



As a lawyer, one of the most common questions I get from people I meet is ‘what kind of law do you practice?’ Perhaps it is the prevalence of this question that makes so many young lawyers feel the pressure to choose an area of law

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However, young lawyers, particularly recent graduates, rarely have the experience necessary to make an informed decision about what area of legal practice best suits their interests and talents. Very few young lawyers have had any true practical experience upon which to base their decision and, instead, rely on how much they enjoyed a particular class or classes offered at their law school— an experience that rarely reflects the daily tasks that a practicing lawyer in the chosen field performs.

Unfortunately, this tendency to attempt to specialize too early can have detrimental effects on a young lawyer’s ability to launch a rewarding career. For those young lawyers who manage to land jobs within a highly specialized area, many find themselves disappointed by the difference between their academic and practical experience. Others may find themselves pigeonholed early on and experience significant difficulty finding a job if they later decide to try their hands in other practice areas.

Perhaps the greatest problem associated with early specialization, however, is the difficulty of finding that initial job. Far fewer jobs exist within highly specialized fields, such as environmental law, for example, than do within more general practice areas such as litigation. These jobs are highly sought after and generally go to candidates with significant practical experience in the field and to graduates of top-10 schools. The competition is fierce, and even highly qualified candidates who mistakenly tailor their job searches too narrowly may find themselves without employment.

The nature of the job market presents a significant problem for those young lawyers who chose to specialize early on, not because they felt pressure to choose an area, but rather because they hold a true passion for the field. It can be very frustrating to find oneself effectively blocked from entry-level positions in the field of choice, and many young lawyers harm themselves by choosing to settle for inferior opportunities within the field rather than broaden their job search. The key for these young lawyers, therefore, is to learn to develop an effective “game plan.” The key to a successful career is not in one’s ability to land the ideal first job, but rather in a lawyer’s ability to see the bigger picture and recognize that the most important function of that first legal job is to provide the opportunity to develop the tools necessary to be able to successfully compete for jobs within the desired field later in that lawyer’s career.

Since many different legal specialties require the same basic lawyering skills and since those skills are largely acquired during a lawyer’s first few years in practice, accepting a first job in a general practice area is unlikely to harm a lawyer’s future prospects for participating in a more specialized area. For example, lawyers specializing in such areas as environmental law, employment law,

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medical malpractice, insurance defense, and mass tort litigation will all require a basic background in litigation skills and motion practice. Whether a lawyer's first year in practice is spent in a highly specialized boutique firm or in a general litigation practice, the same basic training will take place, and the same skills will need to be developed. Therefore, a lawyer who wishes to go into one of these fields is much better off taking a job in a general litigation practice if that job carries significant responsibility and will provide good initial training than taking a job in a boutique firm that would relegate that lawyer to doing solely document review or clerk-type duties.

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While many firms, particularly smaller or mid-size firms, do not have highly specialized departments, their litigation departments are likely to perform work on at least some cases within a specialized area. For young lawyers, this can provide a wealth of opportunity. Letting assigning partners know of particular areas of interest and seeking to perform work on cases within those areas of interest often allows a lawyer in a general litigation practice to gain valuable exposure to the types of issues raised within a specialized area. Many firms do attempt to provide young lawyers with cases involving whatever specific areas hold the most interest for them, and often even mid-level associates are able to carve out niches of specialties within the more general practice areas. Gaining specialized experience in this manner allows lawyers who hope to later go on to practice only within a particular specialty build their resumes to make themselves more attractive candidates for upper-level positions within their chosen field.

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