EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS & RESOURCES

Attorneys work in a variety of settings, including the legal sector, legal related sectors and non-traditional settings. Two important steps in assuring career success and job satisfaction are: (1) understanding each work environment and how it might fit your needs, and (2) deciding which setting would be the best fit for you. The following is an overview of the various settings. However, note that these are generalizations and thus do not necessarily apply to every employer in the described category.

PRIVATE SECTOR

Lawyers in private practice generally provide legal services to clients for a fee. While most law firms’ fees are paid by the hour and charged as “billable” hours, some firms, especially plaintiff-side law firms, are paid pursuant to a contingency fee that is a portion of their client’s recovery. The following explains the different types of employment opportunities offered within the private sector, and a directory of NALP member law firms is online at www.nalpdirectory.com.

- **BIG FIRMS/MEGA FIRMS** (200-500+ lawyers). Mega firms are generally full service law firms, and typically have branches nationwide and in foreign countries. Their clients usually consist of Fortune 500 corporations who are billed on an hourly basis, but may also consist of smaller businesses such as start-up companies.

- **MID-SIZED FIRMS** (50–150 lawyers). The types of services offered by mid-sized firms vary from specialized services to a full range of services. Their clients may include both businesses and individuals, and business development (i.e. bringing in clients) is often encouraged at an earlier stage than in larger firms.

- **SMALL FIRMS** (2 – 30 lawyers). Most lawyers nationwide work in small law firms. Some small law firms have general practices while others are specialized are known as “boutique” law firms. The advantages of a smaller firm often include a more intimate working environment, greater responsibility, more control over cases, and the ability to see a case through from beginning to end.

- **SOLO PRACTICE**. There are many issues to consider when to opening your own practice and we suggest reviewing one of the many books on the subject prior to doing so. For instance, when you start your own practice, you will not only practice law but you will also have to do all the marketing and most of the administrative work. In addition, you will probably need a client base, some experience, and enough capital to cover operating expenses. Accordingly, starting your own law firm may not be a practical option directly out of law school, but some do it, especially given today’s economic climate.
- **CORPORATE/IN-HOUSE COUNSEL.** Businesses and corporations often hire their own “in-house” legal staff. Most corporations, accounting firms, insurance companies, banks, financial institutions, motion picture companies, as well as software, computer and e-commerce companies, have an “in-house” legal staff. Typically, corporations seldom hire entry-level attorneys, as they prefer a few years of experience. However, in-house counsel often hire students as law clerks during summer or as clinical legal interns/externs during the academic year.

**GOVERNMENT**

Government positions for lawyers are available in all three levels of government: federal, state and local. In fact, the government is the second largest employer of law school graduates after private firms. The federal job website is [http://usajobs.gov](http://usajobs.gov). Most government agencies hire students for summer positions. Like other employers, governmental agencies take grades and writing ability into consideration, but other factors are also important. Government agencies also prefer to see dedication to public service and welcome candidates with a previous career.

- **FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.** Most federal positions are located in Washington, D.C. However, many agencies have offices in other states, and most have offices in the Bay Area. Some federal agencies have honors programs for law students and new graduates with a structured, time-sensitive application process, with the application typically due in early September of each year. See [www.justice.gov/oarm/arm/hp/hp.htm](http://www.justice.gov/oarm/arm/hp/hp.htm) for application and deadline information. The Department of Justice (DOJ) is the largest federal employer of attorneys and has the largest honors program.

  Federal government positions typically require a special application form in lieu of, or in addition to, a resume. Information about several honors programs, including the DOJ Honors Program, is available in OCP and on the agencies’ websites. See the *Government Honors & Internship Handbook*: [www.law.arizona.edu/career/honorshandbook.cfm](http://www.law.arizona.edu/career/honorshandbook.cfm) (password available on your home page of USFLawLink.com) for other agencies that may be hiring.

- **STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT.** In addition to the federal level, there are also many opportunities at the state and local levels. The most popular positions are at the offices of the (1) Public Defender; (2) District Attorney; (3) City Attorney; (4) County Counsel; and (5) State Attorney General. Positions at the state level generally parallel those at the federal level. Attorneys are also hired by school districts, colleges, universities, and many large cities. State and local governments have a variety of application requirements and some require a civil service exam. See [http://ag.ca.gov/careers/students.php](http://ag.ca.gov/careers/students.php) for information on law clerk positions at the California Attorney General’s Office. The job website for the State of California is [http://jobs.ca.gov/OEC/index.aspx](http://jobs.ca.gov/OEC/index.aspx).
USF law students also participate in Public Interest Public Sector (PI/PS) Day, typically in early February. At PI/PS Day, students can obtain information and learn about the variety of government positions for attorneys and summer law clerks.

PUBLIC INTEREST

The work engaged in by public interest lawyers encompasses a broad range of activities. In general, public interest lawyers tend to represent people who, and issues that, otherwise might lack meaningful representation in the legal system. Public interest law can encompass direct legal services, impact litigation, and policy work. Like lawyers in private practice, public interest lawyers often specialize and develop expertise in specific types of advocacy and in particular fields of law. Excellent sites to research public interest careers are www.psjd.org and www.equaljusticeworks.org.

Many public interest organizations hire law students for summer positions or as externs during the school year for academic credit. Although typically unpaid, these internships provide excellent experience. For students interested in public interest careers after graduation, it is important to start building a public interest resume and demonstrating a commitment to public service early on. Public Interest/Public Sector Day (PI/PS) in February is a great forum to meet and interview with many public interest employers.

JUDICIAL EXTERNSHIPS & CLERKSHIPS

Many state and federal judges hire law students as judicial externs during the summer and during the fall and spring semesters. Judicial externs gain valuable research and writing skills, and are exposed to the judicial process. Strong writing skills are an important criterion for judges, and most require a writing sample as part of your application. See the OCP handout “How to Apply for Judicial Externships” for more detailed information about the application process, proper protocol, and sample cover letters.

USF graduates have obtained judicial clerkships with federal and state courts, such as the U.S. District Courts and the California Appellate Courts and Superior Courts. Positions are also available with Administrative Law Judges, which are at the federal and state levels. Normally one to two-year post-graduate positions, clerkships provide an invaluable learning experience and serve as a strong foundation for launching a legal or academic career. Federal clerkships are very competitive and generally, it is somewhat easier to obtain a clerkship position in state court. Students should submit judicial clerkship applications for federal and some state courts by early fall of the third year of law school. The OPC holds a judicial clerkship workshop during the spring semester that will go over the timing for submission of application materials. Any student interested in a judicial clerkship should contact OCP.

EDUCATION / ACADEMIA

Teaching at a law school or at a college or university are the two main areas of academia that attract law school graduates. Additionally, post-graduate teaching and clinical fellowships are other avenues into academia. To teach in a top tier law school, scholarly legal publication, top
grades, and often a judicial clerkship, are usually needed. Faculty members are great sources of information and advice if you are interested in academia.

**INTERNSHIPS / EXTERNSHIPS**

A fall or spring legal internship is a full-time semester placement with an off-campus government agency, non-profit organization, private law firm, or corporation for academic credit. A judicial externship is a placement with a judge. For our purposes, we refer to both types of opportunities collectively as “externships.” These opportunities are available to students in their fourth or fifth semester. Contact the Externship Programs office at externships@usfca.edu for timing and other information.

**RESEARCH ASSISTANT POSITIONS**

Many law school professors hire research assistants for the summer or during the school year. If you are interested in doing research for a particular professor, contact the professor directly. Students are likely to get excellent research and writing experiences, and an in-depth understanding of a particular area of law. The OCP sometimes lists positions on USFLawLink.com, but the direct approach is generally more effective.

**SPECIALIZATION AREAS**

No list of jobs held by attorneys could cover all the options available to them. For more information about a number of popular practice areas, stop by OCP and read *The Official Guide to Legal Specialties: An Insider’s Guide to Every Major Practice Area* and other law specialty resources.

**NON – LEGAL POSITIONS / ALTERNATIVE LEGAL CAREERS**

For students who are interested in non-legal positions or alternative legal careers, OCP has a wide range of resources to aid students in their research. OCP also has an extensive resource library and career counseling available to law students interested in alternative careers. However, many students have found the best education to be through networking. In this regard, some students and alumni have found it useful to become involved with their chosen target employer group through a professional association. Many non-legal professions have associations that can be found in the Encyclopedia of National Associations, available online through either Westlaw or Lexis. OCP may also be able to help you identify alumni in your field of interest. J.D.’s can be found working in the real estate industry, finance, banking, law school administration, legal recruiting, insurance, legislative and entertainment industry.

A great resource on alternative careers is *What Can you Do with a Law Degree? A Lawyer’s Guide to Career Alternatives Inside, Outside & Around the Law* by Deborah Arron, is available in OCP.