



INDUSTRY OVERVIEW: LAW

What is the field of law really about?

When students think about lawyers, often images from television and movies come to mind, where lawyers are standing up in courtrooms either defending accused individuals or prosecuting the “bad guys” to fight for justice. In reality, only a small percentage of lawyers actually go to trial, and an even smaller percentage get to work on glamorous or high profile cases. The field of law is vast, and there are numerous specialized occupations with distinct roles and responsibilities. In general, the legal profession can be divided into two major categories: litigations and transactions. Litigation is the process of arguing a dispute between two parties, while transactions relate to business and personal matters that usually do not require going to court. Specializations exist within both areas, and include tax, antitrust, bankruptcy, labor, real estate, insurance, international trade, intellectual property, employment, environmental regulation, and mergers and acquisitions—to name just a few. Lawyers can also specialize in specific industries such as health care, high tech, life sciences, entertainment, or nonprofits. About 27 percent of lawyers are self-employed, either as partners in law firms or in solo practices.

Many attorneys handle civil law, assisting clients with wills, trusts, contracts, mortgages, titles, and leases. Still others work for the government, either at the state level as attorneys general, prosecutors and public defenders, or at the Federal level, investigating cases for the Department of Justice and other agencies. Government lawyers also help develop programs, draft and interpret laws and legislation, establish enforcement procedures, and argue civil and criminal cases on behalf of the government.

The National Association of Law Placement (NALP) estimates that 70 percent of law students go into private practice upon graduation from law school, but lawyers are increasingly using their skills in related fields. In fact, many lawyers decide to leave their firms after two or three years, going to work for corporations, nonprofits, or government bodies, or leaving the profession altogether. Legal consulting, legal education, law school administration, government lobbying, and legal recruiting are a few of the options available to JDs looking beyond the practice of law.

Career Tracks

Trial Lawyers: specialize in trial work, and must be able to think quickly and speak with ease and authority. In addition, familiarity with courtroom rules and strategy is particularly important. Still, trial lawyers spend the majority of their time outside the courtroom, conducting research, interviewing clients and witnesses, and handling other details in preparation for a trial.

Firm Associates: are recent law school graduates who do the bulk of the grunt work in a law firm, from producing documents and conducting due diligence (reviewing and substantiating claims), to writing briefs and running deals. They usually work long hours—2,000 to 2,400 billable hours per year are required by most major firms (which easily translates into 70 to 80 hours per week)—for attorneys who hope to achieve partnership.

Paralegals: help lawyers prepare for closings, hearings, trials, and corporate meetings. Paralegals might investigate the facts of cases and ensure that all relevant information is considered. They also identify appropriate laws, judicial decisions, legal articles, and other materials that are relevant to assigned cases. After they analyze and organize the information, paralegals may prepare written reports that attorneys use in determining how cases should be handled. If attorneys decide to file lawsuits on behalf of clients, paralegals may help prepare the legal arguments, draft pleadings and motions to be filed with the court, obtain affidavits, and assist attorneys during trials. Paralegals are strictly prohibited from carrying out duties considered to be the practice of law, however,

such as setting legal fees, giving legal advice, and presenting cases in court. Some students consider becoming a paralegal for a year or two after undergraduate prior to attending law school.

In-House Counsel: are lawyers employed full-time by a corporation, hired to work within the company's legal department. These attorneys advise management on legal issues related to its business activities, such as accounting compliance, patents, contracts, property interests, and merger-and-acquisition negotiations. They generally work more reasonable hours than attorneys in big firms, and these coveted positions are typically filled by transactional attorneys with three or more years of experience.

Assistant District Attorneys: aid district attorneys in prosecuting criminal cases in a city or county's municipal or superior courts. The office of the district attorney presents evidence to a grand jury in order to obtain a criminal indictment. The fast-paced days in court and high-profile trials are highlights to this job, though the work can also be draining and the salary is generally lower than at law firms.

Public Interest Attorneys: work in positions with impact litigation advocacy organizations. These include the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Center for Youth Law, NOW, NARAL, the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the Environmental Defense Fund. Competition for these positions is intense, and the pay is relatively low—with the exception of positions at environmental law organizations, which tend to be better funded. The advantage of these positions is that they're both intellectually stimulating and socially meaningful. The work involves brief writing and advocacy, and in some cases there is also a great deal of client contact.

Law Professors: are attorneys who teach their trade to law students. Working on a tenure-track or adjunct basis, professors spend most of their time teaching in the classroom and researching legal issues. They can run clinical programs (giving students hands-on experience representing underprivileged clients), or teach classes such as constitutional law, tax law, and intellectual-property law. Competition is high for these positions, and spots usually go to experienced practitioners.

Judges: apply the law and oversee the legal process in courts. They preside over cases concerning every aspect of society, from traffic offenses, to disputes over the management of professional sports, to issues concerning the rights of huge corporations. They must ensure that trials and hearings are conducted fairly and that the court safeguards the legal rights of all parties involved. Judges rule on the admissibility of evidence and the methods of conducting testimony, and they may be called on to settle disputes between opposing attorneys. They also ensure that rules and procedures are followed, and if unusual circumstances arise for which standard procedures have not been established, judges interpret the law to determine how the trial will proceed. Judges also work outside the courtroom in their chambers or private offices, where they read documents on pleadings and motions, research legal issues, write opinions, and oversee the court's operations. Most judges have been lawyers prior to being appointed or elected to their positions.

Additional Related Occupations

Adjudicator
Conciliator
Law Clerks
Legal Assistant
Legal Recruiter
Magistrate
Mediator

Requirements / Skills

Formal requirements to become a lawyer usually include a 4-year college degree, 3 years of law school, and passing a written bar examination; however, some requirements may vary by State. Competition for admission to most law schools is intense, and job prospects for those graduating from lower-tier and middle-tier law schools have seen slowed growth in recent years. Some recent law school graduates who have been unable to find permanent positions are turning to the growing number of temporary staffing firms that place attorneys in short-term jobs. This service allows companies to hire lawyers on an “as-needed” basis and permits beginning lawyers to develop practical skills.

Individuals planning careers in law should like to work with people and be able to win the respect and confidence of their clients, associates, and the public. Perseverance, creativity, outstanding communication skills, and reasoning ability also are essential to lawyers, who often analyze complex cases and handle new and unique legal problems.

Salary

Compensation depends on experience level as well as size and location of the firm. Top firms pay competitive salaries with high first year associate salaries that increase as seniority increases, often with sizable year-end bonuses. Regional firms, government agencies, and other organizations may offer lower salaries, but their positions often have more responsibility, manageable hours, and early client contact. Lawyers who own their own practices usually earn less than those who are partners in law firms. Those who choose to start their own practice may need to work part time in other occupations to supplement their income until their practice is well established.

Firm associate: \$75,000 to \$300,000, plus bonus (depending on year/firm)

Partner in law firm: \$200,000 to million(s)

In-house counsel: \$75,000 to \$300,000

Public defender: \$35,000 to \$100,000

Assistant district attorney: \$54,000 to \$130,000

Assistant U.S. attorney: \$50,000 to \$130,000

Public interest attorney: \$35,000 to over \$100,000

Law professor: \$44,000 to \$250,000 (depending on year/level and school)

Directories

Martindale-Hubbell Legal, www.martindale.com

NALP Directory of Legal Employers, www.nalpdirectory.com

Associations

American Bar Association, www.americanbar.org

The Association for the Bar of NYC, www.nycbar.org

National Association for Law Placement, <http://www.nalp.org>

National Federation of Paralegal Associations, www.paralegals.org

National Lawyers Guild, www.nlg.org

*Additional associations listed on: <http://practice.findlaw.com/law-marketing.html>

Websites

www.lawjobs.com

www.idealists.org

www.top-law-schools.com

www.nylag.org

www.nyclu.org

www.nalpdirectory.com

www.probono.net

<http://stu.findlaw.com>