CAREER OPPORTUNITIES IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

Description of the Field
International law is an interdisciplinary academic field for students who are interested in cross-border issues such as international business and human rights. There are typically two branches within the field of international law. Public international law is for students interested in policy making and the evaluation of countries’ adherence to international agreements performed by governments and intergovernmental organizations. On the other hand, those interested in practicing law for private organizations and nonprofits on a wide range of issues including international business, human rights, economic development, and the environment tend to go into private international law.

Career Paths and Entry Salaries
The available career paths for an international lawyer can be further broken down into law firms, federal government, corporate counsel, international organizations, and nonprofit organizations.

Private law firms handle most international business transactions, although the degree varies on the specialty of the firm. New York City and Washington DC have the largest number of international law firms, however, there are quite a number of firms in smaller cities. Law firms with foreign offices usually send mid-level associates overseas based on the attorney’s skills and language ability. Once there, an attorney may choose not to return to the United States and still be able to achieve partnership.

Other lawyers work on behalf of the government. The federal government’s largest employers of lawyers are the Departments of State and Defense, but each division either has a legal division in-house or a General Counsel Office. Lawyers at the State Department will have timely policymaking work and the opportunity to advise policymakers. While the government cannot offer all the perks and comforts of a private firm, a young government attorney is likely to be given a high amount of responsibility early in his/her career. Salaries for government lawyers are also lower than those in the private sector.

Corporate lawyers are the most active international lawyers today, as most of the work done by law firms has moved in-house. Corporations are more prone to hire a lawyer well versed in domestic issues like antitrust law, contracts, securities regulations, or trademarks and then train them for international law. Each company has its own bureaucratic ladder within the legal department for young lawyers to climb and as a first and second-year attorney, one can expect to work very long hours on long-term cases.

International organizations and nonprofits offer a wide variety of options for an international lawyer. These organizations typically do not offer solid legal training; lawyers are expected to hit the ground running. The United Nations Legal Counsel’s Office and the legal departments of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have the most active legal shops. The United Nations Legal Office is deeply involved in legal problems arising from the administration of UN operations. The World Bank and IMF attorneys can be assigned to leading operations or participate in the settlement of investment disputes between countries. Legal positions in the nonprofit field include organizations such as Amnesty International USA, Catholic Relief Services, and CARE. It is advisable for an attorney to begin his or her career in the private sector and then move into an international or nonprofit organization.

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Demand
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the long-term outlook for lawyers is that employment will grow about as quickly as the average for jobs overall through 2012. The outlook for international law suggests growth, as this area of law is expected to grow even faster than other divisions. However, competition for these jobs is generally high due to the large number of law school graduates and the current economic climate forcing some firms to cut back on hiring. Increasingly, law graduates are using their specialized training to secure jobs in related fields.

As globalization brings the private and public sectors closer together, the demand for international lawyers has risen. Increasingly, larger organizations are establishing offices in foreign countries to handle international issues. This development has created a niche for lawyers with a master’s degree in international affairs, as well as those with language skills, cultural awareness, and overseas experience. Developing countries need lawyers to assist in their legal transformations and organizations like the United Nations need lawyers to interpret their charters and international law.

Qualifications Necessary to Enter the Field
According to International Jobs author Kocher Segal, “Of the two degrees, law and international affairs, you will find the former of paramount importance in the job hunt”. To practice international law, it is essential for one to first hone legal knowledge and skills though internships and clerkships. A master’s degree in international affairs or a related field should supplement legal education by providing insight into the international legal world and providing exposure to jobs as they arise within one’s firm. While a J.D. and an international degree cannot guarantee work that is global in nature, the combination will prove helpful when such jobs develop within an organization.

Other skills that are highly recommended include foreign languages, research and writing skills, overseas experience, a strong interest in practicing law in an international setting, and knowledge of the basic differences in the world’s legal systems as well as their political and cultural contexts. The most common foreign languages required by organizations include French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish. Overseas experience allows immersion in a foreign culture and helps to develop the understanding and patience required to work in an international environment. Participation in the Jessup Moot Court competition, working for an international law journal, and securing a summer position in an international law firm are further ways to expand credentials. These skills combined with a background in law and international affairs will provide a solid foundation on which to build an international legal career.

Sample Group of Employers

Private Firms
- Baker and McKenzie - www.bakermckenzie.com
- Cleary Gottlieb - www.cgsh.com
- Debevoise & Plimpton, LLP - www.debevoise.com
- Davis, Polk, and Wardwell, LLC - www.davispolk.com
- Dewey & LeBoeuf, LLP - www.dewyleboeuf.com
- Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, LLP - www.gibsondunn.com
- Goodwin Procter, LLP - www.goodwinprocter.com
- Sullivan and Cromwell, LLP - www.sullcrom.com
- White & Case - www.whitecase.com

Nonprofits
- American Civil Liberties Union – www.aclu.org
- Amnesty International - www.amnesty.org
- Woodrow Wilson International Center - www.wilsoncenter.org
- World Policy Institute – www.worldpolicy.org
Intergovernmental Organizations

- International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda - www.unictr.org
- International Monetary Fund - www.imf.org
- The United Nations - www.un.org
- Constitutional Court of South Africa - www.constitutionalcourt.org

Future Challenges of the Profession
The demand for international lawyers with expertise in international relations and cross-border transactions will continue to grow as the legal industry globalizes. The international legal field is constantly redefining itself by adding new areas to the practice, making it difficult for attorneys to describe themselves as all-inclusive international lawyers.

The international law career field is unsystematic at best and preparing oneself to meet its demands is challenging because there is no international law career ladder to climb or road to follow. Another challenge of the profession is to stay motivated when facing the lack of international work at the beginning of one’s career or the required length of time it takes to develop a career. As a rule, a lawyer will gain experience exclusively in domestic law until a client involved in an international project requires their domestic expertise.

Resources for Additional Information

Associations

- American Bar Association - www.abanet.org
- American Bar Association, International Law - www.abanet.org/intlaw
- American Society of International Law - www.asil.org
- International Law Students Association - www.ilsa.org
- International Bar Association - www.hibanet.org
- International Chamber of Commerce - http://hibernate.org/
- International Municipal Lawyers Association - www.imla.org
- Inter-American Bar Association - www.iaba.org

Internet Resources

- International Jobs - www.intljobs.org – A tool to assist job seekers interested in international employment as organizations such as the UN, International Criminal Court, International Labour Organization, World Bank, etc.
- Law Crossing - www.lawcrossing.com – Legal employment and internship board and career resource for lawyers, law students, paralegals, legal secretaries, and other legal professionals.
- Idealist - www.idealista.org – A project of Action Without Boarders which contains job and internship listings in economic development, social services, human rights, environment, etc.
- Researching Careers in International Law - www2.lib.uchicago.edu/~llou/careers.html - Website affiliated with the University of Chicago Law School that provides a collection of links to other job sites where users can search for law positions.

LinkedIn Groups

- International Humanitarian Law- www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=2641570
- International Law & Policy - www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=83161
- International Law - www.linkedin.com/groups/International-Law-2622998

Publications
