
Advice and Testimonials from Law Graduates Who Chose Not to Practice Law

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Linda Shopland, Esq. is a career counselor at Widener University School of Law in Wilmington, DE. She previously practiced family law in Delaware.

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On handling others' perceptions or assumptions about your decision not to practice law:

[Karen Jackson Vaughn](#) gives good advice on how to avoid getting caught up in the negative perceptions or assumptions that sometimes come your way from people critical of your decision not to practice law. "I still consider myself an attorney. I had to decide, however, that I can accept not being viewed that way," Vaughn says. Colleagues and even family members may be skeptical and judgmental of your decision. Ultimately, you need to be confident and be comfortable in your own skin. It also helps if you are secure in your reasons for not wanting to engage in typical law practice. Vaughn explains, "a lot of my story has to do with the essence of who I am and the reasons I decided to pursue the J.D. degree in the first place. I was attracted to the study of law because of the intellectual rigor and the flexibility that the law degree provides. It was never my intention to spend my entire career practicing law in the traditional sense."

On the value of networking

Everyone knows that networking is important to your job search and this is no less true when embarking on an alternative career search. According to [Vaughn](#), "Never underestimate the value of human capital. No one can afford to be boxed into a very narrow sphere of influence. Proving this point, she continues to be active in a wide variety of activities and memberships including the Board of Directors of the Homeless Advocacy Project and the Philadelphia Area Minority Job Fair and Zone 1 member of the

Pennsylvania Bar Association House of Delegates. Of course, these kinds of achievements do not materialize overnight. Consequently, Vaughn recommends networking very early in your career. For example, for years, she worked on a variety of Philadelphia bar association sections and committees (e.g., Public Interest Legislative Liaison, Committee on Minorities in the Profession, Commission on Judicial Selection and Retention) and planned CLE programs. Along the way, she built relationships with an impressive number of individuals from around the country, many of whom have proved helpful in her career search.

Vaughn realizes that it can be difficult to network and that it may cause you to step out of your comfort zone. Nevertheless, the rewards for your efforts can be great. “You must learn to do some things alone such as going to luncheons, dinners, etc. Breaking the ice with strangers is a skill that can be acquired. Employers like people who are comfortable in a variety of social settings and who know how to deal with a variety of people.

On choosing a mentor for an alternative career search

Mentors can be an invaluable resource to you as you transition to an alternative legal position. Therefore, it is important to learn how to cultivate all kinds of relationships in your professional career. You never know from where a mentor may come. In fact, you are well advised to look broadly for mentorship possibilities, especially if you think an alternative career is in your future. Vaughn recommends that you “look for people who have reached leadership positions or busy people who are doing things beyond practicing law. They may be able to open doors. Also, mentors can be anyone in any field because people now understand that lawyers are using their training in other ways.

On preparing financially for an alternative career search

Exploring the possibilities of a new alternative career can be exciting. Some of the fields you will explore offer similar if not better financial compensation. However, for many alternative careers, you may quickly discover that the compensation is much less you would earn in a legal career, and that you will need to prepare financially before making the switch. Linda Shopland shares her plan. “For two years before I left the practice of law, I financially prepared myself. I paid off loans and credit cards. I cut back on my lifestyle somewhat. I figured out how much I needed to live comfortably and that became my bottom line when budgeting and negotiating salaries.

On taking risks in your alternative career search

Pursuing an alternative career can involve a measure of risk, especially if you have worked in the legal profession for a substantial period of time. Those who have made the successful transition, however, will likely tell you that the benefits outweigh the risks. As Shopland explains, “when you work in a position for a long period of time, it becomes part of your comfort zone. This is true even if there are aspects of the position that you do not like. Over time, you may even begin to lose sight of what you can do outside of this position because it has become so comfortable to you. Shopland offers tips on moving outside of your comfort zone. She says that you should look more deeply into who you are beyond your skills and title. Examine your values and goals. Spend time focusing on what you want. Through these tasks you will discover that you offer alternative employers substantial transferable skills and that you can be productive for them. This process will also help you begin to redefine yourself as something other than just a law student or lawyer and will free you to think more broadly about your options.

On thinking creatively about your alternative career search

Nikki Shenk offers these tips on conducting a creative alternative career search:

Don't think you are bound by the jobs posted at your law school! Look at legal newspapers and journals for corporate job postings. Employers that advertise in these publications are looking for people with legal backgrounds. If you are leaning toward a job in academics, check the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for job leads. I would also take a look at the legal publishers' websites for a list of alternative career postings (<http://www.thomsoncareers.com/>). I know when I saw the list of Thomson job postings for the first time I was amazed that there were literally thousands of alternative jobs available. It was also the first time I realized how valuable my JD is even if I decided not to practice law.

Think outside the box!! There are many jobs where you do not practice law per se but need legal background. One example is managing trusts. You can work at any bank or college in the nation—which definitely constitutes a large list of employers. Banks need people who can manage trusts and know the legal implications of their decisions. Alumni and Development departments need people to draft trusts and estate documents when alumni want to donate to their schools. If you think outside the box, you will realize how many employers could benefit from your legal education. You now have an advantage over every other interested employee who does not have a JD.

If you are interested in a specific agency or employer, check if they are willing to accept interns. I know it is a financial sacrifice at first, but that “foot in the door” (assuming you make a good impression) could be your ticket to be first in line for new positions. It is easier to interview for a position when you already understand the work environment and what is expected from the employer.

A law student's perspective on finding an alternative career position

Marquitz entered law school thinking an alternative legal career might be right for her. Here, she talks about her first steps in the job search process and things that have surprised her along the way.

“I had a non-traditional background in nutrition and development, and I wanted to build on this training and work and combine it with the legal/policy training. I could have gone to a different type of graduate school, but I thought the J.D. would give me more versatility.

Even though people told me that Career Services was firm and clerkship oriented, I still went to talk to them. They helped me organize the search and made sure I had the fundamentals; sometimes they learned about an application process with me. I did not disregard their services simply because I was looking for something unusual. Now, I ask them to look over just about everything I write.

[I was surprised that] people, even high-level, very important, and busy people are willing to help up-and-coming members of their field if you ask the right way. Be sincerely interested, even if you find out half way through an informational interview that it isn't for you. Straight-out ask for advice. It's flattering and sometimes they share a little extra.

Also, I don't think you can really exhaust a search like this. There are always companies, groups, or organizations out there that you didn't know existed. I keep looking, and keep typing different combinations into the same search bank.