

ALTERNATIVE CAREERS

Handout Series #6

OVERVIEW

Not everyone who obtains a law degree wants to practice law. There are many career opportunities for law graduates in professions outside the legal field. Just a few examples of these include jobs in government, human resources, the media, financial services, contracts, legal publishing, contracts administration, and academics. While such jobs may not require a law degree, many of the skills learned in law school (such as analysis, advocacy, communication and research) are directly transferable to other professions. The biggest obstacle you may face in pursuing a career outside of the law is in convincing a non-legal employer that your law degree is an asset. There are a number of ways to prepare in order to make yourself more attractive to a non-legal employer.

RESEARCH

First, regardless of the profession you target, you should thoroughly research the industry, the companies, and the individuals involved so that you will know as much as possible about your field of interest. Find out what specific skills and backgrounds employers in your chosen field are seeking, and learn how to correctly use industry "buzz words." When talking or writing to a potential employer about your skills, list specific achievements or accomplishments that demonstrate those skills. Explain what you can do for the employer, then prove it by describing related things that you have already done. In addition, take as many law school courses as you can that relate to your area of interest, and consider taking courses outside of law school that specifically relate to your targeted profession. There are many professions in which having a law degree may be helpful, but it may also be necessary to have industry specific experience, training or education.

TAILOR YOUR RESUME

Even if you do not have direct experience in a business or profession, you should tailor your resume to your target audience by using language that shows an understanding of the job requirements. This will enable you to relate your law degree and other work experience to the job that you are seeking. For example, in seeking a job as a contracts administrator, your resume should show a familiarity with drafting and negotiating contracts (even

if not with the types of contracts specific to the targeted industry), an ability to interact with customers and other departments, and the skills needed to handle and prioritize multiple complex assignments simultaneously.

Just as in seeking a job practicing law, a resume for a non-legal job must be easy to read, well organized, visually attractive, and free of mistakes. Unless you have prior work experience in the targeted industry, the resume should concentrate on demonstrating your accomplishments and abilities that relate to the type of work you want to do. For every employer to whom you apply, you should have a cover letter that is customized to that employer and which shows that you have researched the employer, that you have an understanding of what the employer needs and that you are the person who can help resolve the employer's problems. A cover letter should always be addressed to the individual in charge of hiring and it should demonstrate your enthusiasm to work for this particular employer. Employers are not in business to give you training or experience; they want to know what you can do for them. Remember that the best way to get your resume reviewed is if you have made a contact with someone at this employer or have a personal referral that can be used. Networking tips are in the *Networking Made Easy* handout.

INTERVIEW PREPARATION

In preparing for an interview with a non-legal employer, do thorough advance research on the company. Take advantage of the services of your undergraduate career placement office, visit the business section of your library for corporate background materials, and search the company's website, as well as financial and business websites, for information about the company. Read trade publications for the targeted industry and become familiar with the language, trends and goals of the industry. Read the company's annual report and any company brochures so that you can speak intelligently about the individual company's current activities.

During the interview, you will be selling yourself and trying to convince the employer that you have a plausible reason for not wanting to practice law. Some of the questions you can expect are, "Why don't you want to practice law?"; "Why should I hire you instead of someone trained in this field?"; or "How do I know that you won't leave this job for a more lucrative position in law practice?" Have your responses ready. It will be your job to clearly state your motivations and goals and to convince the interviewer that it is precisely because of your law degree that you would be a perfect candidate for this job. Prepare responses to questions about yourself that emphasize your transferable legal and non-legal skills. Know what your strengths and weaknesses are.

It will be essential to convey enthusiasm and sincerity to the prospective employer. Anticipate the concerns of the interviewer and address them with positive statements about your abilities and your motivations. If your first interview is with someone from the human resources department, it may be merely for screening purposes. In that situation, it will be more important to convey your enthusiasm than it will be to talk about your ability to perform specific job tasks. A human resources interviewer is interested in whether you will fit well into the organization, and thus the questions asked will be broad and not necessarily job specific. Try to understand the agenda of the particular interviewer with whom you are meeting and tailor your answers to that person's agenda.

The Career Development Office has a number of books that discuss many of the non-traditional careers that are open to law graduates. You can check out any of these books as a way to start focusing on the career options that are available to you. These books include:

Alternative Careers for Lawyers, The Princeton Review, 1997. Rethinking your career strategy, suggestions for non-legal careers, advice for dealing with the financial ramifications of leaving the practice of law, real life success stories.

Beyond L.A. Law, Harcourt Brace, 1998. Inspiring stories of people who have done fascinating things with a law degree.

Changing Jobs - a Handbook for Lawyers for the 1990's, Heidi L. McNeil, ABA. Designed to assist those who are thinking about changing their current legal positions or even about leaving the law business entirely.

Judgment Reversed: Alternative Careers for Lawyers, Jeffrey Strausser, 1997. Guide to assessing the best alternative uses of a legal degree according to the strengths and likes of the individual. Includes bibliographical references.

Landing a Non-Traditional Job Part I: Suggestions for Changing Careers; & Part II: 600+ Things You Can Do With a Law Degree (Other than Practice Law), Federal Reports, Inc., 1995

Life After law - Second Careers for Lawyers, Mary Ann Altman, 1991. Detailed stories of 23 former lawyers who are now in other careers and other information on various ways to effect a career change.

Non-Legal Career For Lawyers, Gary A. Munneke and William D. Henslee, 1994. A guide published by the American Bar Association Law Student Division.

The Road Not Taken - A Practical Guide to Exploring Non-Legal Career Options, Kathy Grant & Wendy Werner, 1991. A workbook for law students seeking alternatives to traditional careers in law.

Running From the Law - Why Good Lawyers Are Getting Out of the Legal Profession, Deborah L. Aaron, 1991. Features interviews with successful practitioners who have left the law to find greater personal and financial rewards.

What Can You Do With a Law Degree? - A Lawyer's Guide to Career Alternatives Inside, Outside and Around the Law, Deborah L. Aaron, 1999. How to tell if you are better suited to the law or to some other field and how to transfer your legal skills to other professions.

In addition to these books, the CDO has copies of several booklets published by the National Association of Law Placement (NALP), including *Searching for an Alternative: A Law Student's Guide to Finding Non-Legal Jobs; Careers in Human Resources; Careers in Financial Services; Careers in Compliance and Regulatory Affairs; Careers in the Media; Careers in Legal Publishing; and Going In-House: A Guide for Law Students and Recent Graduates*. Finally, there are numerous websites that may be helpful in identifying and locating non-traditional job opportunities for lawyers. These include:

<http://www.ajb.dni.us>

<http://www.fedjobs.com>

<http://www.jobtrak.com>

Since new websites appear all the time, you should also conduct your own web search of the profession or industry in which you are interested, using any of the many commercial search engines. Some websites have related listservs to which you can subscribe in order to receive regular updates of job opportunities.