

LAW WEEK

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Disparate Job Market Changed Legal Careers



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LET ME START by saying I don't know of anyone I attended law school with who is now waiting tables. And I do know a lot of people who got jobs at law firms.

But I also know people, who after graduation and bar passage, have in various stages of desperation worked full-time for free, tutored, substitute taught, worked in sales, accounting and other office settings, and even one who landscaped. I also know people who agreed to saddle even more student loans by staying in school for a second advanced degree.

Friends and acquaintances alike from the class of 2010 have remarked that the economy forced them to rethink their job searches, which in many instances meant postponing a legal job search or leaving the legal field altogether.

I'm one of them. As an evening student at the University of Denver Sturm College of Law, I worked full time through law school, at a non-legal job in the nonprofit sector. I attended law school with a number of potential next steps in mind. While working at a firm was never high on the list, the economy forced me to think critically about whether I was willing to leave full-time employment with benefits for the possibility of something with a firm. I ultimately dismissed it as an option.

I know I landed where I was supposed to, with a company that maximizes my talents, my education and my love of the law. But some of the people I contacted for this article didn't have the same experience. A few were even hesitant of speaking openly

about their experiences.

Two former classmates, both of whom preferred not to be named, gave up on their job searches while waiting for their bar results. While it may have seemed preemptive to do so, both felt the pressure of mounting loans and returned to the sectors they worked in before attending law school.

Others I know just waited the bad economy out, taking what they could get in the meantime.

"I postponed looking for a legal job," said Thaine Lennox-Gentle, who is now an associate with Sheridan Ross. Lennox-Gentle, who owned and ran an engineering-automation company before and during law school, was a patent agent, and he wanted to practice in intellectual property.

"I had friends who were in the field, I had worked with people who were patent attorneys, and I looked at the field and asked if the firms were hiring," he said. "They overwhelmingly said 'No.' They weren't hiring first-year associates."

Lennox-Gentle stayed at the helm of his business, but he kept his foot in the legal world, attending intellectual property conferences and continuing legal education

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classes. Eight months after passing the bar, he finally heard news from friends in practice who said they thought work was picking up. Not long after, he got the call from Sheridan Ross asking if he was interested in a contract position, with the possibility it could lead to a full hire.

"Sheridan Ross was creative with me," he said. "We did a contract base/conditional hiring situation. It was a 'try before you buy' idea for both of us." And it worked. Lennox-Gentle was added as an associate in August.



THAINE LENNOX-GENTLE

Chris Scolari, an associate with the Denver office of Burleson, knew firms weren't hiring after the bar exam, but he wanted to use his law degree in whatever he did.

"I answered a call from a friend one day and ended up moving to Kansas," he said.

firms in large part because I didn't think I would get any offers," Scolari said. "I thought the market was terrible." Had the economy been different? "I would have been more inclined to examine other opportunities to see what was out there," he said. "I likely would have tried something else."

"The people I know who went to law schools in other states and moved here to find jobs have had no luck," Scolari said. "One is starting his own shop because he can't even get an interview. It's been tough for everyone."

"You graduate and you have this massive debt, and you realize you have to find a job to pay it back, even if it's not in the legal field," Scolari said.

Everyone in my class knows someone who was forced to move out-of-state or take jobs they may not have wanted. But most people I know wouldn't change a thing.

Cindy Sack, a senior portfolio management associate with Northstar Investment Advisors, has moved on from the law, in some part because of the economy. Sack worked at Northstar through law school, and she didn't apply to work at a firm. But she said that "if the economy had been different, I would have given it a try."

"Law school made me take a hard look at what the law was and who I was," Sack said. "I did love the education and would do it again, even though I'm not practicing." •

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