

feature

THE



CALL OF THE LAW



YOUNG ATTORNEYS
FACE A TOUGH LEGAL
LANDSCAPE. HOW CAN THE
PRIME NEW TALENT STAY
ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE
INDUSTRY'S FUTURE?

BY JOHN GALLO

THE NUMBERS ARE SOBERING: Nationally, 56.2 percent of 2012 law school graduates had found long-term, full-time legal employment nine months after graduation, according to the American Bar Association. "Lost Generation" stories abound about post-2008 law school graduates with terrific credentials having difficulty landing full-time legal jobs, let alone the most sought-after, highly paid associate positions with national law firms.

Economic trends affect individual prospects. The 250 largest law firms in the nation have pink-slipped more than 10,000 lawyers since 2008, and those lawyers have gone elsewhere to find work. The problems facing the legal industry have more to do with a structural imbalance between the supply of lawyers and the demand for high-end legal services than with the 2008 financial crash and recession.

Weil, Gotshal & Manges, one of New York's elite law firms, recently made headlines when it announced layoffs of associates and support staff, and pay reductions for partners. This is a debt-free firm that handled the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and boasts General Electric as one of its clients. Executive Partner Barry Wolf spoke of the "new normal" in his company-wide email.

For years, a law degree was the safe default career option for thousands of

liberal arts graduates unsure of what to do next. No more. Law school applications have dropped approximately 38 percent since 2010, according to the National Law Journal, and some schools have cut incoming class sizes. (*For example, UC Hastings College of Law has cut its number of acceptances by 20 percent.*) Law has now joined other formerly popular professions in which career prospects are uncertain and the competition fierce.

This does not mean that going to law school will no longer lead to a fulfilling legal career. Veteran Orange County attorneys, recently minted J.D.s and current law students say the profession is alive and well, but that focus and strategy are needed to succeed.

SUCCESS IN SPECIALIZATION

Sherrie Boutwell, of Boutwell Fay, LLP – a boutique firm in Irvine specializing in employee benefits and the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, including healthcare reform – says the legal industry is changing and that specialization is a trend that is here to stay. While attending UCLA School of Law in the early '80s, Boutwell did a series of externships, including a practicum in her third year that seasoned her in the actual work that lawyers do. She says young lawyers in today's job market need to bring as much "hands-on experience and value as possible" and learn which specialties are prone to becoming commodities and which ones, such as trial work, are not.

"Pay attention to supply and demand," Boutwell says. "For example, there is a very high demand for intellectual property law, benefit law and international tax law."

Additionally, it is no longer possible to "fall into law school" and then "fall into a career." Students need to be proactive in

developing their skills and expertise.

Leanna Costantini, a 2013 graduate of UC Irvine School of Law, got the message. In addition to being Senior Editor of the Year of the UC Irvine Law Review and winning the Faculty Award for Advanced Legal Analysis, Costantini interned at the UCI Environmental Law Clinic, the ACLU's Jails Project and the UCI Family Violence Clinic. Snapped up by newly established litigation boutique firm Greenberg Gross, LLP, Costantini says, "My impression is that boutiques are growing a lot." She likes the "intellectual excitement" of the law and the variety of career paths.

BE PERSISTENT AND MANAGE EXPECTATIONS

David Mishook had a rough time in the job market but does not regret going to law school. The Stanford history graduate, who earned his J.D. at UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall, has finally landed a litigation job with an education firm in Oakland.

"Education law is interesting and pretty varied," he says, adding that he is quite happy. He says the trick for

current law school students is to be open to different specializations but focused enough to convince potential employers that they share a passion for their particular niche of the law.

John O'Malley, a partner at the Newport Trial Group who specializes in high-stakes litigation for both plaintiffs and defendants, says good lawyers derive a lot of satisfaction from a legal career, but that too many people enter the field with little knowledge as to what skilled lawyers actually do on a day-to-day basis.

"I am part advocate and part problem solver," O'Malley says. "I get to help my clients, hopefully see justice done, and do my best as a problem solver to limit the risks for my clients. You want to reduce the raw emotions and allow the merits of the case to drive the ultimate result."

O'Malley has this caution for students: "A lot of people go into the field because they see there is money to be made, but the more realistic way to examine a career in the profession is to ask yourself, 'Will I actually like the tasks I will be performing? Do I understand the demands of the job? Do I have the combination of skills that will make me successful?'"

The turbulent legal field and hyper-competitive job market have the attention of Chapman Law student and Law Review member Shaun Sanders. Completing his first year with hopes of a career in business and technology law, Sanders wrote this blog post:

"Time and again, I have been told that the economy 'isn't what it used to be,' and that the job prospects 'aren't what they used to be,' – but what about what *I want to be?* ... No matter how

Students, staff and guest judges participate in the Experian/Jones Day MOOT COURT COMPETITION at U.C. Irvine School of Law.

Students at the **RINKER LAW LIBRARY**, at Chapman University School of Law. Today's graduates are looking at a job climate that is far more uncertain than in the past.



concerned I may be about an ever-growing debt monster looming on the horizon threatening to swallow my dreams, I am more terrified at the idea of selling those dreams short – and my dream is to be a lawyer."

DISTINGUISH YOURSELF

Would-be attorneys are well advised to attend the best law school possible. The brand matters in terms of getting job interviews. In addition, O'Malley echoes Boutwell's counsel: "Get as much experience as you can, any way that you can."

A joint J.D./M.B.A. can differentiate students from the pack. Todd Holman pursued his joint degree at UCLA over a four-year span that included summer internships at the Department of Justice's U.S. Trustee Program for bankruptcy and an elite law firm specializing in mergers and acquisitions (M&A). Now an investment banker in San Francisco, Holman says, "Law touches a lot of what I do with M&A."

Tom Dietrich is an associate at the national firm BakerHostetler in Costa Mesa, where his focus is intellectual property litigation. Associates at big firms work long hours, and Dietrich says it is important to find a mentor whom "you really like as a person and enjoy their style of work."

Corporate lawyer Ellen Bancroft loves her work focusing on initial public offerings and M&A work for technology companies and startups. A partner at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, LLP, in Irvine, she says newcomers should keep an open mind about which specialty to pursue. Bancroft initially joined Rutan & Tucker, one of Orange County's leading local firms, to specialize in real estate, but when she arrived she was asked to work on securities and corporate law. She found her niche by accident.

"It's at a law firm where your legal education really begins," she says. "Don't presume you know what you want to do." She advises new graduates to try to get an initial job with as large a firm as possible, because big firms "are an incredible training ground."

Bancroft's final words: "Regardless of the tough job market, a law degree is an incredible background for anyone to have. It gives you good preparation for a career in business as well as a traditional legal career."



ATTORNEY WEST SEEGMILLER wanted to optimize his training program, so he built a courtroom in his Newport Beach offices.

MOCK TRIAL TRIUMPH

BY SUSAN BELKNAPP

What is the best way to train for a high-stress situation before you are actually in it? The tactic of simulating every detail (*both sensory and situational*) to replicate the experience has been used since the days of early pilot and astronaut training. Today, virtual-reality technology (*video games, essentially*) can be used to help heighten reactions and reflexes for everyone from soldiers to Olympians.

Former judge and current Newport Beach attorney West Seegmiller recognizes the training value of staging real-life situations in order to optimize preparation. When Seegmiller decided to relocate to his new offices, one of the features he insisted on was a reproduction of an actual courtroom, complete with a judge's bench, a jury box and tables for the plaintiff and defendant.

Seegmiller stages mock trials and even recruits "juries" to hear his cases first, so he can gain their feedback. He then shapes and reshapes his arguments. That way, when he tries the case in front of an actual jury, nothing is left to chance.

"Too many lawyers in my field are too quick to settle a case and rarely, if ever, try one before an actual jury," says Seegmiller, who represents whom he considers to be "the underdog, the powerless and those who otherwise have nowhere else to turn."

"It should be the goal of every attorney to do everything in his or her power to secure justice for their clients, and if that means installing a courtroom in the office, then so be it," he says.

And he should know. In his 30-plus-year career, he has taken on such high-powered opponents as Coca Cola, Southern California Edison and Rockwell International – and won.

Seegmiller continues to train his staff at his offices, on MacArthur Court in Newport Beach. theseegmillerlawfirm.com