

ALTERNATIVE CAREERS FOR JDs

(Adapted from a presentation by the Career Development Office at Creighton University School of Law at the April 2010 NALP Educational Conference).

You have probably heard it said many times, “a law degree is valuable, *even if you do not want to practice law.*” But, what can you do with a law degree besides practice law in a traditional legal environment? There are many options available and deciding upon a nontraditional legal career should be a thoughtful process. There are pros and cons to beginning your career outside of a traditional legal practice and this handout will help you get started in determining if an alternative legal career is right for you. It is no substitute, however, for meeting with your advisor as you evaluate your career options. Finding an alternative career that is right for you takes time, patience and persistence.

Step 1: Assess Yourself

Step 2: Research and Investigate Career Options

Step 3: Develop Your “Marketing” Materials

Step 4: Find and Apply for Positions

Step 5: Identify Your Transferable Skills

Self Assessment

Self-assessment is a process where one spends time learning about oneself. It requires you to take stock of your skills, values, knowledge, strengths and weaknesses, passions and needs as they relate to your career goals and development. It is an exercise that may seem time consuming and/or daunting at times, but it is necessary for you to truly determine if practicing law in a traditional environment is not right for you and what alternative careers might be a better fit.

It is critical to spend time thinking about the job qualities you must have in order to be professionally fulfilled, including your interests (subject matters to which you are drawn, read and inquire about), skills (the abilities you have developed), values (the guiding principles that bring meaning to your work and motivate you), people preferences (the type of contact you like with others) and work environment (the office atmosphere, work schedule, office aesthetics, etc.). For example, do you prefer working with people or with facts? Do you need to be in a downtown professional environment to feel fulfilled? Also, think about what you must avoid to be professionally fulfilled.

Some simple self-assessment exercises include going through the Sunday paper to determine what articles draw your interest, examining what magazines you read, and what subjects in books draw your attention. Another exercise is to read the classified ads from the Sunday newspapers for white collar job opportunities for the next several weeks. Clip what interests you and make no judgment until several weeks have gone by.

Before you become convinced that you don't want to practice law, consider the following as you perform your self-assessment (these issues are not intended to scare you away from pursuing an alternative career, but they are factors to think about).

Resources/Books/Testing Instruments in the Career Services Office to help you Self-Assess

- *What Can You Do With a Law Degree? A Lawyer's Guide to Career Alternatives Inside, Outside and Around the Law*, Deborah Aaron, Niche Press (5th ed. 2004). (Chapter 3) (The classic guide to nontraditional legal careers. Pay special attention to creating an ideal job grid).

- *Nonlegal Careers for Lawyers*, Gary A. Munneke, William D. Hensley, and Ellen Wayne ABA, (5th ed. 2006) (Chapter 4 – “When to Choose a Nonlegal Career?”).
- *Should You Really Be A Lawyer?” The Guide to Smart Career Choices Before, During & After Law School*, Deborah Schneider (2005) (Self-Assessment: Chapter 6).
- *Guerrilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams*, Kimm Walton (2008) (Chapter 2 “Figuring Out What the Heck the Job of Your Dreams Is”).
- *Be Your Own Brand: A Breakthrough Formula for Standing Out from the Crowd*, David McNally and Karl D. Speak, 2003
- *What Color is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers*, Richard N. Bolles (updated yearly).
- Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Instrument (MBTI) evaluates personality type to determine work and communication preferences.

Research and Investigate Career Options

Once you determine what you need from a career, the next step is to determine what careers meet your “ideal job.” This will entail a lot of research. Many of the resources mentioned above contain broad categories of non-traditional legal careers, such as careers in business, government, consulting, academia (either teaching or education administration), alternative dispute resolution, publishing and media, and many other areas. There are also numerous websites that can provide alternative legal career leads (See http://www.nalp.org/assets/296_alternativecareerswebsite.pdf).

After you find a field that sounds promising, it is time to start doing information interviewing with people who currently do the type of work you think you want to do. Find out from them what their career path was and how they made it to that position. Ask them what advice they would have someone who wants a similar position. Informational interviews are the key to getting the inside information you need to persuade employers that you are the right person for their job.

Develop Your Marketing Materials

When applying for non-legal positions, your chronologically-based “legal” resume may need to be adapted to best market you for positions in that field. A functional or skills-based resume breaks down your experience into relevant areas such as “Writing and Analytical Experience” or “Communication and Presentation Experience.” (See e.g., *The Before and After Resume: Effective Resumes for the Alternative Career Job Search*), http://www.nalp.org/assets/319_resumes.pdf).

When crafting your resume for non-legal employers, think about the transferable skills you have gained in law school, either in your classes, employment during law school or participation in law school competitions or extracurricular and volunteer activities. Focus on your research skills, analytical ability, organizational skills, and writing ability when presenting your credentials to non-legal employers. If you are applying in response to a specific job description that you have seen posted by the employer, you may wish to use a “targeted” resume that is organized to reflect the skills and experience sought by the employer.

Resumes and cover letters must be specific to the field and the employer to which you are interested. Let them know what it is that you can do for them and how your background will help them in their organization. During your informational interviews, ask people about the common resume and cover letter formats for that field and be sure to conform your materials to the industry standard.

In your cover letter and in interviews, you will need to assuage potential employer concern over your not wanting to “use” your law degree for which you worked so hard. Make sure that you do so in positive terms rather than giving the appearance of running from the law. For example, “After careful thought, I

have decided that non-profit management is the career path for me as it will allow me to use the organizational and communication skills I developed in law school to serve people who need assistance in today's society."

To prepare for job and informational interviews prepare a brief "sound bite" of your skills, what you have to offer and what you are looking for. Be ready to explain why a traditional law practice is not for you and have a compelling reason for seeking a non-traditional career. Then follow-up with the reasons your chosen field is right for you and a better match than traditional law practice.

Be prepared to address potential employer resistance to hiring a JD for a non-legal position. Remember that although a JD represents a lot of hard work and valuable educational experience on your part, it does not automatically make you qualified for every position in the world. Anticipate employer concerns and be prepared to persuade the employer that though you understand their concerns, you have what it takes to do the job. Some employers may be concerned that a JD will get "bored" and quit and not be worth the training investment. Demonstrate to employers why you want the job even if your educational experiences make you appear overqualified. (See e.g., http://www.nalp.org/assets/320_toughinterviewissues.pdf).

Always remember that the burden of proof is on you to show that you have the skills and enthusiasm necessary for success in that field. The research you have done will help you combat employer resistance – remember your transferable skills and be prepared to educate the employer about what you can do for them. Use those industry buzz words and speak the employer's language.

Transferable Skills

(Adapted from "Guerrilla Tactics: For Getting the Job of Your Dreams" by Kimm Walton, 2008)

To convince employers who aren't obvious targets that you are the right person to hire, make it crystal clear all the relevant skills you bring to the table. In every aspect of your job search – conversations, letters, resumes – explain why what you've got that is relevant to them. Here are a few suggestions:

Ability to analyze facts

Ability to work in teams or groups

Ability to be a self-starter

Risk awareness

Counseling and ability to establish rapport, to listen and reflect and problem-solve

Familiarity with legal terminology

Knowledge of specific topics such as insurance, health care, tax, criminal law, corporations

Strong motivation and the skills associated with it (working under pressure, ability to complete projects, ability to juggle multiple responsibilities)

Ability to think independently

Ability to negotiate

Ability to persuade

Ability to prepare effectively

Ability to speak before an audience

Research skills

Writing ability

For more information about alternative careers and preparing for alternative career interviews see Chapter 32, page 1301 of *Guerrilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams* by Kimm Walton, 2008 in the Loyola Career Services Office.