

# THE PLACEMENT SEARCH AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR LAW SCHOOL GRADUATES\*

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## INTRODUCTION

The legal market is super hot. Law school graduates have in excess of a ninety-three to ninety-five percent chance of being hired within six months of graduation, and entry level attorneys who practice in large corporate firms within major metropolitan areas can expect to earn salaries in excess of \$100,000.<sup>1</sup> What could possibly be wrong with a picture like that? It is that attorneys are leaving the profession in greater numbers than ever before, citing strong dissatisfaction with law as a vocation.<sup>2</sup>

Satisfying jobs are, however, a result not of luck but rather long hours of networking, outreach, and self awareness. The more knowledge gained about what is available in the legal market, as well as what is appealing about the practice of law on a personal level, the better prepared the law student will be to succeed in the practice of law.

The Placement Search — A Journey to Find,  
to Discover, to Explore.

Basic career strategies have not changed appreciably in the last twenty years. Networking ability, marketing skills, an excellent resumé, and superb cover letters will open doors and get interviews.

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1. See Paula A. Patton, *Associate Compensation — It's Not Just About Money*, NALP BULL., Jan. 2000, at 1, 1.

2. See T.Z. Parza, *The Drudge Report*, N.Y. MAG., June 21, 1999, at 24, 26, 29.

They will not, however, result in instant job offers — that takes more knowledge and effort. Know yourself, know the market, and finally, know how to market yourself.

**Know yourself.** Find out what is appealing about law to you personally. Likewise, know what is *not* appealing. While in law school, you have the perfect opportunity to “try on” various practice settings, and the more you know about what you enjoy, and what brings you pleasure, the better chance you have of being happy and productive in your legal career. Start by asking yourself some very basic questions. Do you enjoy working alone, or do you like being part of a team? Do you enjoy speaking in front of a large group or do you avoid speaking in public at all costs? Do you like the role of counselor or is this role too personal? Do you prefer urban centers with lots of diversity or are you happiest in a small town where you know everyone? This sounds rather simplistic, but in reality these questions, and the answers you provide yourself, will go a long way toward helping you discover your ideal legal position.

The programs that are offered by the various law school organizations, as well as the speakers brought on campus by the faculty, offer ideal opportunities to gather information about what various practice areas and settings are really like. In addition, Career Services offices routinely put on panel presentations and sponsor speakers covering a myriad of legal interests. Programs such as panel discussions about practicing in different size law firms, programs highlighting different areas of practice, such as Intellectual Property or Environmental Law, and “how to” programs on starting a sole practice or entering government service are all offered by the Career Services Office.

In a given law school week, it is probably possible for students to attend three to four luncheon presentations on numerous specialities or areas of interest. These programs offer unusual insight into specific areas of practice, giving students a unique opportunity to understand, in-depth, a particular area of law. For example, most first-year law students may not know that while an Entertainment Law practice may be varied, it may also rely heavily on tax and estate planning, contract structuring, and collective bargaining agreements. The time spent with a performing artist at an awards dinner may account for only one percent of the attorney's time. Programs that highlight the nuts and bolts of a particular practice are quite valuable and oftentimes may help turn a student

toward an area of practice that he or she had not previously thought attractive.

To the new law student, the litigator's life appears exciting, especially the opportunity to try cases in court a la *The Practice*.<sup>3</sup> In reality, few new attorneys, especially in large, urban, corporate firms, see the inside of a courtroom during their first few years of practice.<sup>4</sup> Instead, depending on the size of the firm, first-year associates may spend weeks or months working on discovery for a particular case. Of course, not all firms require new associates to pay their dues — most, however, do.

A few job situations do offer litigation experience to new associates. The State Attorney's Office and the Public Defender's Office both hire new law student graduates and throw them into the courtroom, most often within the first six months.<sup>5</sup> The downside to working for these entities is that the pay<sup>6</sup> and prestige is not usually as great as working in a firm setting. The choices that a new graduate makes, either consciously or not, will undoubtedly impact the level of satisfaction he or she will enjoy during his or her first few years of practice. Knowing the realities of legal practice makes the transition from law school to legal practice easier.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, by the time the new associate realizes there is a problem, the level of dissatisfaction may have reached a point where the degree of unhappiness is so pervasive that the lawyer opts out of the profession altogether, as opposed to re-entering law from a different angle. The bottom line is that the more knowledge the law student has regarding the variety of options available as a new lawyer, the more success he or she will enjoy within the legal arena.

**Know your market.** Once you have identified what you like, you need to find out how to put yourself in a position to be hired into

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3. *The Practice* (ABC 1997–present) (television series).

4. See Patrick J. Schiltz, *On Being a Happy, Healthy, and Ethical Member of an Unhappy, Unhealthy, and Unethical Profession*, 52 VAND. L. REV. 871, 927 (1999) (citing to Carla Messikomer, *Ambivalence, Contradiction, and Ambiguity: The Everyday Ethics of Defense Litigators*, 67 FORDHAM L. REV. 739, 765 (1998)).

5. See Jason Dimitris, *Life After Law School: Experience in the Miami-Dade County State Attorney's Office*, 29 STETSON L. REV. 1303 (2000).

6. See, e.g., FLA. STAT. § 27.35 (1999) (showing that starting salaries for state attorneys in Florida range between \$28,000 and \$32,000).

7. For example, minimum billable hour requirements at most large firms leave little time for “life outside of work.” Carl Horn, *Twelve Steps Toward Personal Fulfillment in Law Practice*, LAW PRAC. MGMT., Oct. 1999, at 36, 37, 40.

that particular niche. What is the market like today? What trends are on the horizon regarding the legal market? Is your particular area of interest currently in high demand? It is important to be aware of current issues affecting the legal market. The legal market is constantly changing. The legal job market is seldom the same on the day you enter law school and the day you graduate. The more up to date you are regarding what is going on in the legal market, the better prepared you will be to enter that market. Legal publications such as the *Legal Times*, the *National Law Journal*, and the *American Bar Association Journal* offer insights into current issues and hot topics. State and local bar association publications are also a good source for identifying areas of interest. Information you need regarding current market trends should come from many, varied sources. Alumni, professors, practitioners, and fellow students can all contribute to the base of information required to be an educated consumer. The explosion of the Internet and E-commerce also offers an additional insight into current trends in the legal market by offering links to current, up to the minute legal news.

**Know how to market yourself.** Career Services Offices are integral in helping students understand and identify areas of law that may be attractive. In addition, your career services professional is trained to make you a master of learning how to go about the business of selling yourself. First, to sell yourself, you must first identify an audience. Alumni contacts are your best source, as mentors and possible sources of employment, and secondarily as networking helpers, connecting you with possible leads and openings. Law school programs are also ideal opportunities to get your message across. The more people that know you in the market, the better chance you have of being noticed and hired. Local bar associations are also good avenues of opportunity.<sup>8</sup> Most local bars offer student memberships — an ideal way to meet potential employment resources. Additional sources for networking should not be overlooked. Faculty members, law school administrators, undergraduate professors, and friends, all may serve as networking outlets. The list cannot be too wide ranging.

Second, part of marketing yourself is knowing what type of mes-

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8. See, e.g., Michael A. Bedke & Rachele Des Vaux Bedke, *Prepare Yourself to Do Well and Do Good upon Graduation*, 29 STETSON L. REV. 1275, 1278 (2000) (discussing the benefits of networking through bar involvement).

sage you hope to convey to your market. Smaller firms and government agencies rely more heavily on experience than grades.<sup>9</sup> The more substantive your resumé, the better your chances are of obtaining an interview. Do not overlook internship and clinical experience as “door openers,” especially with local government and public interest organizations. Many district attorney offices and local government agencies hire directly from the internship programs provided through various law schools. For first-year law students, volunteering for the local circuit judge is an ideal way to get courtroom experience and add something special and unique to a resumé. Interviewing a local practitioner for your school's alumni newsletter is a good way to get in-depth information about the person's practice area and make an impression on the attorney.

Third, *pro bono*<sup>10</sup> work is another good opportunity to not only give of yourself but to also get yourself noticed. In addition to helping the community, you will be making valuable networking contacts for the future.

### CONCLUSION

Much has changed in the legal profession over the past fifteen years. Firms have grown in size and scope. Law is now truly “international,” with many firms having overseas offices. As mentioned earlier, the legal market is hot — law firms in New York and Chicago cannot get enough new associates to fill their offices. Employment opportunities abound — but it is not “your father's law firm.” Radical changes have occurred in how large law firms operate today versus twenty years ago. It is no longer a long term investment for both parties. Sometimes it is not even a short term relationship.

It is of utmost importance that law students take the time, while in law school, to explore all that is available in today's legal marketplace. Armed with the information of what legal opportunities exist and the knowledge of what is appealing about the practice of law, the new law graduate can expect to find a satisfying, rewarding, and stimulating legal position in today's legal environment.

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9. KIMM ALAYNE WALTON, *GUERRILLA TACTICS FOR GETTING THE LEGAL JOB OF YOUR DREAMS* 438–39 (1999).

10. Literally means, “for the good,” and is used to describe legal services performed free of charge. *BLACK'S LAW DICTIONARY* 1203 (6th ed. 1990).