

New NALP Research on Second-Career Lawyers

Late last year NALP conducted a first of its kind survey to document the experiences and success of “second-career” lawyers who went into private practice employment after finishing law school. This survey was the result of more than two years’ work on the part of NALP’s Research Advisory Council. Overall, the survey findings suggest that second-career lawyers in firms fare no better and no worse on such bottom-line measures as aspiring to and achieving partnership, earning bonuses, and originating business. What they do bring, however, is a high level of maturity and a work ethic that is not compromised by a lack of stamina or inability to adapt to the law firm environment. Additional details on the survey methodology and findings follow.

To best be able to compare and contrast the experiences of second-career law graduates with those who attended law school without a significant break, the survey was made available to both groups of lawyers at firms. Both NALP employer members and schools cooperated in publicizing the online survey to their lawyers and alums, respectively.

This resulted in a total of 2,144 valid and complete surveys, after eliminating some duplicate responses and responses from individuals not in law firm private practice but who, nonetheless, completed the survey. Responses were relatively evenly split between those who had worked prior to law school and those who had not, thus providing a good volume of response from both groups, and a good basis for comparing the experiences of the two groups. To further delineate respondents, those with a prior career were divided into three groups: those who had worked two years or less, those who had worked three to five years, and those who had worked five or more years. These three groups accounted for 33%, 26%, and 41%, respectively, of respondents who had worked prior to law school.

New lawyers, whether second-career or not, clearly bring a wide variety of other skills and training to the legal profession. Other advanced degree training reported ran the gamut from accounting to zoology, with chemistry, finance, education, history, engineering, biology/biochemistry/molecular biology, and political science/public policy/public administration among the more common courses of study reported. Some were less frequently reported, such as sculpture, animal nutrition, anthropology, geophysical engineering, divinity/sacred theology, and Russian and East European studies. Likewise, second-career lawyers reported a wide variety of prior careers. Most commonly, these individuals came from an “other” business background. Among the more commonly reported descriptions for this “other” business category were accounting, banking/finance, journalism/writing, human resources, insurance, marketing/public relations, real estate, retail sales, and management, including restaurants. Among the less commonly reported were biomedical research, food service manager, art director/illustrator, landscape architect, pharmaceutical scientist, chemistry research and development, theological seminary admissions and distance education, puppeteer, union field representative, and refugee relief.

Prior titles reported, regardless of employer, varied as well. Jobs as engineers, teachers, administrative assistants, legislative assistants, paralegals, managers, and musicians of various types, as well as a variety of positions in the military were among the more commonly reported titles. Some were reported less often, and in addition to some of the “other” business descriptions above, include archaeologist, arms control inspector, avionics engineer, bicycle assembler, cartographer, coordinator of youth ministry, curriculum specialist, deputy chief of transportation planning, grants manager, guidance counselor, gunnery

officer, radar navigator instructor, Jesuit volunteer, Korean linguist, marine biologist, medical technologist, National Park ranger, supervisor of nuclear medicine department, petroleum engineer, post-production supervisor, and speech language pathologist.

Yet by other measures, differences are not great. For example, half of respondents, regardless of work experience, reported no perceived hindrances to obtaining their job. The economy and grades generally ranked as the top perceived hindrances, identified by 15% and 14% of respondents, respectively, although among respondents who had worked for five years or more, age topped the list, but at just 15%. Employer concerns about adaptability, stamina, and work-life conflicts turned out to be minimal hindrances.

What these second-career lawyers did communicate quite clearly, however, is a strong sense that they bring to their employers maturity (cited by 62%), a strong work ethic (54%), and, to a lesser extent, experience dealing with clients and business skills, 36% and 27%, respectively. About one in five felt that the skills of their prior career offered an advantage. Very few expected to be able to command higher billing rates because of their prior experience.

Once in the firm, second-career lawyers take just about as long to achieve partnership. Among respondents who had achieved partnership, both types of lawyers were equally likely to report that the length of time was typical. Geographic location, nature of the work, and firm reputation are the three top factors considered in choosing a job, regardless of the amount of prior work experience. The extent to which respondents had received a bonus varied little. Seniority or salary credit for prior work experience is rare. Finally, analyses on the value of work originated were inconclusive. Prior work experience could not be disentangled from other factors that could affect this measure, such as the type and location of the practice, and intangible personal attributes.

Other Advanced Degrees Reported by Survey Respondents

Type of Degree	% of Respondents
MA or MS	10.5%
MBA	4.0
MD	0.1
LLM.....	4.2
PhD.....	1.6

Note: All percentages are based on all 2,144 respondents. Respondents could check as many choices as applicable.

Kinds of Prior Careers Reported

	Percent of Respondents
Non-profit organization.....	6.0%
Business — engineering, high-tech, or biotech	11.8
Business — other	39.5
Education.....	11.2
Government — non-military	10.5

Note: Figures are based on all 1,148 respondents with a prior career.

Size of Current Law Firm Employer

	No Prior Career	Had Prior Career	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
			2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
Solo practice	5.7%	9.0%	5.3%	7.8%	12.9%
15 or fewer lawyers	16.6	15.9	14.9	14.7	17.0
16-50 lawyers	6.6	6.1	6.1	5.5	6.8
51-100 lawyers.....	5.8	4.9	5.6	4.1	4.8
101-250 lawyers	10.3	12.6	10.4	13.3	13.9
251-500 lawyers	14.9	16.1	14.9	16.7	16.6
501+ lawyers	40.0	35.4	42.7	37.9	28.1

Note: A total of 2,138 respondents reported the size of their current firm.

Prevalence of Judicial Clerkships

Had a Judicial Clerkship	No Prior Career	Had Prior Career	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
			2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
No.....	86.6%	86.7%	82.4%	88.4%	89.3%
Yes	13.4	13.3	17.6	11.6	10.7

Note: A total of 2,137 respondents reported if they had had a clerkship.

Factors Perceived as Hindrances in Obtaining Current Job

	Overall	No Prior Career	Had Prior Career	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
				2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
None	51.9%	52.9%	51.0%	48.9%	52.6%	52.4%
The economy	15.4	16.5	14.5	16.5	13.7	13.9
Grades or class rank	13.7	14.5	13.0	16.0	12.3	10.2
Lack of law review experience	5.6	6.4	5.0	4.8	6.1	4.1
Age	5.0	2.6	7.1	1.1	2.7	15.0
Interviewing skills	3.7	4.9	2.7	4.8	2.0	1.5
Lack of work experience prior to law school	3.5	7.0	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.7
Nature of work experience prior to law school	2.1	1.1	3.0	1.9	4.1	3.3
Non-law related summer activities/employment during law school	2.0	1.0	2.8	2.7	1.4	3.7
Employer concerns about potential work-life conflicts	1.7	1.3	2.1	1.6	2.0	2.6
Gender	1.6	1.2	1.9	1.1	1.7	2.8
Level of extra-curricular activity	1.4	1.7	1.1	1.1	0.3	1.7
Race or ethnicity	1.4	1.5	1.3	2.1	0.3	1.1
Employer concerns about ability to learn new skills/adapt to new environment	1.1	0.5	1.6	1.9	1.4	1.5
Lack of moot court experience	0.9	1.3	0.6	0.8	0.3	0.7
Limited funds for travel	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.5	—	0.4
Employer concerns about health/stamina	0.2	0.2	0.2	—	—	0.4
Difficulty obtaining strong letters of recommendation	0.1	0.3	—	—	—	—

Note: Since respondents could check up to three items, percentages do not add to 100. Overall percentages are based on all 2,144 respondents.

Factors Important to Choosing Current Job

	Overall	No Prior Career	Had Prior Career	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
				2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
Geographic location	49.0%	51.0%	47.3%	50.3%	50.5%	42.6%
Nature of work	42.7	41.2	44.0	42.8	44.4	45.0
Firm reputation.....	41.6	42.9	40.5	45.2	41.0	35.7
Quality of life	33.1	33.9	32.4	31.6	39.2	28.3
People would work with	31.9	33.1	30.9	35.4	33.1	25.7
Salary or signing bonus	30.6	31.8	29.6	31.4	28.0	30.0
Career-building opportunities	15.8	15.3	16.2	19.1	13.3	15.0
Firm sought individual.....	10.3	10.9	9.7	8.0	9.9	11.1
Firm size	9.7	10.0	9.5	9.6	9.6	8.9
Organizational values/ethics	7.0	6.2	7.8	6.6	7.8	8.7
Job security	6.4	7.4	5.5	6.6	4.4	5.0
Ability to use non-law expertise	6.1	1.3	10.3	7.4	7.8	14.3
Family/friend testimonial.....	4.5	4.6	4.4	4.8	2.4	5.4
Benefits.....	2.9	2.9	3.0	3.7	2.7	2.4
Diversity of workforce	1.6	1.7	1.6	2.1	0.3	1.5
Credit for prior work experience	1.2	0.9	1.4	1.1	1.0	2.0
Training opportunities	1.1	0.8	1.3	2.4	0.3	0.9

Note: Since respondents could check up to three items, percentages do not add to 100. Overall percentages are based on all 2,144 respondents.

Advantages That Second-Career Lawyers Perceive They Bring to Their Employer

Advantage	Overall	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
		2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
Maturity.....	61.5%	50.8%	70.0%	66.1%
Strong work ethic	54.4	54.3	55.3	54.3
Experience dealing with clients	36.3	28.7	37.5	42.4
Business skills and background	26.7	20.2	26.6	32.4
Credibility because of added skills.....	23.2	18.6	22.9	27.6
Skills or training from prior career	20.6	14.6	19.1	27.0
Know what it takes to succeed.....	19.9	20.7	19.1	19.1
Track record of success	12.8	12.0	10.9	15.0
Political savvy	9.3	8.8	10.9	8.9
Ability to command higher billing rates than peers.....	2.4	1.1	1.7	3.9

Note: Since respondents could check up to three items, percentages do not add to 100. Overall percentages are based on all 1,129 respondents who had a prior career.

Ambitions for Partnership

Desire to Make Partner	Overall	No Prior Career	Had Prior Career	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
				2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
No.....	16.7%	13.9%	19.1%	17.2%	14.8%	23.0%
Not sure.....	27.8	26.0	29.2	31.6	30.0	27.2
Yes.....	55.6	60.1	51.7	51.2	55.1	49.8

Note: Overall figures based on 2,075 respondents who answered the partnership question.

Length of Time to Achieve Partnership

	NUMBER OF YEARS		# of Respondents
	Average	Median	
All respondents.....	7.3	7.0	621
No prior career	7.3	7.0	334
Prior career	7.3	7.0	287
2 years or less.....	8.0	8.0	98
3 to 4 years.....	7.1	7.0	73
5 or more years.....	6.7	7.0	112

Assessment of Length of Time to Achieve Partnership

Length of Time Was:	Overall	No Prior Career	Had Prior Career	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
				2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
Longer.....	14.4%	14.7%	14.0%	17.3%	10.5%	14.0%
Shorter.....	36.4	37.1	35.5	33.7	34.2	37.7
Typical.....	49.3	48.2	50.5	49.0	55.3	48.2

Note: Figures are based on 627 respondents who indicated they are currently a partner or counsel, and who reported how long it took to achieve partnership.

Frequency of Receiving a Merit-Based Bonus While with Current Employer

Desire to Make Partner	Overall	No Prior Career	Had Prior Career	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
				2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
All bonuses given.....	29.2%	29.7%	28.7%	26.9%	25.3%	32.2%
More than half of bonuses given.....	9.1	9.3	8.8	9.9	8.7	8.2
Less than half of bonuses given.....	8.0	8.4	7.6	9.7	6.2	6.7
None of bonuses given	9.2	8.9	9.4	10.5	11.4	7.3
Firm does not give bonuses	25.2	24.7	25.6	19.6	27.3	29.3
Not in job long enough	19.5	19.0	19.9	23.4	21.1	16.4

Note: A total of 2,107 respondents answered the question on bonus frequency.

Extent to Which Second-Career Attorneys Received Salary or Seniority Credit for Prior Work

Received Recognition of Some Sort	Overall	LENGTH OF PRIOR CAREER		
		2 Years or Less	3-4 Years	5 Years or More
No.....	84.0%	89.0%	87.0%	77.9%
Yes.....	16.0	11.0	13.0	22.1

Note: Overall percentages are based on 1,095 respondents who had a career prior to law school and who also answered the question on recognition. Examples of such recognition include additional salary or seniority.