

The rise of the later lawyer



JURIS DOCTOR GRADUATES AND OTHER LATER LAWYERS ARE SET TO CHANGE THE FACE OF THE LAW GRADUATE POOL. HOWEVER, EMPLOYERS MAY NOT YET BE FULLY AWARE OF THE BENEFITS OF EMPLOYING LATER LAWYERS.

While it may be premature to posit the demise of the LL.B., the rise in popularity of the new Juris Doctor (JD), a postgraduate degree that allows direct entry into legal practice, is definitely changing the makeup of the law graduate talent pool.

The shift towards postgraduate-only offerings is gaining momentum. This movement has accelerated recently with the rise of graduate law schools such as RMIT, the overhaul of law at the University of Melbourne, where the JD is replacing the LL.B, and the dual LL.B. and JD offered by Monash. The JD now provides a viable alternative to admission not seen since the end of the old articulated clerks courses.

There is no shortage of law graduates, so the market for graduate positions is incredibly competitive. This is truer for the JD “later lawyer” as the current graduate entry pathways remain geared towards traditional graduates. This may be for reasons that are largely to do with legal employers’ perceptions. For example, employers may erroneously believe that a later lawyer’s grasp of technology may not be as strong as that of a younger graduate. This is a moot point, as IT proficiency is a requirement for any university student and for employment anywhere.

Employers may also be reluctant to engage later graduates in the belief that they may not be a good team fit with younger graduates or may not be easy to mould to the firm’s culture. In light of this, later graduates should be actively promoting their work experience, IT proficiency, understanding of team dynamics and team building and professional skills.

Another criticism that later lawyers may face is that by applying for graduate entry roles, they may be demoting themselves. Later lawyers should be upfront about their awareness of this perception and honest about the sacrifices they have made to pursue legal practice. Employers will come to respect that later lawyers enter the profession with realistic expectations of what awaits them, and in doing so will

recognise the passion behind the choices that later lawyers have made.

While legal recruitment practices come to terms with the evolution of the graduate market, JD graduates will need to be proactive in building their identity in the marketplace.

The profession can only benefit from an active engagement with later lawyers in the graduate recruitment process, as this will enable legal employers to capitalise on the unique benefits that can flow from employing later lawyers.

The experience and knowledge that later graduates can bring to a workplace are extensive, even if they aren’t always law related. Later lawyers may often have a paucity of time to undertake extracurricular activities due to a combination of professional, family and study commitments. Their resumes may not feature the type of unpaid legal work experience of some of their LL.B. counterparts. However, the riches that later lawyers can contribute to workplaces are vast. They usually have at least one, and quite often several, qualifications, many in finance, business and commerce. Their industry experience and commercial knowledge can prove invaluable in grasping the key issues that clients seek from legal advice.

Later lawyers are also generally less likely to change employers on a whim because of the considered decision and investment in pursuing a new career. Investing in later lawyers through graduate training could prove to be a very good return on investment.

JD graduates and other later lawyers are going to become more common in our profession. Later lawyers have made a conscious and informed decision to enter the legal profession and generally have qualities and experience that go beyond those of traditional graduates. This extra value and added diversity can only be beneficial to employers, clients and our profession as a whole. ■

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