

WHAT KIND OF LEGAL JOB IS BEST FOR YOU?

Handout Series #11

Few academic degrees are as versatile as a law degree because there are so many different career choices open to a law graduate. Lawyers work in private law firms, government agencies and corporations; they may be in small, medium or large-size firms or in solo practice; they may focus primarily on litigation or on transactional work; they may handle general legal matters or they may specialize in a particular area of law, such as environmental, intellectual property, corporate or tax law; or they may choose an alternative career in academics, business or elsewhere. How does one select a career path from among this vast array of choices? How do you decide what kind of legal career is best for you?

The Career Development Office offers many resources and programs designed to help you find the legal job that is best for you, but it is your responsibility to take charge of your own career and to begin thinking about your options even during your first year of law school. Planning your career in the law means both learning as much as you can about the possibilities that are open to you and learning as much as you can about yourself and how you can best utilize your interests and abilities to achieve your goals.

ASSESSING YOURSELF

Learning about yourself and your abilities means engaging in self-assessment. Being able to project confidence and enthusiasm during an interview can make or break the interview. The least successful job candidates are those whose goal is to be hired for just any job rather than for the right job. It is much easier to project confidence and enthusiasm if you are applying for a job that will utilize your talents and is consistent with your personal values. The way to be able to focus on the right job for you is by taking inventory of your skills, accomplishments, goals and motivations.

Self-assessment means answering the questions, “Who am I?”, “What do I have to offer an employer?”, and “What do I want from a job?” For example, if you like to work independently with minimal supervision, then you may be happier in a small less structured firm than in a large firm with established policies and procedures. On the other hand, if you prefer working more closely with others and being given specific tasks to accomplish, then you may prefer the structure of a large firm. The CDO has various self-assessment exercises and tools that

you can use to help you determine the type of legal job for which you are best suited. Remember, however, that self-assessment is an ongoing process that should begin in your first year of law school and continue until you achieved your career goals. Your answers to the self-assessment questions will probably change several times as you learn more about yourself and about the job market for lawyers.

ASSESSING THE LEGAL MARKET - CDO PROGRAMS

The great majority of entering law students have no idea what type of law they want to eventually practice, and even those who enter law school with a specific career goal in mind may find that their minds may change several times by the time they graduate. Even if you have done enough self-assessment to know what general type of position would best suit you, you still need to find out specifically how to find and obtain your dream job. It is never too early to start learning about the legal market (although your primary focus in your first year of law school should be on your studies), and CDO offers several programs that can help you gather information about the many career options in law. In addition, there are many ways for you to gather information on your own that will not only help you develop a focus but will also help you start building a network of professional contacts in the legal field.

The CDO maintains a library of information resources on a wide range of topics, including books describing different practice areas, works discussing how to market yourself to employers, and binders containing information on specific employers. Books may be checked out for a week at a time. CDO also has a handout that gives summaries of websites which contain all types of resources and listings for legal jobs.

Every two or three weeks during the semester, CDO presents “A Day in the Life,” an informal panel discussion by McGeorge alumni giving their insights on either their particular area of law practice or some aspect of law practice that they have in common. Each panel gives you the chance to hear and ask questions about what it is like to practice a specific type of law or in a specific practice setting. Even if you have never thought about pursuing a career in the type of practice being discussed in a particular program, the more of these discussions you attend, the more you will begin to understand where your true interests and talents lie.

Second and third year students may also be assigned alumni mentors. These are practicing attorneys who have volunteered to talk to current students about the day to day realities of their law practice. An alumni mentor is not intended to be a job source, but mentors can help you start to build a network of professional contacts, give you their views on trends in the legal job market, and generally help you to gather information that can be invaluable in planning and pursuing your own career.

ASSESSING THE LEGAL MARKET—SELF-INITIATED EFFORTS

In addition to the CDO offerings, there are many things you can do on your own to learn more about the legal job market. Every month, the various practice sections of the Sacramento County Bar Association hold meetings for their members which are also open to law students.

Often there is an educational component focusing on an issue of particular interest to practitioners in that area of law, but always there is the chance to meet and talk with attorneys who are practicing in that field and who can tell you about career opportunities in the field. Look in the *Sacramento Daily Recorder* for meeting times and places of the sections of the Sacramento County Bar Association and in the *San Francisco Daily Journal* for meetings of Bay Area Bar groups. Both of these newspapers are available in the CDO and in the McGeorge library.

Informational interviewing can also be an excellent way to increase your knowledge of different types of law practice. Most practicing attorneys are glad to assist law students and new attorneys in any way they can, and even a busy attorney can usually spare 15 or 20 minutes for an informational interview. Start by sending a letter requesting the interview to an attorney that you have selected because of his or her type of practice or geographic location. The letter should stress that you are only seeking information, not asking for a job, and it may include a resume to give the interviewee an idea of your background. Follow up the letter in a few days with a telephone call - do not wait for the person to contact you. Dress professionally for the interview and have a set of prepared questions, such as "What is a typical day like for you?", "What career path did you follow prior to achieving your current position?", and "What suggestions do you have for someone wanting to have a practice like yours?" End by asking for suggestions for other attorneys to talk to, and always follow up the interview by sending a thank you note.

Finally, another way to explore different types of law practice is by participating in one or more clinical externships while you are a student. McGeorge offers a wide array of externships with government agencies and non-profit organizations through the Clinical Externship office. This office will help you arrange the externship of your choice and will offer you units of credit toward your J.D. degree for completing a certain number of hours working as an extern. In addition to letting you learn more about a particular practice area, an externship will also help build your resume by giving you legal experience and it can provide contacts and references for your future job search.

SUMMARY

Career development is not just about getting a job as a lawyer after you finish law school. While your primary focus as a law student should always be on doing well academically, you will enhance your opportunities to find a job that will reward and challenge you if you can devote some time during your studies to learning more about where your own talents lie and to exploring the myriad of options that are opened by a law degree. Career development is a process that begins in law school and will continue throughout your career. The most successful and fulfilled attorneys are those who take control of their own career development from the beginning by deciding what they really want, determining the best way to achieve it, and then taking the steps necessary to attain their career goals.