

# **LAWYERS CAN HAVE AN EDGE IN NON-LEGAL JOBS: Tips On Selling Yourself When the Job Doesn't Require a JD**

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## **Introduction**

People go to law school for all kinds of reasons. Some are attracted to roles portrayed on programs such as *The Practice*, *Ally McBeal*, or—for those of a certain age--*LA Law*, which of course do not show the long hours required to research the law, review materials, and draft documents, that we all know is necessary. Others go because they are good at school and aren't sure what else to do, often based on the premise that a law degree will "keep their options open."

Even for students who enter law school with some experience related to legal work, it is difficult to know what practicing law is like until doing it as a member of the workforce. In addition, few law students take the initiative while in school to research the range of career paths attorneys ultimately pursue, particularly as their student debt mounts.

Considering these factors, it should come as no surprise that surveys continue to report a majority of lawyers are unhappy in their careers. Many attorneys discover that the practice of law is not for them. While this realization can be personally and professionally difficult—it takes a great deal of time, money and effort to become a licensed attorney-- it can also provide an opportunity for some of the brightest people around to use their talents in a way that advances both their interests and those of their employers.

Particularly in the current economy, more attorneys are making an effort to "cast a broad net" and pursue positions in a range of professional areas, not necessarily practicing law. To make progress going down that road, however, you need to think about how you can sell yourself to employers, avoid being "pigeon-holed" into applying only for jobs in the legal counsel's office, and translate your skills when the job does not require a J.D.

Many lawyers who effectively represent their clients have a much harder time making the case for themselves. To convince an employer to hire you in a non-legal job, however, requires just that.

## **Advantages to Emphasize and Potential Disadvantages to Address When Applying for Non-Legal Jobs**

The advantages and disadvantages of hiring someone with a JD of course depend on what is required in the non-legal job and the specific experience, skills

and temperament of the individual attorney. Some lawyers have training as engineers, some are great at statistical and financial analysis, many are very comfortable presenting to sophisticated audiences, others excel at facilitating groups and reaching consensus, and some bring in-depth knowledge of an industry or issue that can advance the interests of an organization.

Though difficult to generalize, the following are some advantages and disadvantages frequently cited from the employer's perspective of hiring a JD to work in a non-legal position.

### Advantages to Articulate

1. Lawyers are typically smart, hard workers who respond well to deadlines.
2. Attorneys are trained to "issue-spot." They can pick out events or conditions that could negatively impact operations in business and other entities and often anticipate the ramifications of various courses of action.
3. Lawyers are skilled in research, and these skills typically apply to not just law but also issues of policy and to investigations more broadly. They know how to ask substantive questions that get to the point and solicit critical information.
4. Lawyers understand how corporations and non-profits are structured as well as how laws are passed, regulations developed, judicial decisions made, and rules are enforced. That perspective can be handy in a number of roles.
5. Lawyers' training gives them analytical skills, so they can connect individual events to big picture and develop arguments to support conclusions.
6. Bar membership requirements offer something of a built-in screening process. Most practicing lawyers have a good memory for facts—having passed the bar exam—and have met at least some degree of ethical standards to become licensed.

### Potential Disadvantages to Address

1. To be successful pursuing alternative routes, lawyers need to anticipate skepticism that you're only looking for a non-legal job because you can't find one practicing law. There can be reluctance on the part of employers to invest much in you because they assume you will leave as soon as you find a legal position. You need to make the case that you're there to stay and emphasize what you're moving towards rather than what you're leaving behind.

Be prepared to answer persuasively:

- a. Why you are interested in the position/field, i.e. what are you looking for out of your professional life and how does this fit;
  - b. Why you are not seeking a position in your field of training;
  - c. Where you see yourself in ten to fifteen years; and
  - d. What experience and skills you bring to the table that will allow you to excel in the position.
2. Some lawyers tend to think they are smart enough to do any job without additional training, but--*even if that's the case*-- their lack of deference to how things have been done in the field and to those who followed traditional career paths can create conflicts among colleagues and others outside the organization. Be careful not to come across as the "typical" arrogant lawyer in your conversations with others.
  3. Some lawyers can be overly focused on winning v. losing, particularly those who are used to an environment where clients are there to "pull out the big guns." Demonstrate how you can help people reach consensus, or at least a compromise, and give people the benefit of the doubt. Keep focused on moving the work forward rather than making a point.
  4. Lawyers typically know the substance of issues quite well, which means they can easily go into far too much detail than is appropriate. Avoid developing a reputation of being long winded and recognize the need to be concise, both in written materials and verbally in meetings.
  5. Many lawyers lack any work experience other than practicing law, having gone straight from college to law school into a law practice. Since they are unfamiliar with other types of work environments, it can take time for them to adjust to a workplace that is less formal or has different standards. Emphasize your desire for this type of professional setting and explain how you will fit into it.

### **Jobs That Tend to Be Great Fits for JDs**

Since people with a wide range of backgrounds and personal strengths choose to pursue law degrees, many careers prove to be a good fit for former lawyers. Attorneys go on to be successful in jobs as varied as CEO's, professional chefs, journalists, novelists, actors, and social workers. What follows are some examples of professions that tend to be an easier transition for those with legal training, though of course the degree to which each proves to be a fit depends on

each individual attorney's skills and perspective.

### Careers That Tend to Fit the Skill Set But Don't Require a JD

1. Policy positions that involve research, analysis, and advocacy, in writing or orally, and projecting ramifications.
2. Consulting positions conducting needs analyses for clients, identifying problems and obstacles.
3. Auditing and compliance work, monitoring whether people are following the rules.
4. Teaching K-12.
5. University administration, in both colleges and law schools.
6. Counseling and coaching individual clients, whether students, other professionals, or people who feel unable to cope with certain issues.
7. Negotiating on behalf of others, including government entities, corporations, and/or individuals.
8. Business-related journalism and writing for trade publications.
9. Developing and presenting training materials for highly educated audiences.
10. Ministers, priests, and rabbis, both in academic and religious institutions, that involve public speaking, counseling and/or research and writing.

### **Issues That Former Lawyers Often Encounter in New Fields**

1. The lack of management training continues to be a factor in most jobs.
2. The need for business development skills does not go away in many jobs.
3. The expectation of shorter hours and more work-life balance in a non-legal position is often not met. Other client-based industries in particular present very similar issues. Similarly, work in government or a not-for-profit organization does not guarantee fewer hours.
4. Positions that lack day-to-day autonomy tend to eventually create a strain. Whatever complaints lawyers have about their jobs, they all appreciate the fact that they are most often regarded—even by supervising partners-- as

professionals who have some degree of judgment and who get their work done. While some are willing to give up autonomy in the short run to learn a new field, once they have had autonomy in their work, it remains a long-term need for most lawyers.

5. In addition to confronting stereotypes that they are confrontational and/or stiff, lawyers who leave the practice of law often become frustrated with repeatedly being referred to as a “recovering lawyer” and continue to be annoyed by lawyer jokes. The more serious concern, however, is that many lawyers find the lack of a professional community with shared training and experience proves to be a bigger issue than anticipated.

Leaving the practice of law is a big decision because—other than those who are particularly well connected—the vast majority of lawyers who stop practicing find it extremely difficult to get hired in a legal position later in their careers. While many attorneys who leave the law are glad to be free of it, a substantial number of them miss having peers who share a legal perspective. Pursuing a non-legal job requires translating your skills and experience effectively. Just as important, taking the time to investigate and evaluate the pros and cons in advance proves to be a valuable investment in your career.

### **About Kate Neville**

Kate Scurria Neville is an attorney who has worked in a variety of capacities in both the public and private sectors. She is the founder of Neville Career Consulting, LLC, which provides guidance to individual attorneys who are considering a professional transition, whether within the practice of law or to another field. More information is available at [www.nevillecareerconsulting.com](http://www.nevillecareerconsulting.com).