

## **UNDERSTANDING THE LEGAL PROFESSION:<sup>1</sup>**

Take advantage of the time you are in law school to learn about the variety of employment opportunities and practice settings that will be available to you as a law school graduate. This section provides a brief overview of some of the practice settings available to attorneys.

### **Law Firms**

**Large Firm Practice:** Large firms are generally defined as those firms having 50 or more attorneys. This varies depending on the region/geographic location. Large firms generally provide the highest starting salaries, the greatest opportunities for specialization, and a steady client base. Large firms are known for their high billable hour requirements of new associates, which translate into long work hours.

Most large law firms recruit for summer associates exclusively in the fall. The second year summer associate program is heavily relied upon to fill permanent first year associate positions, and often a permanent offer of employment follows a summer spent at a large firm. Large firm recruiting is very competitive; typically large firms are interested in students who are in at least the top 20% of the class, have outstanding legal research and writing skills, and who have been selected for law review and/or moot court. Detailed information on large and medium firm employers is available through the National Association for Law Placement (NALP) Directory. ([www.nalpdirectory.com](http://www.nalpdirectory.com))

**Medium Firm Practice:** Medium sized law firms can range from firms with 11-20 attorneys to 21-50 depending on the geographic location of the firm and the type of firms in/around it (i.e. what is considered medium in Fort Worth may be small in Houston). Firms in this range are often called “boutique firms,” meaning they have specialized practices.

While some medium sized firms recruit in the fall, similar to the large firms, others do not make summer law clerk hiring decisions until the spring. In order to avoid missing opportunities, it is wise to send letters of inquiry to medium sized firms in the fall, but to anticipate that they may not be looking to hire summer clerks until the spring. Medium sized firms tend to be somewhat more flexible on application criteria than large firms. Often they will recruit lower in the class, and may even consider hiring outstanding first year law students for summer law clerk positions.

**Small Firm Practice:** In small firms, a graduate has the opportunity to take on more responsibility for cases and have more client contact early on. However, smaller firms generally have less money for attorney salaries and for support staff, which means you may have to accept a low starting salary and could end up doing a lot of your own typing, copying, and other administrative tasks.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from University of Toledo Law School *LCS Handbook*

Small firms usually cannot predict their hiring needs very far in advance, and tend to hire for summer and for permanent positions on an as-needed basis. The process of finding employment in a small firm is more complicated and unregimented than finding one with a large or medium sized firm. Although some people have had success finding a small firm position through blind mass mailings, a more targeted approach tends to be more fruitful. You can search for small firm employers by city, state, and/or practice area on [www.martindale.com](http://www.martindale.com). Positions with small firms may also be advertised on Symplicity.

If your ultimate goal is to practice in a smaller community or in a small firm in a larger community, your plans may not be settled as early as some of your classmates. In fact, it may not be until after you've taken and passed the bar that permanent employment plans materialize.

### **Judicial Clerkships**

Judicial clerkships are typically one or two-year appointments for new law graduates, although some judges do hire permanent clerks. One who becomes, or seeks to become a judicial clerk, is really preparing for the role of “advisor to the judge”, a coveted and respected role throughout the legal community. Judicial clerkships provide an amazing opportunity for a new lawyer to spend extended time with a judge, and to keep learning the law from the perspective and hand of that judge.

While it is generally perceived that all judicial clerkships require high academic marks, this is not necessarily the case. Although most federal clerkships are very competitive and require a high GPA, many state courts offer excellent clerkship opportunities without the high GPA requirement. State judicial clerkship application deadlines fall anywhere from the spring of the second year to spring of the third year, while federal clerkship applications are due in September of the third year.

While the employing judge will determine the specific duties and functions of his or her clerk, law clerks typically will perform legal research, prepare bench memoranda on cases before the judge, draft options, verify citations, communicate with counsel regarding case management and procedural requirements, and assist the judge during courtroom proceedings. As you may begin to understand, many law clerks find that the prestige and experience associated with service as a law clerk greatly increases one's future employment opportunities. For example, many law firms will grant second-year status to incoming associates who have completed a clerkship and will defer a grad's start date to allow for the one or two-year clerkship.

For more information on employment opportunities and careers, check out the Judicial Clerkship section of the CSO web page at: <http://law.txwes.edu>.

## **Government**

Opportunities for employment are available at every level of government from local to national. As the size of the government continues to grow, so does the likelihood that there will continue to be available positions for lawyers to work with and represent governmental entities such as school districts, cities, counties, states, services and the federal government itself.

**Federal Government:** The federal government hires lawyers for a variety of tasks in numerous agencies and departments and offers career opportunities in a broad range of specialty fields. The Department of Justice (DOJ) is the largest federal employer of attorneys. Representative of other federal agencies, the DOJ has a well developed Summer Law Intern Program (SLIP) for second year students and a Legal Intern Program for first year law students. The Attorney General Honors Program is the DOJ's recruitment program for entry level attorneys and is the only way the Department hires graduating law students. Recruitment for this program is extremely competitive and takes place during the early fall of the third year. Deadlines for other Federal agencies occur from early fall through early spring. For more information, please visit the Career Services Office to secure a password for the [Government Honors and Internships Handbook](#).

**State & Local Government:** State government opportunities vary. Each of the fifty states maintains a staff under its Attorney General to litigate suits for and against the state; this is often the largest legal office at the state level. Non-legal positions may exist within many state agencies for which a law degree is helpful but not required. Local government units will have a city attorney and a larger city may have a department instead of just one attorney to take on all the work. This office will represent the city in lawsuits or work with outside counsel much like a corporate legal department will do and will draft ordinances when necessary.

Public defender and prosecutor offices are usually good places for new law school grads to find employment with the local government. Public defender offices provide representation to accused persons in criminal cases who are financially unable to retain their own lawyer. On the other hand, the prosecutor's office handles criminal cases but represents the state (or "the people") in these matters. Caseloads tend to be high in these areas, which provide unique opportunities for young lawyers to get great experience.

## **Public Interest Organizations**

Legal opportunities in public service can be found in a variety of legal settings and practice areas. There are two general types of public interest employers, those that are issue-oriented and those that are client-oriented. Each has a different focus and conduct business accordingly.

Issue-oriented groups take on cases with the intention of creating legal policy and precedents that will affect large numbers of people. Related legal employment areas that may come into play include: lobbying, grassroots organizing and community-based education. Examples of such organizations include Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund and Amnesty International.

Client-oriented organizations focus on providing direct legal aid to those that belong to under-represented groups or are poor. These practice areas may include: family law, consumer law and public health. Examples of client-oriented employers are: Legal Aid of Northwest Texas (LANWT) and Advocacy Incorporated.

In order to educate yourself on the variety of opportunities available, it is strongly suggested that you visit [www.pslawnet.org](http://www.pslawnet.org), a public-interest posting site available to Texas Wesleyan students and alumni. The Equal Justice Works website at [www.equaljusticeworks.org](http://www.equaljusticeworks.org) is also a valuable public interest law resource.

### **Corporate**

Corporations, banks, accounting firms, insurance companies, publishing companies and consulting groups are all businesses that employ lawyers. In addition, libraries, hospitals, colleges, school systems and a host of other entities rely on attorneys as well.

In years past, corporations did not have large legal departments and rarely sought new grads to fill any vacancies. Recently, the trend has become to increase the size of the in-house staff but it is still not often that someone is hired right out of law school to fill an in-house position. Unlike law firm attorneys, in-house attorneys work with only one client and generally cover a variety of areas for that one client.

CPA firms also look to lawyers to handle areas such as accounting, auditing, tax planning and management services. Most openings for lawyers will be in the tax departments of the big accounting firms and may require a background in accounting as well as a law degree. Regional accounting firms may also hire attorneys.

Universities and other educational employers, both public and private, hire attorneys to represent them and manage their corporate affairs. Attorneys can be found in the General Counsel's Office, in the medical center and in areas that deal with intellectual property where patents and trademarks need protecting. Lawyers can also serve in a faculty or administrative role.

Hospitals and health maintenance organizations will also have a legal staff on hand to deal with issues that arise in those businesses.

Management consulting is another area where having a J.D. can be an asset. Firms that specialize in management consulting help top management business, government and other organizations in solving management problems.

## **Non-Traditional Legal Careers**

A law degree is highly valued and is the ticket to any number of successful career paths, both legal and non-legal. Today, there are countless opportunities for attorneys to use the skills they have gained in law school in non-traditional legal career settings.

Finding a fulfilling alternative legal career requires time, hard work, perseverance, and commitment. Students looking for non-traditional work must be willing to work hard and to prove themselves—even if it means taking an entry level position with their desired employer and working their way up to a “dream job.”

The following list is just a sample of the non-traditional legal career options that law graduates may pursue:

|                                  |                                   |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Affirmative Action Officer       | Border Patrol Agent               |
| Child Support Enforcement        | City Planner                      |
| Claims Specialist                | Congressional Staff               |
| Contract Administrator           | Consumer Advocate                 |
| Corporate Affairs Administrator  | Court Administrator               |
| Customs Inspector                | Development Officer               |
| Employee Relations Specialist    | Environmental Affairs Officer     |
| Environmental Compliance Officer | Estate Planner                    |
| F.B.I. Agent                     | Government Affairs Officer        |
| Human Resource Manager           | Industrial Relations Officer      |
| Insurance Underwriter or         | Examiner Internal Revenue Officer |
| Law Firm Administrator           | Lobbyist                          |
| Mediation Specialist             | Mergers & Acquisitions Manager    |
| Mortgage Officer                 | Pension Specialist                |
| Planned Giving Administrator     | Probate Administrator             |
| Property Manager                 | Regulatory Affairs Officer        |
| Risk Manager                     | Strategic Planner                 |
| Tax Specialist                   | Trust Administrator               |

If you are thinking about pursuing a non-traditional legal career:

- Begin by analyzing your abilities and assessing the job market.
- Decide what characteristics and responsibilities of a job are important to you, and then what career will fit within these parameters.
- Determine how you can present your skills and achievements in the most positive light to your target employer.