

Career Options for Young Lawyers

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You've finally made it. Five years of study, one year of Articles. Now you're a lawyer. You know exactly what you want out of your career. Or do you?

There are many career options for young lawyers. Lawyers end up in a wide variety of fields including private practice, government and in-house, politics, general management, training, marketing, human resources and recruitment. It is important that young lawyers are fully informed about their options, so that they can plan their careers and make the right decisions on their future direction.

The following is an overview of just some of the career options available to young lawyers.

PRIVATE PRACTICE

Large Firms

Large firms (20 plus partners) offer lawyers exciting careers in the commercial areas of law (for example, corporate/commercial, banking and finance, intellectual property, telecommunications, resources, and mergers and acquisitions). They provide structured training and allow early specialisation in your chosen field. The work is high quality and challenging and your clients tend to be large corporations. Those who are concerned about getting 'lost' in such a firm should take note that you generally work in specialised, close-knit teams. Finally, large firms generally pay well, which is important after all those years as a student!

Medium Firms

The character of medium sized firms (10 - 20 partners)

can vary widely. Some resemble large firms and others small. They tend to offer a more intimate environment. You have client contact and responsibility for your own files comparatively early in your career. You are also involved in marketing early. Clients will be small corporates, businesses and entrepreneurial individuals. Medium sized firms offer ambitious young lawyers fairly rapid promotion to partnership. Generally, lawyers practising in these firms have broad based practices, although you are still able to specialise in a particular area of law if you wish.

Small Firms

Small firms, whether in the city or suburbs, offer young lawyers almost immediate client contact, a high degree of responsibility for file management and the opportunity to develop their own practice early on. Your practice is likely to be broad, with an emphasis on practical solutions for individuals and small business clients.

Country Firms

If a change of lifestyle is what you are after, think further afield than the city

and suburbs, and consider a career in a county practice. The work offered is top quality and the benefits include reasonable working hours, enjoyable work environments and sometimes a slower pace. You can become a partner early in your career, and don't believe those rumours that you can't earn a decent living. Don't let the tyranny of distance deter you. Country towns are generally close-knit communities which quickly welcome outsiders.

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But please note...

When deciding on the size of firm you want to join, you should consider where the experience you gain from the particular sized firm is going to take you. Generally, large firms are a very good base to move from if you want to work in-house with a corporation or overseas. It is not impossible to pursue both these options if you are working at a medium or small firm, but it is a little more difficult. You might need to take a few more steps to get to where you want to go. For example, you may need to move from a medium sized firm to a large firm or a small firm to medium, and then a large firm. Therefore, planning where you are going from the outset or at least having some idea is important.

Overseas

This is an exciting option which young lawyers should consider after gaining a couple of years' post admission experience. The most usual destination is London, although continental and eastern Europe and Asia are gaining in popularity with young lawyers. Corporate & commercial or banking & finance experience from large firms is most in demand by the major overseas law firms. If you are lucky enough to have patriality, then working overseas will be easier.

In-House

Working as an in-house lawyer has become a popular alternative to private practice in the last ten years or so. Many young lawyers would not be aware that companies as diverse as Kodak, Village Roadshow, Australian Grand Prix Corporation, Phillip Morris, Esso, BHP, ANZ, NAB, City of Melbourne, Wheat Board, Multiplex and TAB employ in-house lawyers.

In-house is a popular alternative because you work very closely with the client (in fact, inside the client) and are generally involved in the decision making process from the start to finish, rather than being brought in once the deal is done. There is a sense that you are more involved in the business world and it is a good opportunity to hone your commercial skills,

especially if you wish to eventually move into management.

The work tends to consist of broad commercial matters. Litigation is usually outsourced to private law firms.

Most in-house vacancies are filled by lawyers from major law firms with about 3 - 5 years' post admission experience in commercial/corporate law. However, in some cases, lawyers from small and medium sized firms have been placed into these roles as well.

Government Law

Both State and Federal government departments employ lawyers in a wide range of areas. This option is very similar to an in-house position, as most government departments and statutory corporations operate as business enterprises. They tend to offer flexible work conditions, including study leave and part-time hours. They have traditionally offered greater security, although this is less so nowadays.

Lawyers in government have opportunities to work in areas of the law not normally encountered in private practice, such as regulation at the ASC, constitutional issues with the Australian Government Solicitor's

Office and criminal law with the DPP.

Promotion in government practice usually results in less legal work and more team management responsibility. There is less emphasis on time sheets and budgets in comparison to private practice.

The Bar

If you enjoy litigation and like the idea of running your own business, this is the option for you. The Bar offers lawyers an exciting alternative to private practice and still allows you to specialise in your chosen field if you wish. It also lends itself to part-time work. Note that life at the Bar for junior

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barristers is difficult while they develop their practices. Because of this, it is considered advisable to get at least a couple of years' experience in private practice before making a move to the Bar. You then have the solicitor contacts you need, in order to develop your practice.

Accounting Firms

This is a popular alternative to a law firm for those wishing to pursue a career in taxation, litigation management or insolvency. Accounting firms offer structured in-house training and there is now less need to do the formerly compulsory "professional year". Compliance work can be a little off-putting for some, but the advisory work can be as interesting and challenging as that done in law firms. Keep in mind also that, if you are practising tax in an accounting firm, you can always move to the tax practice of a law firm at a later stage. In some cases, experienced tax practitioners from accounting firms are offered articles of clerkship by major firms in their tax departments.

Also, some of the major accounting firms have set up their own law firms. This offers an interesting alternative to practising in the major law firms. Many lawyers enjoy the smaller, close-knit atmosphere and management style of these "firms within a firm". Another benefit is that, although smaller than the major law firms, these firms provide high quality work and exposure to large scale matters as a result of their existing blue-chip accounting firm client base.

Other Options

The other options available to you as a young lawyer are only limited by your imagination. Below is a list of just a few suggestions. Most require varying, but not substantial, post-admission experience. Some may also require postgraduate study of some kind.

- community legal centres
- training in a law firm
- recruitment co-ordinator in a law firm
- human resources manager in a law firm
- professional service marketing or management
- ministerial advisor
- merchant banking
- academia
- company secretary (often combined with in-house legal)
- legal recruitment
- legal publishing
- politics.

Good luck in the choices you make and in your future career!

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