

Self-Assessment Questions

Whether you came to law school with concrete ideas about what you want to do with your law degree, or you are still trying to sort through all of the possibilities, self-assessment is key to career planning. By finding a career that fits with your strengths and interests, your chance of achieving career satisfaction will increase greatly. You should consider your answers to the questions below as you map out your career, keeping in mind that the answers will almost certainly change over time.

Questions to consider when planning your career map:

How do you like to work?

The nature of the work and your work environment may be critical to finding the right fit. Here are some factors to think about:

- Do you love to research and write? Would you rather be an oral advocate for your clients?
- Do you need to have a great deal of contact with people? Must it be with clients or are colleagues enough?
- Would you rather work with people? Things? Ideas? Or a business?
- Are you happier juggling multiple short-term assignments or would you rather spend lots of time on a few long-term assignments?
- How much autonomy and/or responsibility do you want to have early in your career?
- Do you need to see the immediate results of your work or are you satisfied with the potential for eventual large impact?
- Does an adversarial practice make you uncomfortable?
- Do you want to be an expert or a generalist? Is your first thought "Put me wherever you need me."?

What practice setting do you want to work in?

There are many practice settings lawyers can work in. Within the public service arena, they include government (federal, state, local, international and intergovernmental), nonprofits, legal services, public defenders, and private public interest law firms. There are, of course, different sets of options within the private sector, including firms of all sizes, corporations, investment banks, management consultant groups, etc. Questions to ask about setting include:

- Do you want a formal atmosphere, or will you be happy with a more casual non-hierarchical setting?
- Do you seek formal training, or will you be satisfied by on-the-job training combined with some supervision and/or mentoring?
- How important is it for the office you work in to have a great deal of resources at your disposal?
- Will you be willing to take into account the economics of your practice? For example, private public interest law firms often have to evaluate whether a case will make money for their firm, not just whether it is the "right" case to pursue.
- Do you have a strong need for political/ideological compatibility?
- Do you need to feel like an activist?
- What kind of people do you want to work with?
- How much teamwork do you want versus working solo?
- Is a strong mentorship program important to you?

What issues do you want to work on?

If you think the substance of the work will matter to you but have not yet identified an issue area that you want to work on, these are some of the ways to think about a practice area that will grab you:

- What have you liked and disliked from your prior work experiences and extracurricular activities?

- What issues do you like to read about?
- What volunteer work do you gravitate towards?
- What academic subjects excited you in law school?
- Do you mind facing moral conundrums in your practice?
- Can you operate within the gray areas of the law, or do you need concrete answers?
- Can you handle emotionally charged situations within your practice?

What are your lifestyle needs?

Career choices should take into account the other aspects of your life that are important to you. These are some of the factors you should consider:

- How much time do you want for friends, family, hobbies, etc.?
- How much control do you want over when you work and when you have time for other pursuits?
- What are your realistic financial needs?
- Geographic considerations - where do you want to start out your career? Do you want to be close to family?
- Do you have geographic constraints?

What trade-offs are you willing to make?

There is no perfect job, though there are many great ones. Your goal is to find one you will be happy going to when you leave law school and where you will build skills. You may have to give up something to get the right fit, particularly at the beginning. Some of the items you may need to trade off are:

- Geographic location - you may need to go to a different city than you had planned to land the right job. Or you may need to go to a different city to afford the lifestyle you want.
- Money for responsibility - many of the jobs that give you a great deal of responsibility early on do not pay as well as some of the ones that bring you along slowly.
- Time for outside pursuits or control over own time - some positions can be very demanding; litigating positions can mean less control over your life as courts often set the time table. Don't assume that it is just large firms that require long or unpredictable hours.
- Client contact vs. high impact - while some positions offer both, many jobs will give you either the opportunity to work with many clients or the chance to work on class action or law reform work.

How do you define success?

Different people have different measures of success. Try to come up with what will make you feel satisfied with your success level weighing these and other factors:

- Prestige - what is prestige? Does it have to be an employer whose name people recognize?
- Helping people - how many people/what kind of people?
- Making a difference? On what scale? One person at a time? Entire groups of people?
- Money - how much do you need to feel successful?
- Fame - e.g. name in paper
- Enjoyment of Job
- Balanced life
- Power