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What's the next step after law school?

Law school seemed like a good idea at the time. How to plan the rest.

Kate Neville/Legal Times
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It's a time-honored tradition: going to law school to "keep your options open." But as many law students come to know all too soon, identifying what those options are and how to pursue them successfully can prove to be a challenge both in law school as well as after several years of practice.

In my role as a law school career services adviser and as a personal career consultant, I have met with many students and lawyers who started law school without a clear sense of what they want to do with

their degree. As one graduate described her entry into the profession, "When I applied and started law school, I had absolutely no idea what it meant to be a lawyer. There are no lawyers in my family, and I did not talk to any law students or lawyers beforehand. Looking back, it was a completely uninformed decision."

The result, of course, is that many students entering top-tier law schools have only a vague understanding of what practicing law is like. And yet the vast majority of students at these schools end up working at large law firms both in their second summer and after law school, which forces them to make significant career decisions after their first year of law school that often determine where they will live and what they will do over the next several years.

While career options exist, it is important for students and attorneys to take the initiative to consult knowledgeable sources of information about what these options are to help them figure out a career after law school that satisfies them. It is not an easy process, and the time pressure is intense, as the vast majority of positions at large firms are filled by students who worked there during the summer. To get those jobs, students must identify what firms and practice areas they might like and accept a position before having received any grades in their second-year coursework.

Options quickly become narrowed as summer associates who receive permanent offers are required to accept or decline the position before November of their third year — months before jobs in smaller firms, the public sector, or nonprofits are even posted. Students who interview with large firms as 3Ls — including those who excel in their second year rather than first, or need to live in a different geographic area, or whose practice area over the summer proves not to be their interest — face a drastically smaller market.

Under such time constraints, where do law students without prior exposure to the practice of law turn for career information?

While law firm Web sites are widely regarded as marketing materials, many students rely on rankings of large national firms published on the Internet to identify which firms have offices in places where they might want to live and that do work in practice areas they think they might like.

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These entities use a variety of methodologies to compile their rankings, and while some confirm one another's results, many experienced attorneys remain extremely skeptical of the process. Particularly, the accuracy of comments in associate surveys may be suspect since associates who take the time to respond can be advancing an agenda or may have a particular axe to grind.

As information has proliferated on the Internet and is easily updated, books reviewing legal employers have become increasingly limited in their value. The two publications typically regarded as most helpful are now woefully outdated: *The Insider's Guide to Law Firms*, published in 1994, and *America's Greatest Places to Work With a Law Degree*, written in 1998. Some law school career offices, however, still recommend these to students as a helpful starting point.

All of this information remains very generalized and can be hard to discern without law firm experience. Lacking this perspective, some students follow their peers' choices, although one graduate recalls: "One source of information that was decidedly NOT helpful was my 2L peers. It felt like the blind leading the blind — a lot of speculation and gossip and not much reliable information." Under strict time lines in this situation, more than one student has resorted to selecting the firms they want to interview with alphabetically and taking it from there.

Law school career services

The most obvious place for students to turn for information is their law school career services office. These offices vary widely in quality, and criticizing them is common among law students and practicing lawyers. While some are perhaps justifiably held in disdain, those that are well run can provide helpful information.

Given the breadth and vagueness of interests identified by so many law students, law schools can't possibly provide information on all potential career paths. Career services offices have limited resources to advise an entire student body that, at least in their first year, is primarily focused on the immediate demands of their academic work.

And the pressure of the fall on-campus recruiting season often makes students feel they have fewer options, not more choices. At top-tier schools, students are typically assigned interviews with large firms based primarily on how high they rank each firm in their "bid list" and the number of interviews that firm makes available. In this process, not everyone gets to meet with his or her top picks, and students who get interviews with the most selective firms may not have the grades and experience the firm requires, narrowing opportunities on both sides.

Law school career advisers can help students who take the time to consult with them in advance by helping these students to strategically develop their lists. These advisers have access to data about different firms' past hires from their law school and can place a student's grades and preferences in the context of the competitiveness of various markets and firms.

Most career services offices also provide candidates with access to surveys completed by students who previously summered at particular firms, along with students' contact information. One graduate says, "Many of the 3Ls were actually quite candid and helpful, especially those with personalities and values I could relate to. I found the 3Ls to be much more grounded and helpful than my classmates or the career services advisers."

But keep in mind that most career offices have responsibilities beyond advising students. They are also tasked with tracking and reporting data on students and alumni as well as developing and maintaining relationships with employers to promote their school's students. At top-tier schools, these duties often include arranging events for law firms to come on campus, requiring significant staff time to focus attention on time-consuming logistics.

And then there is the influence of law schools concerned about their own "rankings." While still on a limited budget, many law schools began to devote more resources to their career services offices after 1990, when *U.S. News & World Report* began publishing its annual ranking of law schools approved by the American Bar Association. A law school's rank is based in large part on the number of its students with a job at graduation and again nine months later. Such calculations create powerful incentives for a school to place as many students as possible before graduation.

Soon after such rankings began to be published annually, a number of top-tier law schools — including Harvard, Georgetown, and New York University — started to invest in separate career services offices to provide students with information about practicing law in the public sector or for a not-for-profit organization. These offices typically do not, however, include information to help students pursue career options outside of practicing law.

Nevertheless, many lawyers are interested in learning about positions in both the public and private sectors that are open to attorneys but do not require the practice of law. These opportunities can include management consulting, investment banking, financial advising, policy analysis, research, publishing, project management, and government administration. Such options remain unmentioned in the vast majority of top-tier law schools.

The default option for both top-tier law schools and their students is for graduates to accept a job with an employer who has the resources to recruit on campus and make offers early.

But law students who take an active role in their career search can take advantage of opportunities while still in school to help evaluate their options. Informed students recognize that participation in clinical programs can provide some insight into what practicing in a certain area of the law would be like. They also select electives based on what could help them in their careers. At some law schools, students can also take advantage of such programs as "job shadowing" initiatives during spring break.

While most often done in the midst of post-graduation job searches, informed students can also gain a great deal of perspective by meeting with alumni mentors. One recent graduate found a job she is happy with and reports that, "I ultimately learned the most about what my post-grad options were by talking to alumni, going to programs held by the school, and reading articles and other information on what the daily life of different types of legal jobs would be like." Informed law students pursue these conversations and

activities during law school.

Graduating without a job

Law schools, of course, have an incentive to help graduates find a job in the nine months after graduation. As candidates often move to a different city to study for the bar exam, well-run career offices alert them to any postings in their geographic regions of interest, provide them with a list of local alumni, and are available to answer questions. Other than that, however, finding a job is up to the individual.

Students who do not secure a job before graduation have to determine how to proceed primarily on their own. As one recent graduate who turned down a law firm offer during her third year put it, "Although I was aware that I had options, there was not a lot of 'how to' advice available out there."

Researching potential paths and finding a job on one's own is of course easier said than done. It is common to hear stories from lawyers who did not join large firms directly out of law school about the difficulty they encountered. An established family lawyer recalls her experience just out of law school:

"I tried speaking with attorneys and other people I knew in Chicago and D.C. — the cities where I wanted to live — about career opportunities, but I kept hearing that I would definitely have to start my career at a large firm. While discouraged, I was determined to practice in an area of law that interested me. Using Martindale-Hubbell as a guide, I applied to firms in D.C. and Chicago that practiced family law and through that process got my first job practicing law at a boutique firm in Washington, D.C."

While requiring a great deal of time and effort, this process can provide multiple benefits. While acknowledging the difficulty of going a different route, this attorney also emphasized that the experience helped her to start her own practice several years later.

Law students who graduate without a job and determine how to pursue their professional interests early in their careers often develop networking and business development skills that attorneys who have worked exclusively in large firms may not have honed. At the same time, beginning one's career at a large firm can provide highly valuable experience and significantly reduce debt. Whatever path one takes as a student or a new graduate, it is not the last career decision most attorneys will make.

Throughout the process, it can be helpful to keep in mind that every job has its pros and cons and that needs change over time. Law students and attorneys who invest the time to learn about their options are in the best position to make educated decisions about which combination of features best suits their needs over the course of their careers.

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