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Focus: Law

Law-school grads hone job-search strategies



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That [Maggie Lewis](#) parlayed the J.D. she earned last year into a staff counsel post at **PNC Financial Services Group** Inc. isn't surprising.

She entered **Duquesne University** School of Law with a degree in accounting in hand, a trio of internships on her resume and a career strategy in mind.

"I chose to pursue a corporate legal position because I wanted a job that aligned with my accounting background and interest in contracts law," Lewis said.

She had interned as an undergrad at **General Electric** Co., KPMG and the **Ayco** Co., and worked full-time as a financial analyst in UPMC's financial management rotation program and later as a contract specialist at Hatch Associates Consultants. These experiences gave her a strong understanding of business operations and sparked her desire to start her career in a corporate setting.

So her job search was focused. The opportunity at PNC was the perfect match for Lewis, who said she is now happily negotiating vendor agreements, among other responsibilities.

It's a strategy that has paid off during a difficult time for recent law school grads to find work.

Postrecession, law firms across the country were hit hard by client cutbacks, and many eliminated or pared summer associate programs to the bone and severely curbed the hiring of newly minted attorneys. Data for the class of 2013 is just beginning to trickle in, but a report last month from the **American Bar Association** showed that about 12 percent of graduates of the region's law schools — Duquesne, **West Virginia University** and the **University of Pittsburgh** — were still seeking employment.

Those hired at firms were most likely to work at small ones with two to 10 attorneys, and, mirroring a national trend, about one-quarter went to business and industry.

There will be fewer graduates going forward as law schools across the country, including the University of Pittsburgh, have voluntarily reduced the number of students admitted.

Last fall, Pitt Law cut admissions by about 17 percent from 2012 because of the contraction in the market for entry-level attorneys. [Dean William Carter](#) Jr. said then it had "far more than enough quality applicants to fill our seats many times over," but made the decision because "we believe it is the right thing to do at this moment in legal education."

One place law schools have been focusing on to help students find jobs is the growing corporate sector. Strategic employer outreach conducted by Pitt Law's career services office has resulted in more corporations interviewing — and hiring — its students. Although the majority of Pitt Law's class of 2013 are employed at law firms, about 21 percent work in the business sector.

"Examples include PNC, Mylan, **Talisman Energy**, **NOVA Chemicals** and **Kennametal**, to name a few," Carter said.

Duquesne has an evening program that has been a popular option for many already working in corporate Pittsburgh to obtain a law degree, but [Dean Kenneth Gormley](#) also noted the growing impact of the energy sector.

"We have students and alums doing title work with companies like **Rice Energy** and working in all facets of the energy and environmental areas," Gormley said. "We have also seen a rise in students going into compliance positions."

[Joyce McConnell](#), dean of the College of Law at West Virginia University, said its students also are in demand in the energy and environmental sectors.

"There is growth in regional law firms due to increased activity in the energy sector and in small firms, which represents the entrepreneurial spirit of many law graduates," she said.

Still, the argument over whether corporate legal departments prefer experienced lawyers or will hire recent graduates has many angles.

"It's still a tough market for people graduating from law school, and if they have more options, including going in-house, that can only be positive," said [Kevin Whyte](#), vice president and general counsel at Carmeuse Lime & Stone and past president of the Association of Corporate Counsel's Pittsburgh chapter. Whyte's own four-lawyer department hasn't hired new grads, but he said the size of a legal department may be a factor.

"Historically, in-house law departments prefer to hire someone with a bit of experience, although I know some of the larger ones do hire directly," Whyte said. "I think it would be a great experience for new lawyers who have an interest in getting into the business world."

[Robert Denney](#), who leads a namesake law firm consultancy practice based in Wayne, Pa., said he believes it comes down to corporations trying to lower outside legal spending.

"It's easier for them and their operating costs to hire associates right out of law schools," Denney said. "That's been the pattern across the country. These new lawyers don't have a lot of skills, but they can pick that up pretty quickly. Companies are trying to keep as

much work in-house as they can. And, at the same time, trying to use less expensive law firms when possible.”

Annually since 2009, an estimated 15 percent to 18 percent of recent law graduates nationwide have found jobs in the business sector. And the law schools have noted some changes in the companies coming to campus.

“In our region, we believe that the energy law boom has prompted increased hiring both at law firms as well as at businesses focusing upon related areas,” Carter said.

In addition, decreased hiring by the largest law firms has opened opportunities for smaller ones to nab top early stage talent.

[Rosalind Lister](#), assistant director of career services at WVU Law, said the number of small - to medium-size firms recruiting on campus has increased over the past two years.

Duquesne’s Law Alumni Board of Governors has a number of prominent members from “relatively small but successful firms,” Gormley said. “And our grads are excellent about helping to hire our own alums.”

He said the importance of networking with the local bar association is emphasized to students.

“Reflective of the Pittsburgh region, most practitioners in the bar association are from small- and midsized firms,” he said. “As a result, the connections that our grads make are often with attorneys at smaller practices.”

In response to student demand, Duquesne Law’s career services office launched a solo and small firm practice series, which Gormley believes has helped to generate additional interest in this practice niche.

And the tide may already be starting to turn as prospects look up. [Lori Carpenter](#), president of recruitment firm Carpenter Legal Search, said summer programs, traditionally the feeding system for firms, are somewhat larger than in past years.

“Students between the second and third years of law school seem to have more potential opportunities than they’ve had in four or five years,” Carpenter said.

Firms’ prudent postrecession hiring is also causing shortages in some areas of specialization where demand is on the upswing, creating potential opportunities for recent graduates.

“A number of clients need mid-level real estate associates, and since that work was down, the numbers are few and far between for lawyers with two-to-five years of experience,” Carpenter said. “We’re starting to see pockets where they’re needed, but there’s not enough talent.”

Gormley noted campus interviewing has “picked up a little.”

“We have a steady, reliable group of firms who come to campus to recruit,” he said. “Additionally, we have noticed that some firms are taking more people this year than last, which is a positive sign.”

In the short-term, projections seem to be steady with possibly a slight uptick in employment rates, Gormley said.

“In raw numbers, more law school graduates (nationwide) were employed this year than in recent years,” he said. “Also, as baby boomers start moving into retirement in the next few years, there are likely to be increased entry-level positions and long-term employment opportunities on the horizon for recent law graduates.”

Still, law schools remain cautious. Carter expects to remain conservative with admissions this fall.

“Given the still-challenging job market and decline in law school applications both nationally and in our region, I continue to believe it to be wise to bring in entering classes somewhat smaller than has historically been the case,” Carter said. “We will continue to monitor the situation and make adjustments as necessary.”

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