

Lawyer

Snapshot

Career Cluster(s): Business, Management & Administration; Law, Public Safety, Corrections & Security

Interests: Law & justice; regulations

Earnings (Yearly Average): \$122,960

Employment & Outlook: As Fast As Average Growth Expected

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Lawyers advise and represent individuals, businesses, and government agencies on legal issues and disputes. Although some lawyers work for firms or corporations, others have a desire to open their own practices.

Work Environment

Lawyers mainly work in offices and courtrooms, although many are required to travel in order to meet with clients. Being a lawyer can be a high-stress occupation, especially during trials or when facing deadlines.

Occupation Interest

Lawyers are highly organized, analytical people who have a desire to uphold the law and either advocate for or advise clients on their legal rights. This can take many forms, from criminal prosecutions and defense to tax, labor, and corporate law. In business, lawyers are essential in order to legally conduct financial transac-



A lawyer questions a witness before the jury in a courtroom. Photo via iStock.com/RichLegg. [Used under license.]

tions, and for areas such as patents and copyrights.

A Day in the Life—Duties and Responsibilities

Lawyers, also called attorneys, function as both advocates and advisors.

As advocates, they represent one of the parties in a criminal or civil trial by presenting evidence and arguing in support of their client.

As advisors, lawyers counsel their clients about their legal rights and obligations and suggest courses of action in business and personal matters. All attorneys research the intent of laws and judicial decisions and apply the laws to the specific circumstances that their clients face.

Lawyers often oversee the work of support staff, such as paralegals and legal assistants and legal secretaries.

Lawyers may have different titles and different duties, depending on where they work.

In law firms, lawyers, sometimes called associates, perform legal work for individuals or businesses. Those who represent and defend the accused may be called criminal law attorneys or defense attorneys.

Profile

Interests: People, Data, Things

Working Conditions: Both Inside and Outside

Physical Strength: Medium Work

Education Needs: Bachelor's Degree, Law Degree

Licensure/Certification: Bar Exam

Opportunities for Experience: Internship, Part-Time Work

Interest Score: E1

Duties and Responsibilities

- Advising and representing clients in courts, before government agencies, and in private legal matters
- Communicating with clients, colleagues, judges, and others involved in the case
- Conducting research and analysis of legal problems
- Interpreting laws, rulings, and regulations for individuals and businesses
- Presenting facts in writing and verbally to their clients or others, and argue on behalf of their clients
- Preparing and filing legal documents, such as lawsuits, appeals, wills, contracts, and deeds

Attorneys also work for federal, state, and local governments. Prosecutors typically work for the government to file a lawsuit, or charge, against an individual or corporation accused of violating the law. Some may also work as public defense attorneys, representing individuals who could not afford to hire their own private attorney.

Others may work as government counsels for administrative bodies and executive or legislative branches of government. They write and interpret laws and regulations

and set up procedures to enforce them. Government counsels also write legal reviews of agency decisions. They argue civil and criminal cases on behalf of the government.

Corporate counsels, also called in-house counsels, are lawyers who work for corporations. They advise a corporation's executives about legal issues related to the corporation's business activities. These issues may involve patents, copyrights, government regulations, contracts with other companies, property interests, taxes, or collective-bargaining agreements with unions.

Public-interest lawyers work for private, nonprofit organizations that provide legal services to disadvantaged people or others who otherwise might not be able to afford legal representation. They generally deal with civil cases, such as those having to do with leases, job discrimination, and wage disputes, rather than criminal cases.

OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES

Environmental Lawyer

Environmental lawyers deal with issues and regulations that are related to the environment. For example, they may work for advocacy groups, waste disposal companies, or government agencies to help ensure compliance with relevant laws.

Family Lawyer

Family lawyers deal with a variety of legal issues that pertain to the family. They may advise clients regarding divorce, child custody, and adoption proceedings.

Intellectual Property Lawyer

Intellectual property lawyers deal with the laws related to inventions, patents, trademarks, and creative works, such as music, books, and movies. For example, an intellectual property lawyer may advise a client about whether it is acceptable to use published material in the client's forthcoming book.

Securities Lawyer

Securities lawyers work on legal issues arising from the buying and selling of stocks, ensuring that all disclosure requirements are met. They may advise corporations that are interested in listing in the stock exchange through an initial public offering (IPO) or in buying shares in another corporation.

Tax Lawyer

Tax lawyers process a variety of tax-related issues for individuals and corporations. They may help clients navigate complex tax regulations, so that clients pay the appropriate tax on items such as income, profits, and property. For example, tax lawyers may advise a corporation on how much tax it needs to pay from profits made in different states to comply with Internal Revenue Service (IRS) rules.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Immediate Physical Environment

Lawyers work mostly in offices. However, some travel to attend meetings with clients at various locations, such as homes, hospitals, or prisons. Others travel to appear before courts.

Lawyers may face demanding pressure during work—for example, during trials or when trying to meet deadlines. Most lawyers work full-time and many work more than 40 hours per week. Lawyers who are in private practice and those who work in large firms often work additional hours, conducting research and preparing and reviewing documents.

Human Environment

Lawyers interact with others daily, as part of their routine work. There may be solitary moments of research and paperwork, but a great deal of time is spent meeting with clients, appearing in court, arguing cases in front of mediators and arbitrators, meeting with opposing lawyers, and working with support staff. Lawyers must be comfortable dealing with people one-on-one—sometimes relating to extremely sensitive or emotional matters—and public speaking, such as during court appearances.

Technological Environment

Technological requirements depend on the sphere of the lawyers' work, but all lawyers must be comfortable using computers, including word processing software, as well as specialized software and platforms such as accounting software, presentation software, databases, and information retrieval platforms.

EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND ADVANCEMENT

High School/Secondary

Since becoming a lawyer typically requires 7 years of postsecondary schooling, high school students considering a career in law should plan ahead for their postsecondary career by striving for high grades in all subjects, with an emphasis on courses such as sociology, political science, psychology, and history. Science and math courses can help sharpen analytical skills, while English and language courses are essential for building communication and written skills. In general, courses that require a great deal of reading, analysis, and writing will help prepare high school students for the intensity of law school.

Suggested High School Subjects

- Biology
- Chemistry
- Civics
- Earth or Life or Physical Science
- Economics
- English
- Forensic Science
- Law Foundations
- History
- Math
- Physics
- Psychology
- Statistics
- Technical Writing

Related Career Pathways/Majors

*Business, Management & Administration
Career Cluster*

- General Management Pathway

*Law, Public Safety, Corrections &
Security Career Cluster*

- Legal Services Pathway

Transferable Skills and Abilities

Analytical Skills

- Analyzing large amounts of information
- Determining relevant facts, and propose viable solutions

Interpersonal Skills

- Building a trusting relationship so that clients feel comfortable enough to share personal information related to their case

Problem-solving Skills

- Separating emotions and prejudice from clients' problems and objectively evaluating the relevant applicable information
- Preparing the best defense and recommendations for clients

Research Skills

- Finding those laws and regulations that apply to a specific matter, in order to provide the appropriate legal advice for clients

Speaking Skills

- Presenting and explaining their case to arbitrators, mediators, opposing parties, judges, or juries in a clear manner
- Speaking on behalf of clients

Writing Skills

- Preparing documents, such as wills, trusts, and powers of attorney with attention to detail

Postsecondary

Becoming a lawyer usually takes 7 years of full-time study after high school—4 years of undergraduate study, followed by 3 years of law school. Most states and jurisdictions require lawyers to complete a Juris Doctor (JD) degree from a law school accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA). ABA accreditation signifies that the law school—particularly its curricula and faculty—meets certain standards.

A bachelor's degree is required for entry into most law schools, and courses in English, public speaking, government, history, economics, and mathematics are useful.

Almost all law schools, particularly those approved by the ABA, require applicants to take the Law School Admission Test (LSAT). This test measures applicants' aptitude for the study of law.

The JD degree program includes courses such as constitutional law, contracts, property law, civil procedure, and legal writing. Law students may choose specialized courses in areas such as tax, labor, and corporate law.

Related College Majors

- Arts & Humanities
- Business
- Communications
- Criminal Justice
- Economics
- English
- History
- Math
- Philosophy
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Science
- Sociology

Adult Job Seekers

Adults seeking to become lawyers must be prepared to do the legwork required to reach that goal, including attending law school. Coming from a related field, such as criminal justice, business, and communications, is an asset, as is having worked in a position such as a paralegal or legal assistant.

Professional Certification and Licensure

Prospective lawyers take licensing exams called “bar exams.” Lawyers who receive a license to practice law are “admitted to the bar.”

To practice law in any state, a person must be admitted to the state’s bar under rules established by the jurisdiction’s highest court. The requirements vary by state and jurisdiction. For more details on individual state and jurisdiction requirements, visit the National Conference of Bar Examiners (NCBE).

Most states require that applicants graduate from an ABA-accredited law school, pass one or more written bar exams, and be found by an admitting board to have the character to represent and advise others. Prior felony convictions, academic misconduct, and a history of substance abuse are just some factors that may disqualify an applicant from being admitted to the bar.

Lawyers who want to practice in more than one state often must take the bar exam in each state.

After graduation, lawyers must keep informed about legal developments that affect their practices. Almost all states require lawyers to participate in continuing legal education either every year or every 3 years.

Many law schools and state and local bar associations provide continuing legal education courses that help lawyers stay current with recent developments. Courses vary by state and generally cover a subject within the practice of law, such as legal ethics, taxes and tax fraud, and healthcare. Some states allow lawyers to take continuing education credits through online courses.

Additional Requirements

Part-time jobs or summer internships in law firms, government agencies, and corporate legal departments provide valuable experience. Some smaller firms, government agencies, and public-interest organizations may hire students as summer associates after they have completed their first year at law school. Many larger firms’ summer associate programs are eligible only to law students who have completed their second year. All these experiences can help law students decide what kind of legal work they want to focus on in their careers and may lead directly to a job after graduation.

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Many factors affect earnings, including the type of law practiced, a lawyer's position within a firm, the size of the firm or corporation, whether the lawyer is a public defender, or if he or she runs or is a partner in their own firm. Lawyers who own their own practices usually earn less than those who work in law firms or other business establishments. Median annual earnings of lawyers were \$122,960 in 2019. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$59,670, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$208,000.

Lawyers may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These are usually paid by an employer. Travel expenses may also be covered by an employer.

Newly hired attorneys usually start as associates and work on teams with more experienced lawyers. After several years, some lawyers may advance to partnership in their firm, meaning that they become partial owners of the firm. Those who do not advance within their firm may be forced to leave, a practice commonly known as "up or out."

After gaining a few years of work experience, some lawyers go into practice for themselves or move to the legal department of a large corporation. Very few in-house attorneys are hired directly out of law school.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

Lawyers held 813,900 jobs in 2019. Seventeen percent were self-employed. Employment is expected to grow as fast as average through the year 2029, at a rate of 4 percent. Demand for legal work is expected to continue as individuals, businesses, and all levels of government require legal services in many areas.

Despite this need for legal services, more price competition over the next decade may lead law firms to rethink their project staffing to reduce costs to clients. Clients are expected to cut back on legal expenses by demanding less expensive rates and scrutinizing invoices. Work that was previously assigned to lawyers, such as document review, may now be given to paralegals and legal assistants. Also, some routine legal work may be outsourced to other, lower cost legal providers located overseas.

Although law firms will continue to be among the largest employers of lawyers, many large corporations are increasing their in-house legal departments to cut costs. For many companies, the high cost of hiring outside counsel lawyers and their support staffs makes it more economical to shift work to their in-house legal department. This shift will lead to an increase in the demand for lawyers in a variety of settings, such as financial and insurance firms, consulting firms, and healthcare providers.

The federal government is likely to continue to need lawyers to prosecute or defend civil cases on behalf of the United States, prosecute criminal cases brought by the federal government, and collect money owed to the federal government. However, budgetary constraints at all levels of government, especially the federal level, will likely moderate employment growth.

Despite the projected growth in new jobs for lawyers, competition for jobs should continue to be strong because more students are graduating from law school each year than there are jobs available. Some law school graduates who have been unable to find permanent positions turn to temporary staffing firms that place attorneys in short-term jobs. These firms allow companies to hire lawyers as needed and permit beginning lawyers to develop practical experience. Many other law school graduates and licensed lawyers end up finding work in other occupations or industries due to the difficulty in finding jobs with traditional legal employers.

Because of the strong competition, a law school graduate's willingness to relocate and his or her practical experiences are becoming more important. However, to be licensed in another state, a lawyer may have to take an additional state bar examination.

Related Occupations

- Arbitrator/Mediator/Conciliator
- Judge/Hearing Officer
- Paralegal/Legal Assistant
- Postsecondary Teacher

MORE INFORMATION**American Bar Association (ABA)**

1050 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
202.662.1000
www.americanbar.org

American Intellectual Property Law Association (AIPLA)

1400 Crystal Drive, Suite 600
Arlington, VA 22202
703.415.0780
aipla@aipla.org
www.aipla.org

Association of American Law Schools (AALS)

1614 20th Street NW
Washington, DC 20009-1001
202.296.8851
info@aals.org
www.aals.org

Federal Bar Association (FBA)

1220 North Fillmore Street, Suite 444
Arlington, VA 22201
571.481.9100
fba@fedbar.org
www.fedbar.org

Intellectual Property Owners Association (IPOA)

1501 M Street NW, Suite 1150
Washington, DC 20005
202.507.4500
info@ipo.org
ipo.org

Law School Admission Council (LSAC)

62 Penn Street
Newtown, PA 18940
215.968.1001
LSACinfo@LSAC.org
www.lsac.org

National Association for Law Placement (NALP)

1220 19th Street NW, Suite 401
Washington, DC 20036-2405
202.835.1001
info@nalp.org
www.nalp.org

National Association of Patent Practitioners (NAPP)

701 Exposition Place, Suite 206
Raleigh, NC 27615
919.230.9635
napp@napp.org
www.napp.org

National Conference of Bar Examiners (NCBE)

302 South Bedford Street
Madison, WI 53703-3622
www.ncbex.org

United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO)

USPTO Madison Building
600 Dulany Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
800.786.9199
www.uspto.gov



Conversation With...
GRANT BREWER

Executive Director

LICENSE: Center for Technology Commercialization

Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

Entrepreneurial mentorship in academia, 22 years

What was your individual career path in terms of education/training, entry-level job, or other significant opportunity?

My grandfather lived a relatively long life, but life was hard on his body. He was injured during World War II, smoked, and worked in coal mines. He also taught me how to fish, hunt, and play baseball. One day he was that guy and the next day he couldn't get off the couch because he lost a leg due to old injuries. We lived in Alabama, and the VA there gave him a prosthetic leg like something you'd see on Captain Hook. He just kind of withered away from that point on. I thought they should be able to do more for their patients. So, I left for college actually wanting to make prosthetic legs for people who had had leg amputations.

I went into the bioengineering program at the University of Georgia, which was brand new at the time, and earned my BS in bioengineering.

My first job was at a company called CryoLife, Inc. in Atlanta, where I made \$10/hour in a lab making a glue used for sealing wounds after surgery. I got a lot of exposure to US Food & Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and how big a deal quality control is in the biotech space. After a short tenure, I moved to a company called Serologicals in Charleston, South Carolina, that made highly concentrated antibody treatments to help people recover from exposure to rabies, hepatitis, that sort of thing. I was Director of Operations when the company was sold 4 years later.

At that point I moved into academia and worked in the tech transfer office at the Medical University of South Carolina. My original work involved surveying and assessing the research going on at the university for technologies of potential patentability and commercial interest. If an inventor was in his lab working on a widget, and Company X wanted to produce and market it, I'd hire a patent attorney to protect the rights to the widget, license it, and establish royalties on sales. I later transferred to running the university's incubator. An incubator looks at helping emerging companies understand what they need to do to make their company successful.

During this time, I also earned an MBA in Entrepreneurship from The Citadel. I've been part of a few startup companies with varying levels of success, from being purchased to completely flaming out. That's a typical entrepreneurial experience, and I have had a lot of experience picking ideas that have financial potential.

Here at Virginia Tech, I'm in charge of running an office of people who are handling patents and licensing. I spend a lot of time working on relationships between the university and outside entities—corporations and startups—who want to do business with the university.

For example, we have a professor who works on making devices to treat malignant tumors, a really interesting science. We patented that and licensed it to a pharmaceutical company who now has gotten the technology approved for use by the FDA, and it's being used to treat cancer patients and save lives. The goal is to get the technology out of the halls of academia and pages of journal articles and into the hands of people who can use it.

What are the most important skills and/or qualities for someone in your profession?

An ability to communicate well and get along with different types of people. You also need to understand the synergies and relationships between science and business because not everybody understands when good science is good business.

What do you wish you had known going into this profession?

That no one has a crystal ball into the future. You can only make the best decision you can make with the information at hand. I'm in a position where I'm being asked to pick winners to some extent, and our technologies are at a super early stage. Early on, it would have been helpful if I'd known that I just needed to take an objective and fair approach to my job as opposed to wondering which idea was going to be the next big commercial success.

Are there many job opportunities in your profession? In what specific areas?

Yes. Universities are becoming much more involved in the economic development of their communities, and there is more synergy between the university and nonacademic professionals. To the extent you can marry good analytic science skills with good business, there will be more opportunities. Most universities have a tech transfer office, and the best way to get involved is through the Association for University Tech Managers (<https://autm.net>).

How do you see your profession changing in the next 5 years? How will technology impact that change, and what skills will be required?

I think we're going to see a lot more focus on quantum technology and artificial intelligence and cyber security, and those will require a very different skill set from traditional science focused on life sciences. Biosciences will continue to grow, but we will see an explosion in these other fields. Among other impacts, it will affect healthcare by changing how we make medical treatment and diagnostic decisions.

What do you enjoy most about your job? What do you enjoy least about your job?

I most like using my skill set and the exercise of developing business opportunities from science opportunities. I least like the conflict that can arise; when you do a job with tough decisions, that's part of the job.

Can you suggest a valuable “try this” for students considering a career in your profession?

Listen to technology podcasts to keep abreast of technological innovations and where the energy and forward momentum is occurring.