



Feature

## What's Hot? Today's Legal Specialties

By Karen Maheu, Esq., Vice President of Global Resourcing at Lumen Legal

business trends at large affect the legal industry and the specializations that are most in demand. Successful lawyers keep an eye on business trends and marry passion with specialization. Here is our determination of the current top five areas of specialization, based on our placement of contract attorneys across the country.



### 1. Intellectual Property (IP)

IP has been — and will remain — hot. As companies invest money in new technologies, new processes, and new brands across the business spectrum, they will spend money to protect those investments.

IP work involves trademarking, licensing, and protecting new inventions in the patent area. And establishing initial protections doesn't mean the work is done. More legal work in enforcement is necessary to maintain protection. If litigation occurs, it can be massive, with billions of dollars at stake and teams of lawyers on both sides.

### 2. Technical Expertise

Lawyers who have technological expertise have become invaluable for e-discovery challenges, especially those related to class actions. It's not so hard legally to figure out what is required in e-discovery, but the practical question of how to retrieve and evaluate huge quantities of electronic documents can be highly technical.

### 3. Corporate Transactions

These days, parties team up in many different forms, including joint ventures, licensing agreements, and all manner of other arrangements. In this age of constant mergers and acquisitions, both sides of these transactions need legal support.

### 4. Private Equity

More and bigger deals are in the works, so corporate attorneys with private equity experience are in high demand. And with so many deals going on, it's likely that some will go south — and that means more work in commercial litigation.

### 5. Immigration

Immigration doesn't get talked about much, but it has remained strong. The reason? There's confusion about the numbers of people allowed to enter the U.S. pursuant to various modes of approval and how long they can stay. As long as changes continue to the types of visas and the limits imposed on the numbers of workers allowed in under certain visas, immigration work will stay strong.

At the executive level, employers want to get people in legally, and they want to be able to keep them in the U.S. In the worker ranks, there are issues with illegal and undocumented workers.

While immigration work is often done by smaller boutique firms, larger firms have taken notice of this steady stream of work and have developed immigration practice groups.

### Other Legal Specialties to Watch and Consider

Commercial real estate is another area to consider, despite what one sees in the news. In contrast to the subprime mortgage problems of the residential side of the market, commercial property transactions remain a solid, steady source of legal service revenue as private investment activity in new businesses continues.

Environmental law, which seems to cycle between hot and cold, is worth keeping an eye on. Regulations do not go away, and the whole "green movement" means there aren't just brownfields to consider anymore.

Though the flood of Sarbanes-Oxley-related work has subsided somewhat, corporate compliance is a strong category due to the proactive stance companies have been forced to adopt, large class action litigation that will continue, and new discovery rules at the federal, state, local, and internal levels.



## Feature

### Advice for Today's Students

What about students considering law school? Should they be thinking about a specialty?

It's helpful to have a sense of where you want to go. Some specialties are tied to the undergraduate degree; for example, intellectual property specialists in the patent area almost always have an undergraduate engineering degree. And knowing where you want to go allows you to shape your law school curriculum to that end.

However, entering a specialty out of law school isn't usually a scientific process. Strength and interest assessments can help students determine areas in which they might excel. If nothing else, at least tackle the big question early: do I want to be a litigator or a transactional attorney?

Too many law students focus on the fun of moot court only to realize they really don't like the "real world" of litigation after driving to their 1,000th deposition. Vice versa, the one model contract you did for a class may not compare to the boilerplate in 50-page agreements you are sifting through every single day.

One possibility for getting into a hot specialty is to build

expertise in that area by being a contract attorney. Contract work is flexible to meet your work-style preferences, and it can give you a taste of a different specialization. Working as a contract attorney or paralegal lets you engage in the practice of law without the complications of office politics, billable-time quotas, or difficult client relationships.

Contract work can also be a bridge to your first full-time job in the law profession, a way to reenter the profession after career interruptions (child rearing, for instance), or a supplement to a new solo practice. If you are between jobs and looking for a way to "keep your hand in," temporary assignments can provide income while enabling you to maintain or expand your skills.

### About the Author

Karen R. Maheu, Esq., is vice president of global resourcing at Lumen Legal, a legal services and law-professional staffing company headquartered in Royal Oak, Michigan.

Karen is a 1994 magna cum laude graduate of the Michigan State University College of Law.

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