



GETTING IN THE DOOR

Despite a surplus of lawyers, shortage of jobs and a school system under increasing scrutiny, female law school graduates in Chicago can still find themselves well-positioned to break into the industry. BY MARGARET SUTHERLIN

Describing the job market as competitive might be an understatement for new lawyers; getting hired is perhaps their biggest hurdle. According to a Northwestern University study, 15,000 legal jobs have disappeared since the recession. In today's context, young women right out of school will struggle to secure their first job in an industry where education is expensive and increasingly under criticism for poorly training graduates. Women will face familiar challenges of family/work balance, learning the complicated world of business development and navigating the workforce. So is it a good time to be a woman in law?

GETTING THE JOB: THE RIGHT TRAINING

"Regardless of gender, law firms and public interest organizations want the same qualities when hiring attorneys: along with academic success and practical skills, they also want attorneys who act professionally, but have the ability to do things like interact appropriately with clients and staff, practice proper email etiquette, conduct cost-effective legal research and

work within a budget," says Amy Gardner, dean of the University of Chicago Law School.

With an increasing number of experienced attorneys out of work, law students have to prove that their legal education and few months of internship experience is enough to qualify them. For those without degrees from the top tier universities, it can even be more difficult.

"It's very difficult to judge law schools on rankings and numbers," says Laurel Bellows, president elect of the American Bar Association and partner at Bellows Law Group, P.C., though she adds, "It's true that law students attending top tier law schools and students graduating at the top of their class are likely to obtain employment."

Law schools are coming under increased scrutiny for emphasizing too much theoretical practice and not enough practical experience in the classroom, leaving lawyers under-prepared to tackle day-to-day work and the business of law.

Katie Larkin Wong, an associate at Latham Watkins, graduate of Northwestern University Law School and president of Ms. JD, a nonprofit fo-

cused on women's issues in law, says that the analysis is fair, considering law schools do little to actually teach the basics of what the day-to-day looks like for most practicing attorneys.

"If students can come out of law school more prepared to hit the ground running, they'll certainly be in a better position than their peers – once they're hired," says Ms. Larkin Wong. "The big question is whether hiring practices will change. For now, firms, agencies and organizations seek out the 'top' lawyers (meaning those who graduated from the top of their class at the top law schools). If there are changes, they will instead look for the most well-trained lawyers. Currently, there is little difference between law schools in terms of training. Until a law school makes a bold move, meaning making a broad change in how they train their students, there is little pressure on top law schools to make changes to their curriculum."

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION: PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE AND MENTORING

Chicago's law schools, however, are beginning to recognize the need for practical experience in the classroom and ensuring support once lawyers are in their first positions. As just a sample of Chicago's six law schools, the University of Chicago and John Marshall Law School both have launched programs in the past year focused on professionalism and success for young lawyers.

The University of Chicago launched the Keystone Professionalism and Leadership Program in September 2011, and has seen 90 percent participation among first-year law students. The program offers additional programming or workshops that student can register for to bolster their experiences in law school, from practical computer classes to mentoring.

Under the direction of retired Justice Margaret Frossard, John Marshall Law School was the first to launch the Lawyer-to-Lawyer mentoring program in conjunction with the Illinois Supreme Court. Newly licensed graduates of John Marshall have the opportunity to be matched with experienced attorneys as mentors.

"What is so different about this program is that it's very concrete in the mentoring process," Ms. Frossard says. "In your first year of practice at a new job, you need to have a go-to person that you can run things by. Our program helps with networking and in particular, is geared toward the professionalism aspect of the law, so ethics issues and those types of things are highly stressed."

Women entering law today face an economy that has shrunk their industry, and made an already competitive job market even more difficult. But once in their field, women face challenges balancing personal and work life, developing skills that law schools haven't traditionally focused on in the classroom, and taking their place in the ranks as new lawyers.

Patricia Brown Holmes, a partner and diversity committee co-chair at Schiff & Hardin who entered law right after the first glass-ceiling-breaking generation, believes that now is an exciting time to be a lawyer.

"Changes are happening now. Peoples used to place restrictions and prejudices on what you could and couldn't do, and now they just can't because of the younger generation," Ms. Holmes says. "If women today want to become lawyers and have the option to work part-time, they have the attitude that they can do it. It's taking a while for it to infiltrate the system, but it is happening. It all contributes to a view that we can all do what we want: our lives are not planned out by anybody." ■

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