

BALTIMORE BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, June 11, 2010

Vying for shrinking pool of legal jobs

Law school grads are sometimes forced to take a different career path as firm layoffs persist

Baltimore Business Journal - by [Elizabeth Heubeck](#) Contributor

A law degree is no longer the sure thing.

In the not-so-distant past, second-year law students could breeze into cushy summer associate positions at a law firm, earning weekly salaries in the \$3,000 range.

A decent performance would almost certainly result in an offer for post-graduation employment, meaning a fat starting salary of up to \$160,000 and the promise of a long-lasting, lucrative career.

Not so anymore.

Grim statistics illuminate the new reality for law school graduates. In 2009, 138 large U.S.-based law firms laid off 12,000 employees, according to the American Bar Association Journal, and a total of 4,633 attorney positions were shed. Law school graduates are feeling the trickle-down effect.

The most recent report from the National Association of Legal Professionals (NALP), released last month, showed that among 40,833 graduates from the class of 2009, 88 percent had secured employment.

That doesn't sound so bad. But almost 25 percent of the jobs were temporary, more than 10 percent were part-time, and only 70 percent of the jobs required a law degree.

"These job statistics include flipping burgers at McDonald's," said James Leipold, executive director of NALP.

Facing fierce competition

Leipold warns the numbers will look worse for 2010 graduates, many of whom began competing for job offers made by firms at the close of 2009 summer associate programs — when the recession was at its lowest point.

As traditional routes to legal employment narrow, countless recent and pending law school graduates have been forced to make unsuspecting detours.

"Folks need to widen their net, look at different sectors, get creative," said Astrid Schmidt, director of the Law Career Development Office at the [University of Baltimore](#) School of Law. Students heeding this advice report mixed results.

The federal government has become an increasingly attractive employment target for law school graduates — particularly because of its stability and, in some areas, continued growth.

But competition is fierce. Just ask 28-year-old Alison Smith, who graduated in May from the University of Baltimore School of Law.

She has accepted an offer with the federal government for a two-year Presidential Management Fellowship, beginning at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and rotating throughout various federal agencies. But it didn't come easily.

The intense nomination process began in fall 2009 with about 8,000 graduate school candidates, about one-third of whom were law students.

After a requisite recommendation from her professors, Smith took a standardized test, which culled the candidates to approximately 900. Finalists were invited to a federal agency job fair. About 60 percent of them — less than 7 percent of the original nominees — were offered fellowships. Smith declined to share her starting salary, saying her earnings will be comparable to a public service attorney. But she did offer her impression of the job market.

"It depends on what kinds of opportunities you're looking for, and how hard you're willing to look and hustle. All you really need is one offer," she said.

But for some job seekers, even one offer seems elusive.

Taking a different path

Jesse Sommer, a second-year JD/MBA student at [American University's](#) Washington College of Law, assumed he would follow the traditional path to employment, starting with the time-honored summer associate position.

It hasn't worked out that way, and Sommer claims it's not for lack of effort. Through the university's Office of Career and Professional Development, he sent his résumé to about 200 firms, researching each one to ensure a potential fit. He received no callbacks.

Additionally, he networked to obtain contacts at 45 to 50 law firms. He took a similar approach with alumni at his law school, reaching out to about 15 graduates.

Each one gave him the same response: "We're not in a position to extend any offers."

"The relationships required to establish yourself at a firm through summer associate programs just aren't available," Sommer said.

His conclusions coincide with NALP statistics, which report a drop in the median number of summer associate positions hired by U.S. law firms, from 15 in 2007 to 10 in 2008 to 7 in 2009.

After traditional methods of obtaining legal employment failed, Sommer decided to get entrepreneurial.

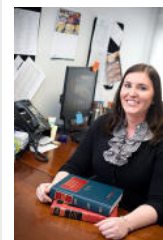


Photo by Christopher Myers, Contributor

Alison Smith, a recent law school grad, has landed a federal fellowship.

[View Larger](#)

He and a friend launched a web enterprise, Cabcorner.com. The website pairs two or more people in the same vicinity heading in the same direction with a cab, thereby reducing fare. They're piloting the venture in New York City.

It's not profitable yet, so it won't offset the student loans of up to \$180,000 Sommer faces after graduation. But he didn't start it solely as a money-making venture.

"I want to be able to show employers: 'Look, I have some ingenuity that I can bring to your firm,'" he said.

Beating the odds

Joey Tsu-Yi Chen brought a bundle of credentials to **Saul Ewing** LLP, the law firm where he held a summer associate position during law school. Chen, who graduated in May from the University of Maryland School of Law, will gain experience through a one-year clerkship with the Circuit Court for Baltimore City before joining Saul Ewing as an associate in 2011. Undoubtedly, Chen's stacked résumé — member of the senior editorial board of the Journal of Business & Technology Law, leadership position on the Moot Court Board, co-chair of the school's prestigious moot court competition, and dean's award for leadership activities — helped him stand out from the competition.

The 33-year-old, with five prior years of professional experience as a scientist, believes his work experience and professional demeanor also stood in his favor.

Chen displayed that professional acumen during his summer associate position with Saul Ewing in 2009, in a climate that offered no future guarantee.

"They were fair with us [summer associates] from the beginning, telling us it was a different economic climate," Chen said.

He, too, was up-front, expressing an interest in pursuing a clerkship at his summer associate exit interview with Saul Ewing.

"I realized there was no guarantee of a permanent position with the firm," Chen said.

His peers know too that there are no guarantees. Chen estimates less than half his friends with whom he graduated from law school have secured jobs. It's a somber reality that may have lasting consequences.

"I think everyone is re-thinking law. It's not, 'I'm going to go to law school because I can always find a job.' There are no guarantees anymore," said the University of Baltimore's Schmidt.

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.