Lawyer / Attorney

Laws affect every element of society. Forming the backbone of the legal system are lawyers. Lawyers must be responsible and live up to a strict ethical code.

Lawyers, also known as attorneys, act as advocates and advisors. As advocates, lawyers use evidence to defend clients at criminal and civil trials. Lawyers act as advisors by advising their clients about their rights and suggest strategies to deal with legal problems. Lawyers conduct legal research and apply the law to the circumstances of their clients.

An attorney's specialization will determine his or her job responsibilities. All attorneys are licensed to defend their clients in court, but some spend more time in courtrooms than others. Trial lawyers, attorneys specializing in trial litigation, must think quickly, be effective communicators, and understand court rules and strategy. However, trial lawyers spend most of their time interviewing witnesses and conducting legal research.

There are many legal specialties, including environmental, international, elder, probate, and bankruptcy law. For example, environmental lawyers represent waste disposal and waste management in disputes with the Environmental Protection Agency. Lawyers specializing in intellectual property defend clients in intellectual property disputes. Some lawyers defend insurance companies after fraudulent claims are filed, or these lawyers can serve as advisors when an insurance company writes new policies.

The majority of attorneys work in private practice focusing on criminal or civil law. Lawyers practicing criminal law represent people charged with crimes. Lawyers specializing in civil law help clients draft wills, set up trusts, draft contracts, and assist with numerous other legal issues. Lawyers involved with public interest cases, criminal or civil, focus on causes that affect how a law is applied in future cases. Lawyers known as house counsel, are attorneys representing only one client such as a corporation. These attorneys advise their clients on government regulations, business activities, and supervise the creation of new contracts.

Numerous lawyers work for government agencies. Some work as prosecutors or public defenders. Attorneys working for the federal government represent the government in civil and criminal cases, interpret laws, draft potential new laws, and provide investigative work for the Justice Department.

Some lawyers work for non-profit organizations. These organizations provide legal services for poor people. Since public defenders exist to help people unable to afford attorneys in criminal cases, non-profit organizations specializing in legal services usually help people in civil cases.

Lawyers use more technology today than in the past to help them work more efficiently. They continue to use law libraries, but most lawyers use legal databases available on the internet to conduct research. Software has been designed to search the vast amount of legal literature and identify helpful information to be used by lawyers in their cases. Attorneys can also use computers to index and organize material. Lawyers must be assessable for their clients, so they utilize such technologies as electronic filing and videoconferencing.

**Work environment.** Attorneys spend most of their time in courtrooms, law libraries, or legal offices. They can meet clients at their homes, prisons, or hospitals. Lawyers may have to travel to various locations such as courtrooms or meeting locations. Attorneys will experience a lot of stress when a case is being tried in court. Lawyers must stay up to date about recent judicial decisions and new laws.

Attorneys working on salary usually have set work schedules. The hours for lawyers in private practice will vary, depending on how much research they conduct and how many clients they have to meet with. About 37 percent of lawyers working full time work more than 50 hours a week.

**Training, Qualifications, and Advancement**

Lawyers usually spend 4 years in college, 3 years in law school, and then they must pass a written test known as the bar examination. Admission to law school is very competitive. Federal courts and agencies have their own standards for attorneys who appear before them.

Education and training. Law school applicants need a bachelor's degree before they can attend law school. More law schools now offer part time programs to accommodate students who cannot attend full time.

Potential law students should possess good reading, speaking, research, analytical, logic, and writing skills. These skills are essential to succeed in law school and legal work. Taking classes in English, public speaking, philosophy, history, economics, math, or foreign languages can help improve these skills. Students wanting to specialize should take courses related to the specialty. For example, a student hoping to specialize in patent law should take engineering and science course, or a student desiring to specialize in tax law should take accounting classes. Law schools base their acceptance criteria upon undergraduate GPA, the score received on the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), prior work experience, and, in some cases, an interview with the admissions staff. Individual law schools emphasize different admission criteria.

All American Bar Association approved law schools require potential candidates for admission to take the LSAT. In 2006, 195 ABA approved law schools existed in the United States while some schools were licensed in the states where they were located. Most schools require applicants to submit their college transcripts and LSAT scores through the Law School Data Assembly Service which is administered by the Law School Admission Council as well as the LSAT. Admission to law school is very competitive, especially at schools considered prestigious. More people apply than available spots exist.

First year students study core subjects including legal writing, civil procedure, torts, property law, contracts, and constitutional law. The remaining years they take specialized courses in subjects such as corporate, labor, or tax law. Law students can obtain practical experience by conducting research and submitting articles to the school's law journal, participating in mock trials supervised by judges, participating in legal clinics sponsored by the school, or participating in moot court competitions, forums where students present and defend legal arguments.

Some schools offer students the opportunity to participate in clinical programs. Clinical programs allow students to gain real life experience by participating in mock trials and projects supervised by faculty members. Some programs could include work for legislative bodies. Students can also gain experience clerking in law firms, corporate legal divisions, or government agencies. These clerkships can lead to employment after law school and help students determine their specialty. After graduating, graduates are awarded a juris doctor (J.D.).

Law students also have the option to pursue advanced law degrees which allow students the opportunity to research, teach, or specialize. Students earning joint degrees, usually spend an additional year or semester in school. Some joint degree programs include public or business administration.

Attorneys must stay informed about legal changes affecting their practices. In 2006, 43 states require attorneys to obtain continuing legal education. Many law schools and state bar associations offer attorneys continuing education programs. Some states permit lawyers to get continuing education through the internet.

**Licensure.** To practice law, lawyers must be licensed in the states they practice in or be admitted to the state's bar association. All states require graduates to pass a state bar exam, and most states require graduates to pass an ethics exam. Attorneys who have passed the bar in one state can occasionally be admitted to another state's bar without taking another test, if they meet the state's requirements for moral character and have a sufficient amount of legal experience. Most states require attorneys to take the state's bar exam. Federal courts and agencies have their own requirements for attorneys who appear before them.

Before taking the bar, applicants must graduate from a law school accredited by the American Bar Association, (ABA). ABA accreditation demonstrates that a law school's faculty and library meets its standards. Most graduates of schools not ABA approved, mostly schools in California, are limited to taking the bar in the state the law school is located in; however, some exceptions may exist.

48 states, Guam, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands, require potential attorneys to take the 6 hour Multistate Bar Exam (MBE). However, individuals taking the bar in Louisiana or Washington are not required to take the MBE. The MBE covers a broad array of issues. The 3 hour Multistate Essay Exam (MEE) is part of some state bar exams.

Many states require Multistate Performance Testing to determine whether potential attorneys possess practical legal skills. Each state has different requirements, and the test only is required to be only taken once, in conjunction with the bar exam.

In 2007, potential lawyers in 52 jurisdictions were required to pass the Multistate Professional Responsibility Exam (MPRE). This test determines a graduate's knowledge of the ABA regulations of judicial conduct and professional responsibility. Some states allow students to take the MPRE during law school, often after completing a class on legal ethics.

**Other qualifications.** The legal profession needs responsible candidates. Potential lawyers should enjoy working with people and have the ability to earn the trust of clients, colleagues, and the general public. Attorneys who work on complex cases should possess reasoning skills, be creative, and persevere through struggles.

**Advancement.** Most lawyers begin their careers in jobs paying salaries. New attorneys begin as associates, working with experienced attorneys. Lawyers who have worked for years can become firm partners, meaning they own a portion of the firm. Some attorneys begin their own legal practice. Some attorneys have the opportunity to be nominated or elected to serve as a judge, and some work as faculty members or administrators at law schools.

Some attorneys become administrators or managers for large corporations. Transferring from the legal division to another division can provide lawyers aspiring to be corporate managers a way to gain administrative experience.

**Employment**

In 2006, there were about 761,000 attorneys. 27 percent of attorneys were self-employed either as partners or private business owners. Attorneys earning salaries worked for government agencies, corporations, non-profits, or law firms. The majority of lawyers working for government worked for local municipalities. Federal government attorneys primarily worked for the Defense, Treasury, or Justice Departments. Many salaried attorneys served as house counsel for banks, insurance companies, public utilities, and manufacturing firms. Certain attorneys also worked part-time for independent practices.

A few attorneys worked for law schools and are not included in employment data. Most serve as faculty members while some work as administrators. Some teach part time, but still practice law while not teaching.

**Job Outlook**

Job growth for attorneys is expected to be average while intense competition will exist for these jobs.

**Employment change.** The legal profession is expected to grow 11 percent through the decade. A growing population will require more lawyers to handle civil disputes, criminal charges, and legal issues involving business transactions. Demand for legal services involving health care, venture capital, energy, intellectual property, and environmental law, will provide lawyers with more jobs. The middle class will also use more legal services as legal clinics make legal services cheaper. Job growth for lawyers will decrease slightly as large companies utilize paralegals and accounting firms. To illustrate, accounting firms handle employee-benefit counseling and process documents. Moreover, people are using more mediation and dispute resolving services as alternatives to litigation.

The majority of new attorney jobs will be salaried because government agencies and businesses will hire staff attorneys. Most salaried positions are located in big cities where large corporations, law firms, and government agencies are located. The number of attorneys starting their practices will grow slowly because establishing a profitable practice is difficult since there is a lot of competition from larger firms. Likewise, larger firms have the resources to train and hire more specialized lawyers.

Job prospects. Because of an increasing number of law school graduates, fierce competition should exist for jobs. Graduates with good grades from elite law schools will have better opportunities. Many lawyers will find jobs in fields that do not require a legal education such as managerial or administrative jobs in banking, insurance, government agencies, and other organizations.

Some law school graduates are accepting jobs in fields outside their specialty which they are overqualified for. Many graduates are finding temporary jobs with staffing agencies, providing services when needed. This allows law firms to outsource legal work when they need extra help, and it enables new attorneys to gain experience.

Because of competition, many law school graduates must relocate. Moving can help a graduate find a job, but they will probably have to take the state's bar exam. Moreover, employers are seeking graduates with advanced law degrees and specialized experience such as admiralty, tax, or patent law.

Cyclical economic shifts negatively affect job growth. During economic downturns, demand for discretionary legal services such as drafting wills, real estate transactions, and estate planning shrinks. Corporations are less likely to pursue litigation during recessions. Some corporations and law firms will lay off staff and institute hiring freezes until revenue increases. However, firms that specialize in such areas as foreclosures, divorces, and bankruptcies will benefit from the economic downturn.

Lawyers starting their own practice will probably be most successful in small cities and suburbs. There will be less competition, and establishing relationships with potential clients will be easier.

In May of 2006, $102,470 was the median annual salary or combined wages for attorneys. Attorneys in the middle of the pay spectrum earned between $69,910-145,600. In May of 2006, median annual earnings for attorneys were as follows:

* State government - $75,840
* Local government - $78,810
* Legal services - $108,100
* Federal government - $119,240
* Company management - $128,610

Experienced lawyers' salaries vary, depending on the location, type, and size of law firm they work at. Attorneys with their own practice generally earn less than attorneys who have become partners. Lawyers setting up their own firm may need supplemental income from other work until their practices are established.

