

Dear Pat,

I'm a 3L having a difficult time job searching in this tough economy. What's your advice about how to land a position?

Signed,
Discouraged 3L

Dear Discouraged,

Take heart. There are many positions still available. You may need to be more creative about your search, but you will find there is a wealth of opportunity out there.

First, seek out the help of the career services counselors at your school. John Feldman, assistant dean for Career Services at the UNM School of Law, has several helpful suggestions for 3Ls and recent graduates. You may want to start your search online. Most career services offices have their own websites and feature job postings, volunteer opportunities, career enhancement opportunities and links to other important resources. An online legal research service recently offered a free training session on how to use their website to find a job. Take advantage of these free resources while you're still in school. Even after you graduate, many career services offices are available to alumni as well as other job websites, although some may require fees.

Tell everyone you know that you're looking for a job. People enjoy making introductions and assisting with successful career matches. You never know who might be acquainted with a prospective employer with a job opportunity. Career resource counselors, friends and family may know prospective employers and will often pick up the phone on your behalf. I don't know of any websites that do that!

Meet face-to-face with potential employers by attending presentations and social functions where attorneys are present. Law schools may offer programs, some open to the public, that are geared toward job searches. For example, several UNM School of Law alumni recently participated in a presentation about their insights and experiences in solo and small firm practices. Meeting experienced lawyers at such presentations may also allow you to gain a mentor or pick up some contract work, which can be a great opportunity for both you and the employer to test the water before the employer commits to hiring a full time associate.

Be flexible and don't limit yourself by geography. Conduct searches near and far away from home. A great job may be waiting for you in another city, state, or even another country. Some recent graduates have landed their first jobs by moving across the country, moving in with family or friends in other cities and returning to their hometowns. Such a move does not have to be permanent. Also, you may not need to move very far away. There may be employment opportunities as close as Texas, Mexico and New Mexico border areas where there is a need for lawyers interested in international law, immigration law and civil rights.

Don't limit yourself to traditional legal positions. Explore your interests outside of law school or those you abandoned during law school. Write a list of your interests and talents. Use this list to guide your job search. This approach may lead you to a position in a niche market or working environment that you previously didn't consider. For example, a recent law school graduate who had an interest in science found a position as a human resources manager in a small museum. The position has enabled the graduate to work in an environment she enjoys while utilizing and refining her professional skills. If your interests include legal research and writing, consider applying for judicial, government or law firm clerkships. Competition can be steep because recent graduates and experienced attorneys may also be seeking these positions, but it's worth the effort to explore clerkships as bridges to the practice of law. You may also want to consider applying for employment with the federal government. For example, the Social Security Administration recently announced that several new employment positions are available. Contrary to popular belief, these positions are not necessarily located on the east coast. If you're interested in private practice, consider exploring opportunities to work in a family law or tax law practice. These "bread and butter" areas of practice steadily maintain a need for new lawyers.

When you find a position you're interested in, submit your resume and cover letter and request a face-to-face interview. Meeting the prospective employer in person is the best way to get a feel for both the position and the working environment. Avoid impersonal e-mails. If you can't meet in person with the potential employer, the next best thing is a telephone conversation, giving you the opportunity to ask the questions you want to ask without the pressure you may normally feel in a formal job interview.

Maintain a positive attitude even if you receive rejections from prospective employers. Job offers don't always crop up quickly or in expected places. If you don't land a job right away, find a part time job (legal or not) and volunteer in the legal field. Volunteer work will help you gain valuable legal experience, build your professional network of contacts and may lead to employment opportunities. If you're working and engaged in something you enjoy, your positive energy will help keep you motivated.

There is at least one advantage to seeking work in tough economic times—it forces you to explore your interests and creativity. Your legal education, the other skills you learned in law school and your creativity afford you considerable advantage in this market. Your first job may not be your dream job, but it will help you gain financial stability and valuable experience. Good luck in your search!

Sincerely,
Pat

Note: A special thanks to Dr. John Feldman, assistant dean for Career Services, and his colleagues Bonnie Stepleton and Nancy Huffstutler for providing information and insight into landing that first job.