

Alternative Legal Careers

[Danielle D. Hansen]

So you went through three years of law school only to eventually decide that you don't want to practice law? No problem. Your J.D. offers you a plethora of other opportunities that don't involve typical attorney work.

We all began law school with a love of the law -- or at least a curiosity about it. Okay, let's be honest and admit that it might have been because of the inherent financial rewards that a J.D. affords us. For some of us, however, about midway through our third year we realized that perhaps we might not have it in us to spend our days and nights working our way towards becoming partner. It can be too daunting and far too time consuming.

So, the prospects of other careers became more appealing. Ah, but what to do with that precious J.D. you worked so hard (and paid so much) for? You certainly can't discard it, but you also know that you don't have the heart for traditional "lawyer" jobs. We're fortunate to be in a job market now where attorneys have plenty of career options in jobs that don't necessarily call for them to practice law.

You can still use your legal knowledge and expertise to your employment advantage. Moreover, you can combine that experience with some of your most passionate interests and find a job you truly enjoy. Such alternative legal careers are becoming more and more prevalent.

Obstacles:

Beginning an alternative legal career is difficult because you are straying from the traditional path. The largest hurdle you may face is trying to figure out how to use your degree. You may wonder, "Did I waste three years of my life in law school?" The answer is

no, and we'll get to that.

Your family and friends may not (from experience, I could say will not with some certainty) understand your lack of interest in a traditional legal career. They think you go to law school to become a practicing attorney. Period. You will not hear the end of that argument. This can cause quite a bit of stress and confusion, and you may just want to give up and follow the pack, becoming a traditional legal professional.

Fortunately, a legal education is very valuable, and it can provide attorneys with the opportunity to work in almost any career field. Law school provides an intense training ground where students are given invaluable tools that would be assets to any employer in any career.

Law school stresses critical, analytical, and logical thinking and writing skills, as well as impartiality and the ability to see issues from all angles and points of view. You were also taught how to survive and thrive in an intensely competitive and stressful atmosphere. You may take for granted the basic skill set learned in law school, but these skills are not as common in the workforce among non-attorneys as you may think.

So, no, those three long, hard years of your life were not "wasted" in law school simply because you do not want to take the traditional path. If anything, they have increased your marketability.

Employers want the knowledge and skills you

possess. Your job is to find such employers.

So what can you do with your hard-earned law degree, besides practice law?

Since a law degree is so valuable to employers, you can successfully enter any career field. The options are only limited by your imagination. We'll examine a few of the more typical positions attorneys seek here.

Academic Administration:

There are currently over 3,500 colleges and universities in the United States. Many retain in-house counsel, but there are also many other careers in academic administration which could put your legal skills to use.

Undergraduate institutions are required to follow confusing and intertwining state and federal regulations. In this atmosphere, legal degrees are not only practical, but often essential. Some academic administration options include: Affirmative Action / EEO Officer, Grants and Contracts Specialist, Disability Services Coordinator, Trust Officer, Licensing Director, Legislative Affairs Specialist.

In these positions, you won't be asked to practice law necessarily - which is your goal in pursuing an alternative career in the first place - but your legal background would prove extremely helpful. When it's time for you to confer with the general counsel, you'll be able to communicate with him or her far more easily than a non-attorney could.

If you loved the law school atmosphere, then,



specifically, a position in law school administration might be your best choice. Most law school administrators are legal graduates. Most likely the woman who helped you sift through those confusing financial aid applications and the man who helped you decide what courses to take were attorneys who simply chose a career in academic support.

Some law school academic administration options include: Career Counselor, Financial Aid Administrator, Student Affairs Director, Director of Alumni Affairs, Director of Admissions, Clinical Programs Supervisors, Academic Compliance, Research Directors, Computer Consultant, and Director of Marketing, to name a few.

Wouldn't it have been great to have a guide helping you through your One-L year? More and more law schools are providing in-depth counseling, and who better to perform such work than someone like you who's been through it?

Banking and Finance:

The banking and finance industry is fiercely regulated, and one small legal misstep can spell disaster for any company or corporation. This is a field of constant legal change where an understanding of the law is vital. Some banking and finance positions include: Compliance Officers, Credit Examiners, Financial Planners, Claims Settlement Specialists, Bank Probate Administrators, Mutual Funds Administrators, Trust Examiners, Securities Examiners, and Escrow Agents.

While the law is involved in these positions, it's more of an understanding of the law that would be important, as opposed to day-to-day litigation. These types of officers do not serve as lead counsel on any projects, but rather answer to such counsel. For that reason, these jobs can be far less stressful, and the daily grind can be tolerable since there's a variety in the work.

Immigration:

Attorneys have always led in the field of immigration. It's wrought with confusing legal issues that only someone with a lawyer's training and with diligence to the specialty could fully understand.

Since the 9/11 attacks, this area has undergone vast legal changes. With the enactment of The Homeland Security Act in December 2002, the former United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has been reborn as the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS), a sub-department of the newly created Homeland Security Department. With these drastic changes, the entire U.S. immigration system is adapting as well. Individuals with legal backgrounds are desperately needed to grapple with and administer the new law. It's a career where heavy research is involved, and if you enjoy history, immigration, and administration, then this field may prove to be a perfect fit.

Positions in the immigration field can be found in corporate environments, as well as in state and federal government.

Many corporations import workers from other countries and need immigration administrators to complete the necessary legal paperwork. Many large firms have visa specialists to handle all such paperwork for their foreign employees once they get here. Other corporate positions include: Business Immigration Administrators, Human Resources Administrators and International Recruiters. Government positions, at both state and federal levels, include: Immigration Administrators, Research Specialists and Immigration Inspectors.

These career fields are just a few of the many options you have to explore. There are countless opportunities out there, so don't listen to the naysayers who think that your law degree is wasted if you're not in court everyday!