

News & Reviews

Where the Hot Jobs Are

By Amy Horton

Now that they've settled into the fall semester, most law students are thinking about finding a job. If you're wondering what practice areas offer the best opportunities for law school graduates, there's good news from the employment front: There are lots of possibilities.

"The market is very good for law students," said Jon Lowe, hiring partner at Alston & Bird in Atlanta. "It's a seller's market."

A stabilized economy, emerging technologies and new practice areas are a few reasons why law firms need more lawyers compared to several years ago. Some firms are looking for candidates in addition to the students they hired from their summer programs.

"We're getting a lot of calls now from employers who were previously just looking for 2Ls and are now looking for 3Ls," said Maris Abbene, the director of career services at **Boston College Law School**.

Experts surveyed by The National Jurist revealed that the hottest practice areas right now are corporate law, intellectual property, real estate and litigation.

CORPORATE LAW

Transactional law is percolating again, after a significant slowdown due to the burst of the high-tech bubble five years ago, said David Montoya, assistant dean of career services at the **University of Texas School of Law**.

"Law firms are finding they are short in the young attorney transactional side of the house and they're starting to staff up for deals in the pipeline," Montoya said.

Jane Heymann, the assistant dean of career services at the **University of Wisconsin Law School**, said the job market for attorneys reflects what's going on with the national economy.

"There are initial public offerings being made and the stock market has gained another 300 points compared to where it was, so people are doing more (mergers and acquisitions) work," she said.

Corporate litigation as it relates to white-collar crime, corporate governance, internal investigations and securities is also on the rise, said Heather McDevitt, a partner and member of the hiring committee at White & Case in New York City. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 is part of the reason for that growth. That legislation created rigorous requirements for corporations. It mandated additional financial disclosure that affected the practice of public accounting.

"As a firm, we've grown dramatically in that area," McDevitt said. "We've gone from about zero lawyers in 1999 to 50 today who spend a substantial part, if not all, of their practice in this area."

Rich Hans, a hiring partner at DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary in New York City, also said that corporate litigation offers opportunities for law school graduates.

"We have clients coming to us on a regular basis, far more than we ever saw four or five years ago, asking us to take a hard look at a variety of issues for them

internally, mostly to help prevent litigation, to forestall it or to prepare them for regulatory inquiries,” Hans said.

Internal investigations, which range from accounting issues to employment practices, allow lawyers to take on a variety of roles, including interviewing witnesses, he said.

“I look at it as an opportunity to give young associates a chance to engage and hone investigative skills,” he said.

GENERAL LITIGATION

Hans said he’s noticed a continued strong level of growth in general litigation.

Although litigation has its cycles, it’s less cyclical than transactional practices and typically provides steady employment opportunities, he said.

“We’re all fairly amazed that the level of litigation has continued at this pace,” Hans said. “Product liability litigation, in particular the pharmaceutical arena, is fairly strong.”

Heymann said there is always a need for litigators.

“When the economy is bad, there’s bankruptcy litigation and when the economy is good, there are other kinds,” she said. “There’s always insurance defense work, plaintiff personal injury work and workers compensation.”

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Hiring partners, legal recruiters and law school career center directors all identified intellectual property as a hot practice area, partly due to globalization. It’s also less cyclical, particularly on the dispute resolution/litigation side.

Specifically, there’s a demand in patent law for law school graduates, especially if they have a science-related background, such as electrical engineering, biochemistry or physics.

“Lawyers who understand the technology can serve that industry enormously more expeditiously than lawyers who don’t understand the technology,” said Lowe of Alston & Bird. “In general, firms that are going to be successful in this economy have to have those lawyers.”

DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary’s Hans said a litigator needs to have a good knowledge of the client’s issues.

“If you struggle to understand the technical aspects of processes and circuitry and mechanics and the like, you have to work that much harder to learn the business,” he said.

Hans said, however, that many lawyers without technical backgrounds bring other skills to a patent team. Such attorneys have the ability to translate complex engineering or physics principles into something simpler for the jurors or judge to understand.

McDevitt said a technical background isn’t always necessary because litigators work as a team.

If law students are interested in intellectual property, she said, they should focus on taking classes, such as antitrust law or a survey course, that will provide the best building blocks for practicing patent law.

REAL ESTATE

Another hot area of law attributed to the economy is real estate, particularly in the

area of Real Estate Investment Trusts, or REITs.

Hans said the capital-market practice is a good opportunity for energetic graduates who want pursue an emerging field that ranges from making deals to working with finance and investment-related issues.

Legal recruiters such as David Winston, a partner of Winston & Green, Peter J. Redgrove, president and principal at Kass-Abell & Associates Attorney Placement, and Carolyn Pitt-Jones of Hughes & Sloan, said that REIT work provides many opportunities for mid-level associates as well.

WHAT DO STUDENTS LOOK FOR?

Not every student, however, is swayed to a specific practice area by employment trends.

Anita Matta, who graduated in the spring from the **University of California Berkeley School of Law** (Boalt Hall), said she was aware of the cyclical nature of corporate law. Yet, she chose to pursue it because the field interested her.

“I knew I didn’t want to litigate, so that forced me to take certain classes to see if more transactional courses would be more interesting for me, and it was,” said Matta, who began working this month at Hanson Bridgett Marcus Vlahos and Rudy. Dana Fleming, a 3L who worked at Gadsby Hannah LLP over the summer, said many of the students she knows at **Boston College Law School** are interested in alternative dispute resolution, as well as labor and employment law.

Regardless of trends, law students can always find a job in the area of law that interests them, said Warrington Parker, a hiring partner at Heller Ehrman LLP. “Even if an area isn’t hot, it doesn’t mean there isn’t a good opportunity in that (practice area),” Parker said. “It’s just, ‘How far out do I need to expand my search?’ ”

Susan Robinson, the associate dean for career services at **Stanford Law School** , said she advises students to make employment choices based on what they like to do. “Try to separate your own interests from movement in the marketplace,” she said. “If you enjoy the area and do well, there are going to be opportunities for you.” Amy Horton is a freelance writer based in San Diego .