



Feature

A J.D. in the World of Legal Publishing

By Anayat Durrani

A law degree and legal expertise can be applied to any number of careers. Many law students opt out of the traditional lawyer route by pursuing alternative careers post-graduation. One of these careers includes entering the world of legal publishing.



“Many more law school students graduate law school than those who make law their career,” said Judi Schultz, a spokesperson for legal-publishing mammoth LexisNexis. “Using their problem-solving skills, legal skills, and knowledge of the law, thousands of law school graduates find very lucrative careers in related and non-related fields.”

Some of these careers are at large international publishing houses that contain legal arms and at smaller publishing companies that produce news and features magazines and hard law and directory publications.

Schultz said they employ people who have passed the bar exam as attorneys, sales representatives, account managers, market analysts, project managers, and customer support.

Schultz said a person with a background in law brings with him/her an understanding of what that professional needs, whether it is in customer support, product design, market analysis, sales, or as an account representative.

LexisNexis is a leader in comprehensive and authoritative legal, news, and business information and tailored applications. The company does business in 100 countries and has 13,000 employees worldwide.

“Since our largest market is legal professionals, we look for people who have knowledge of that profession more than any other,” said Schultz.

Competitor Thomson West, another giant in the legal publishing world, has many J.D.’s on its staff.

“Yes, we do actively recruit those with J.D.’s,” said Kyle

Christensen, spokesperson for Thomson West. “Many of the positions require a J.D.; and for many others, a J.D. is a preferred qualification.”

Some of the positions West hires for include Attorney-Editors—those who write their renowned headnotes, synopses, and other annotations to case law and statutes and who write articles for ALR and other analytical titles—Product Development; Technology Development; Marketing; Sales; Account Management (dedicated service and training for law firms); and Reference Attorneys (staff researchers to help Westlaw customers perform research), said Christensen.

Thomson provides value-added information, software tools, and applications to more than 20 million users in the fields of law, tax, accounting, financial services, higher education, reference information, corporate e-learning and assessment, scientific research, and healthcare. Thomson has approximately 40,000 employees and provides services in approximately 130 countries.

“The challenges each employee faces are unique to the position,” explained Christensen. “By and large, our greatest challenge is to continue to provide the industry’s highest standards for quality information, authority, comprehensiveness, and accuracy at the speed our customers demand.”

Legal work experience is important when it comes to a career in legal publishing, as is one’s training in law school.

“Legal work experience is very important if you are in charge of a team that is designing, producing, positioning, marketing, or selling a product or service for attorneys,” said Schultz. “In addition, attorneys are taught to think through issues and problems critically, a skill that translates well to many types of jobs.”

But how is the pay?

“West offers great benefits and salaries that are competitive and commensurate with similar positions and qualifications,” explained Christensen.



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Schultz said pay in the legal-information-services industry can be attractive to attorneys who choose not to practice law.

“Management pay levels in business are commensurate with associate pay scales in large law firms and exceed those in small and solo practice law,” said Schultz.

Beth Docherty is an attorney editor in the Codes Content Center at West. Her responsibilities include publishing the Illinois statutes and a range of softbound books that have pieces of the statutes and court rules and administrative code products. She is also responsible for data in print publications, on Westlaw, and in CD-ROM format and supervises five other attorneys and ten editors. Docherty said from the time she entered law school, she knew she wanted a career in legal publishing. She attended law school at the University of Minnesota, where she majored in sociology with an emphasis in law, criminology, and deviancy.

Her advice for those interested in pursuing the same career path: “Law school is pretty intense, but don’t forget there’s a whole other world around you on campus,” she explained on the University of Minnesota’s career services website. “Take advantage of opportunities to meet alums. If you’re interested in working in publishing, the journal option (rather than moot court) in your second year is terrific preparation.”

Joint Programs

For students who might want to explore other non-traditional routes, there are several programs out there that cater to one’s educational and career needs. Many universities offer graduate degrees that combine law with another subject matter. Indiana University offers a joint J.D./Journalism M.A. degree to its students.

“We think that it offers an opportunity for students to explore some very important intersections of the two fields, for example, in freedom of expression issues,” explained John

Applegate, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and professor of law at Indiana University. “We believe that people who work at the intersection of the fields—journalists who write about law for a generalist audience and lawyers who represent journalists or newspapers—benefit from a thorough and systematic understanding of the other field, as opposed to picking it up as you go along.”

Applegate said through the joint degree, students are able to bring to their jobs as lawyers or journalists a valuable set of knowledge and skills that others might not possess. Many national media outlets have legal correspondents on their staffs.

Northwestern University School of Law offers a joint Master of Studies in Law and Master of Science in Journalism with Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism, which runs for two semesters and three quarters.

“The MSL-MSJ Program is aimed at journalists with several years of work experience who want to develop their abilities to report on law,” said David. E. Van Zandt, Dean and Professor of Law at Northwestern University School of Law. “Participants get exposure to the basic courses and the common law reasoning method that first-year J.D. students learn. That helps them understand and analyze a whole range of legal issues.”

While students who complete the MSL-MSJ program do not graduate with J.D.s, they are afforded a better understanding of law and the practice of law in general. This is particularly useful for journalists reporting on legal issues.

“Our goal is that they return to their original employers at a higher level of responsibility and pay. Some may switch employers to accomplish that,” explained Van Zandt. “While they are not qualified lawyers authorized to practice law, their MSL-MSJ degree makes them much better journalists.”

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