



So You've Got Your J.D. ... Now What?

I

By Delmon Smith

How impressive it is to stand before a judge and quote *Samuelson v. Kramer* at the very moment it pertains to a critical element of one's case!

It's mesmerizing to watch a young defense attorney find that single loophole that all but solidifies his case right before the defendant is immediately allowed to stroll right out of the courtroom. Such cases are what make instant hits of shows like *The Practice* and *Law & Order*. To the average layman, this appears to be the life and a quite pleasant one, too! But the truth of the matter is, the majority of legal disputes never reach the courtroom. Moreover, big firm opportunities are typically reserved for students ranked in the top 10-15% of their respective classes.

So, what happens to the remaining 85-90%? There are several options, with the most common being in-house, government, public interest, and non-legal. The following provides some insight into each.

In-House Positions

In-house positions offer the opportunity to perform interesting and complex legal research and work without the extended hours frequently required at some of the nation's largest firms. In-house positions are often accompanied with attractive benefits, and it is not uncommon for individuals to maintain employment in such a capacity for several years. However, most express that companies who offer in-house positions are often seeking attorneys with at least three to five years of experience within a larger firm. This type of experience is likely to have already exposed an individual to the corporate arena and therefore one is immediately recognized as being fully capable of handling the task at hand. Start-up companies are willing to invest in a talented recent graduate, as a recent graduate is less likely to demand as high of a salary.

Government Jobs

Government opportunities are very attractive to attorneys, as well. In this particular sector, such positions often present excellent benefits but are highly competitive. These positions are often announced far in advance, and it is not uncommon for them to remain open for six to more than 12 months. However, government employment provides job security that is unmatched by any other area. A significant number of individuals who decide to go this route often remain there throughout their entire careers. The environment is frequently relaxed and friendly, but past employees often complain that there is too much free time. At first, this may be attractive to the attorney accustomed to working 12-16 hour days but over time would probably not be looked at as a positive attribute. Overall, the government is a very good option, but be sure to prepare ahead of time, as this is not a process that is completed within a few weeks.



Public Interest Jobs

2

Public interest opportunities often give one the feeling of “giving back”, as we so often heard during law school. Prior to the six-figure salaries and the attractive job offers, many arrived with plans to “make a difference in the world.”

Public interest opportunities can surely satisfy the soul, as you are often assisting individuals who would otherwise not be able to afford legal representation. The upside — peace of mind and the ability to put a smile on someone’s face who probably hasn’t smiled in quite some time. The downside — salary! While it varies depending on the jurisdiction, it is quite plausible to receive a \$42,000 salary with minimal increases each year.

Attorneys who elect to go with this option are usually afforded the opportunity to gain a wealth of experience, not because the organization is intentionally attempting to develop one’s skills, but because of a limited staff/budget and an enormous caseload. The two go hand-in-hand in the area of public interest, but often they result in producing some of the country’s finest attorneys. All in all, public interest work is quite appealing if you’re seeking fulfillment and are willing to forego a few luxuries in life.

Non-Legal Option

The last category is non-legal, or going outside of the typical practice of law. It definitely happens, and often doesn’t come to mind until an individual has gone well beyond his/her first year of professional work. Some attorneys practice law for years and realize that they would rather have a career as a chef, news anchor, talk show host, or even an NFL quarterback (see Steve Young). This option is rarely planned upfront and is usually decided upon through trial and error. Some attorneys come to this realization and never look back, while others simply find it was time for a brief rest. The field of law creates thinkers above anything else, and there is always room for a bright and energetic legal mind in almost every facet of the workforce. Not very long ago, I heard a statement that changed my entire outlook on life and employment altogether. Most people sleep six to eight hours per day and work an average of eight hours (much more for attorneys). If you are, in essence, spending one-third of your life at work, why not choose an occupation that you enjoy? Life is too precious and too short to do otherwise!