

Careers outside the practice of law

By Sherry Karabin

You dole out thousands to go to law school, work hard, and land your first legal job. Certainly sounds like a plan. The trouble is that's not always the way it works.

In fact, not everyone who graduates even goes into the law profession, and many of those who do land law jobs later opt for non-legal careers.

A 2008 survey by NALP, the Association for Legal Career Professionals, showed 74.7 percent of law graduates accepted jobs where bar passage was required, with 8.1 percent taking

jobs where a JD was preferred. However, 4.9 percent got jobs in other professional positions, and 1.3 percent secured non-professional positions.

According to the survey, 5.4 percent were still looking, 2.3 percent were not seeking a position, and 2.4 percent decided to pursue another degree full time. The survey was based on the responses of 40,582 of the 43,587 2008 graduates.

These figures are not much different from NALP's 2001 numbers.

That year, 75.9 percent of the 34,603 respon-

dents got jobs where bar passage was required, 5.9 percent secured spots where a JD was preferred, 5.5 percent accepted other professional positions and 1.5 percent got non-professional jobs.

The results do not surprise Michelle Mohr Vodenik, director of career services and public interest/diversity advisor at Chicago-Kent College of Law.

She not only helps students who want to explore other options, but she herself is a non-practicing attorney.

"While I was in law school, I noticed people

doing career advising and thought that would be an interesting idea,” Vodenik said. “I had worked for Amnesty International in Chicago for five years and did things similar to what career advisors were doing.”

Although the idea sparked her interest, the 35-year-old Loyola University Chicago School of Law graduate said she still prepared herself to practice.

While in school she worked for an immi-

Creating a different life

ABA Journal reporter Rachel Zahorsky began her career as a reporter. A graduate of Chicago-Kent College of Law, the 30-year-old also has a master’s degree in journalism from Northwestern University.

After doing an internship at Bloomberg News, she landed her current spot at the American Bar Association in October 2008.

“I’m doing the same things as a reporter that

brary since 1994, Dempsey has overseen the construction of 41 new state-of-the-art libraries, with 16 more in the works. She began her career as a public librarian, but then decided to attend law school.

After graduating from DePaul University College of Law she went on to practice law for 12 years. In 1993, she left Sidley Austin’s legislative and land use group to take her current position.

“A lot of lawyers like what they are doing. The question they need to ask is, ‘Do they love it?’” —Scott Rosenberg

gration law firm, and with a clinic representing abused and neglected children. She also secured her law license, which she still uses today to do pro bono work.

After graduation, Vodenik looked for legal work in immigration and children’s issues, while also applying for career advisement jobs. She landed the job at Chicago-Kent first, and has remained there since January 2005. It’s a decision she doesn’t regret.

“I’m a public interest career advisor who works with students who want to use their law degrees to further justice; it just seemed like a natural fit,” she said.

Vodenik said jobs like hers are not uncommon for law graduates since almost all law school career advisors have legal degrees.

While legal career advisor is a perfect job for Vodenik, she said there are a host of other options open to those who have their law degrees.

Vodenik works with students to help them tailor their resumes and cover letters to land the alternative job of their choice.

“Students can go into human resources work in non-legal capacities; they can do fund-raising and development work for a non-profit or go into legislative work or lobbying,” she said. “Journalism is also a popular choice since law school graduates have strong research and

I would as a lawyer — gathering facts, investigating, looking at both sides and putting something together,” she said.

Former Worker & Power partner Laura Caldwell puts her writing skills to a different use.

After working for several different firms in the Chicago area and writing novels in her spare time, the 41-year-old decided to stop practicing.

She published her first book, “Burning the Map,” in November 2002, and has been going full speed ahead ever since.

“I came from a family of lawyers; I always thought I would practice,” she said. “When I left, I was a partner, which many consider the pinnacle of success. I didn’t dislike the law, I just ended up liking something more, which was writing.”

While Caldwell no longer works for a firm, she teaches at Loyola University Chicago School of Law.

She also started and continues to run the school’s Life After Innocence Project, where law students represent and help those who have been wrongfully convicted and exonerated by DNA evidence.

Chicago resident Mary Dempsey, 56, uses her law degree to improve residents’ access to books.

“I use my law degree every day,” Dempsey said. “I don’t function as a lawyer for the Chicago Public Library, but it helps to have a legal background. I deal with a lot of First Amendment issues and there are 1200 employees who have all kinds of employment issues. The way lawyers are trained to analyze and solve a problem is extremely useful to me in helping me manage the institution.”

While her husband, Philip Corboy, remains a well-known attorney in the city, Dempsey said she probably won’t take another legal position.

“I have a marvelous opportunity here, with an amazing boss, Mayor Richard M. Daley, who believes in libraries, and I work with a great management team,” she said.

The right spot

Others like self-professed “recovering attorney” Scott Rosenberg carved out niches for themselves in the consulting world, another popular option for many law school graduates.

Rosenberg practiced tax law for seven years and is now managing director of Chicago-based Huron Consulting Group.

“I liked practicing, but I didn’t love it,” said the 48-year-old. “I was sort of the go-to guy for all the technology stuff. People would turn to

"I loved doing that type of work so for me it was an easy transition," Rosenberg said. "Now instead of practicing law, I'm focused on the business of law."

These days Rosenberg spends his days helping firms and law departments manage their business operations more efficiently by using technology and other cost control initiatives.

"I think people go to law school with the notion that somehow they will be connected to the law," he said. "Some, like myself, practice and realize it's not what they love doing. There are a lot of people in the consulting world who came out of legal practice."

"I'm hit up all the time with wanna-be consultants who come from firms and law departments and think they can jump into consulting," he said.

For those thinking about going into the field, Rosenberg said it's not an easy transition, but attorneys do possess some of the necessary requirements, including listening and interviewing techniques, good writing skills, and the ability to deal with people confidently.

He advised attorneys to think things through before trying to switch and be willing to make sacrifices, including taking a pay cut.

"For me it was the right decision," he said. "A lot of lawyers like what they are doing."

"The question they need to ask is, 'Do they love it?'"

Former Jenner & Block associate Jennifer Levin didn't love what she was doing, so she

started Nate & Dot Consulting LLC on Jan. 1, 2006.

"The incentive structure in a big firm didn't work well with my personality," she said. "As an associate the focus is on billable hours versus production. I wanted to interact with people."

"Dealing with people's careers, and how they feel about themselves is personal and gratifying for me," Levin said.

These days, the 32-year-old said she spends more time negotiating than when she was an attorney, only the focus is on getting jobs and contracts for those seeking legal positions.

"I think it's really important to dig down and figure out if you are dissatisfied with the job or the practice of law," Levin said. "Many people like practicing, they just need a different job."

Career advice

Bill Chamberlain, assistant dean for career strategy and advancement at Northwestern University School of Law, encourages his students to give practicing a shot.

Despite such advice, he said anywhere between 5 to 10 percent of the 265-plus students who graduate yearly choose non-legal careers. Many are part of the university's three-year JD-MBA program, he said.

"I always suggest to people that the law is difficult to get into if you don't do so right after school," Chamberlain said. "The law judges your experience level on when you graduated."

If you wait two years, you will be competing with others who have more experience."

He added that many people that don't like law school actually enjoy practicing.

Chamberlain, 57, is also a former practicing attorney who decided to go into career advisement.

For those who choose non-legal careers, he said the problem-solving, research, writing, and logical analysis skills students pick up are invaluable in just about any field, especially in the business and financial sectors.

The business arena has proved to be the right place for Joel Freimuth.

After clerking for less than a year at the Law Office of Robert S. Schwartz in Chicago, he became a financial advisor at Har-El Financial Group in June 2008.

"The idea of resolving issues creatively is appealing," Freimuth said. "In the legal world, by the time you get to the litigation process, things are past the point of redress. The profession I'm in now is more forward-thinking."

Still the 34-year-old said his "lawyering skills" are not going to waste.

"Not only are they directly transferrable, but they have given me a huge advantage over those without a law degree," he said. "Having legal analysis training makes my advice more comprehensive in breadth and scope."

Freimuth said his job has also given him a sense of security that the legal world did not.

"My career is totally dependent on me," he said. "If the company should go under, I'm still a licensed financial advisor and I have developed a client base that I can take with me."

For those considering going into the field, he said it's important to find the right firm.

"A big-box insurance company will emphasize insurance sales. A Charles Schwab will emphasize only brokerage products," he said. "I am able to be more of a strategist that builds and oversees my client's entire plan and works with the client's current advisors, accountants, lawyers, etc. to implement the most effective plan possible."

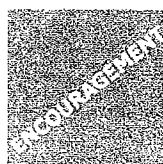
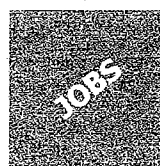
Leaving the firm

In April 2009, bankruptcy and restructuring attorney Kathryn Pamentor put her specialized legal training to work as a senior bankruptcy consultant at The Garden City Group, Inc.

"My legal background lets me help debtors,

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their attorneys and their financial advisors with their case administration needs so they can focus on other aspects of the case," she said.

Pamenter said she enjoyed helping her clients while practicing, but likes the challenge of doing something different.

"One of the last things I did at Goldberg Kohn was work on a petition for writ of certiorari and merit briefs that were filed with the United States Supreme Court," Pamenter said.

"Having been able to do that, if there was a time to try something new, this was it."

She said a friend of hers worked at Garden City Group and encouraged her to make the switch from practicing.

Pamenter said the company has about 30 attorneys on staff who also made that decision.

"There are a lot of exciting opportunities available for people with a legal background," she said.

"If you're open to them, it's a great thing to explore," she said.

Kurt Winiecki also left the law after practicing for 10 years at various Chicago firms.

For him it was the news that his firm, Sach-

noff & Weaver, was merging with Reed Smith that proved to be the final straw.

"I really wanted more control over my career," said the 42-year-old. "There were things I didn't appreciate about the law, including the fact that I wanted more personal contact with people so I could help them address their concerns as opposed to dealing with large corporate clients."

He considered all types of options, including opening his own practice. But in the end he decided his best alternative was to leave altogether.

"I spoke with several hundred people when trying to figure out my career path," he said. "As I was networking with these people, someone told me to consider financial advisory services because it gives you a chance to help people on a daily basis."

After a year-and-a-half stint at Merrill Lynch, Winiecki moved to Kruse Asset Management in February 2009, where he serves as managing director. He already held degrees in finance and accounting, but he said that a job like his could be filled by an attorney with a tax or financial background.

"My law degree helps me to understand the complex financial problems and products out there," he said. "It also allows me to troubleshoot estate plans and come up with tax minimization ideas and strategies."

Winiecki is far from the only one to combine a law degree with other credentials to come up with a winning non-legal formula.

Environmental Compliance Specialist Jennifer Kaminsky left her job at Brady, Connolly & Masuda in 2006, where she specialized in workers' compensation litigation.

"Part of the reason was that I didn't want to be on the tail end of the problem," said the 31-year-old who works at Burns & McDonnell Engineering Co. Inc. "I would rather work with companies to avoid litigation."

Kaminsky said she also wanted to put her environmental science degree to good use and her new job allowed her to do both. "I can work with the engineers and scientists in my company as well as with attorneys in the environmental department."

She said law school taught her to be "assertive and gave me the negotiating skills necessary to deal with regulatory agencies."




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"My skill set has transferred over rather well, although it did take a bit of convincing when I went into the interview process. The firm had a different perception of what lawyers are."

Making the leap

Indeed, convincing potential employers to look past a law degree can be difficult.

Chicago-Kent College of Law's Vodenik suggested those who apply for non-legal positions make that clear right from the start, spelling out what type of job they are looking for at the company and how their legal skills would enhance their performance.

"There's nothing you can't do with a law degree," Vodenik said. "The world is your oyster. The challenge for those looking for alternative careers is coming up with exactly the right fit."

For those who are thinking about not practicing, Freimuth suggested taking a career aptitude test as well as reaching out to law school alumni who have chosen alternative careers.

He added, "They could talk to people in careers they are considering to determine how their legal skills could be adapted to that particular career as well as how their legal skills are an asset in the job searching process."

Kaminsky began her job search by typing key words like environmental, sustainability or conservation into job search engines or Google at least once a week to see what possibilities existed.

"I often found that my education and experience made me overqualified for non-legal jobs in some ways and under-qualified in others," Kaminsky said.

She said some prospective employers were concerned that her JD meant she would be too expensive or that she might think certain tasks were beneath her.

"During the interviews I tried to emphasize my passion for the environmental field so the interviewer would realize it was more about the work than the money," she said, "and that I would help out the company in any way necessary, including refilling the copier."

If you are already practicing, Rosenberg advised making the change as soon as possible since "the culture shift and service orientation from practicing to non-practicing attorney becomes more difficult to overcome the longer you are in practice."

He added those who do switch should be prepared to start at the bottom in their new endeavors.

Before the job search can begin, it's important to decide whether to rule out practicing in the first place. In Winiecki's case he said the writing was on the wall for a while.

"As an attorney, I was never excited to talk about what I did," he said, "and I didn't spend my free time reading the Bankruptcy Code or local litigation rules."

However, he spent time "developing and trying to patent an algorithm that calculates bankruptcy preference action liabilities. I think those are big indications that law wasn't a good fit for me and something mathematically analytical would make me happier. In hindsight, I should have self-assessed much sooner, even before law school.

"If your career path is becoming increasingly unstable and uncertain, a critical assessment of what you seek from a career and your life is in order," Winiecki said.

Although she left, Caldwell stressed that people should not make the jump too fast.

"Nearly everyone feels overwhelmed and more than a little unprepared when they start working, but if you accept that, and keep working toward learning, you'll start to realize sooner rather than later that you're picking things up, that you have a growing confidence about what you're doing, and it's only then that you can really evaluate whether you have a passion for what you're doing," she said.

Regardless of what choice is made, she said a law degree is something no one should ever regret getting since it gives you "credibility," no matter what occupation you choose. ■

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