

**Creighton University School of Law  
Career Development Office**

# **An Introduction to Alternative Legal Careers**

(sample student handout)

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Revised April 2010

## Alternative Legal Careers: Introduction

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 a CDO advisor as you evaluate your career options. Finding an alternative career that is right for you takes time, patience and persistence.

### Step 1: Self Assessment

Self-assessment is a process where one spends time learning more about themselves. It will require 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.

Spend some 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 about 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.

The following are some questions to consider as you perform your self-assessment with respect to alternative legal careers (these questions are not intended to scare you away from pursuing an alternative career, but they are factors to think about):

- Are you willing to start at the bottom of the new industry? Do not assume that a J.D. is the ticket to a non-entry level position.
- Are you willing to give up the “prestige” associated with practicing law? How will you explain your decision to family members who watched you survive 3 years of law school education (not to mention, three years of private law school tuition)?
- Are you willing to make less money if it means more job satisfaction and perhaps more reasonable work hours and quality of life? Financial concerns are a consideration – many

alternative legal careers cannot match a private law firm salary and raises may not be as large or “lockstep.”

- What are you willing to sacrifice to pursue an alternative career? The “golden handcuffs” can trap attorneys in a certain lifestyle (house, car, private school for children, etc.) Can you downsize and forego some of those life amenities?
- Do you really want to forgo the practice of law right out of law school? It is typically easier to leave the practice of law for an alternative career than it is to do something different first and then try to break into the practice several years down the road.
- Are you willing to seek additional education beyond your J.D. if necessary to help land a position in a field you find most interesting?

The following resources and testing instruments may be useful as you engage in the self-assessment process:

- *What Can You Do with a Law Degree? A Lawyer’s Guide to Career Alternatives Inside, Outside and Around the Law*, Deborah Arron, Niche Press (5<sup>th</sup> 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, (5<sup>th</sup> 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”)
- *Do What You Are: Discover the Perfect Career for You Through the Secrets of Personality Type*, Paul Tieger and Barbara Barron-Tieger (4<sup>th</sup> ed. 2007) (utilizes the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator Instrument to help find career satisfaction by personality type)
- *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. It is a widely used instrument that may help you to understand how you perceive things and how you make judgments about information. It requires a certified MBTI practitioner to interpret the results.
- Kiersey Temperament Sorter [www.kiersey.com](http://www.kiersey.com). Shortened version of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator that one can take online.
- Strong Interest Inventory (SII) <http://www.cpp.com/products/strong/index.asp> . Identifies interests and specific jobs that match interests in a broad range of occupations, work activities, leisure activities and school subjects.

- Campbell Interest & Skills Survey. [www.pearsonassessments.com/tests/ciss.htm](http://www.pearsonassessments.com/tests/ciss.htm) or <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/careers/cccss.htm>. The CISS helps one to understand how they fit into the world of work.
- Skills Profiler <http://www.careerinfonet.org/acinet/skills/default.aspx?nodeid=20> Helps one to build a list of skills, identify occupations that require the identified skills and more.

## **Step 2: 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 means research and lots of it. 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 e.g. Alternative Careers for Lawyers: Websites of Interest, [http://www.nalp.org/assets/296\\_alternativecareerswebsite.pdf](http://www.nalp.org/assets/296_alternativecareerswebsite.pdf)).

After you find a field that sounds promising, it’s time to start doing informational interviewing with people who currently have the type of position you want. Find out from them what their career path was and how they made it to that position. Ask them what advice they would have for 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.

Become an expert at networking. Join professional associations for that field and attend meetings where you can connect with current professionals in that area. Continued interaction with those in the field will help you confirm if that is the correct field for you and help you become aware of potential openings. In some ways, networking is even more important if you are looking for an alternative career than if you are seeking a traditional legal career. It is easier to impress someone with your sincere interest in a type of work when you meet them face-to-face in an informational interview or in a professional association setting.

Furthermore, become an expert in the field that you wish to enter. Make sure that you are familiar with the terminology used and the “buzz words” of that industry. Start reading industry professional journals and business newspapers. The more interactions you have with those active in the field, the more you will learn about the industry and the more likely you will find success in actual job interviews. Your knowledge of, and passion for, the field will show through. You will gain credibility in the marketplace and it will provide direction as you develop your “marketing” materials (resume, cover letter, etc.). Find ways to demonstrate your enthusiasm for your chosen field, perhaps through community involvement, volunteer activities, writing about the field, or other means.

## **Step 3: 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](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, your employment during law school or your 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 utilize a “targeted” resume that is organized to reflect the skills and experience sought by the employer. (*Id.*).

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, you might want to 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 help prepare for interviews (and for networking purposes), 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 that 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 J.D. for a non-legal position. Remember that although a J.D. 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 J.D. 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](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.

#### **Step 4: Find and Apply for Positions**

First and foremost, continue informational interviewing and networking so that you will be knowledgeable about positions when they open up in your field of choice. As with any job search, search strategies for nontraditional positions will include a combination of: 1) networking, 2)

targeted mailings to employers of interest (with follow up) and 3) applying for specific openings (job postings).

Frequent the websites for the professional associations in your field of choice to see current job postings (for example in the law career services area, the NALP website contains job postings – [www.nalp.org](http://www.nalp.org)). Do not forget to check the job postings in Symplicity and on local bar association websites – they sometimes include alternative legal jobs, such as legal publishing, bar association positions, etc.

Another resource for finding positions is the ***Nontraditional Legal Careers Report*** (<http://www.nontradlegal.com/>). The CDO subscribes to this publication on behalf of students and alumni. Information on how to access the most current *Nontraditional Legal Career Report* is on the password-protected portion of the CDO website.

Many, if not most, positions will be advertised outside of the legal arena. Be sure to check newspaper classified ads and general job search websites such as Monster.com, CareerBuilder.com, Craig’s List, CareerLink, Indeed.com, Simply Hired, etc.

If you are applying in response to a job posting with a job description, make sure that you address the job description with your resume and cover letter and show the employer that you have the skills to be successful in that position.

Be aware that this is a process and may take some time. Unlike “OCI” in the law school world, some professions may not have a specific hiring timeline or the timeline may not fit with your academic schedule. Unfortunately, you may not find the job of your dreams overnight. In fact, it may take several steps and employment positions that build your resume before you land that job of your dreams, but persistence pays off. Stay focused!