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What Else Can You Do With a Law Degree?

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Recommended Citation
Munneke, Gary A., "What Else Can You Do With a Law Degree?" (2003). *Pace Law Faculty Publications.* Paper 579.
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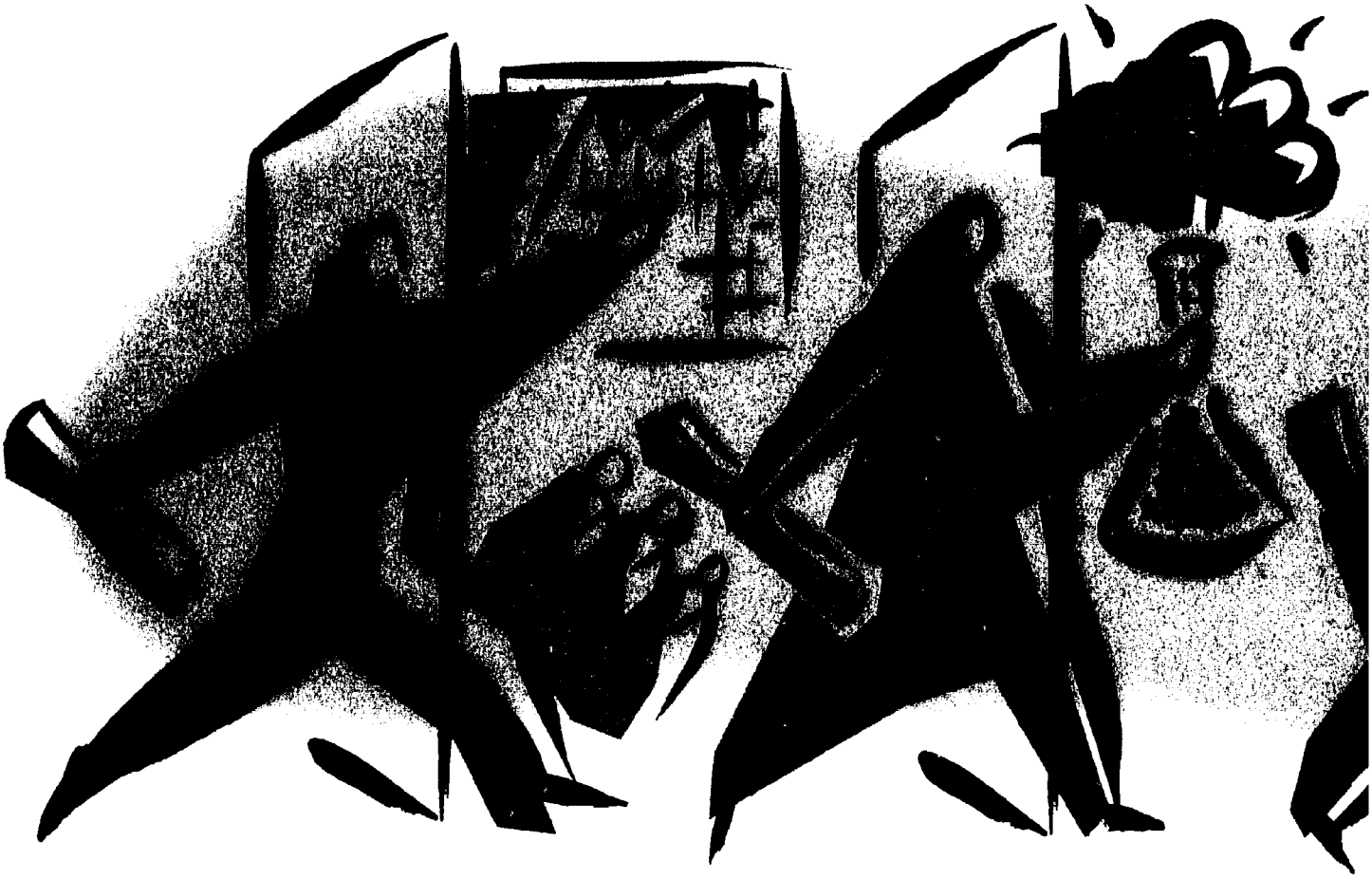

What Else Can You Do With a **Law Degree?**

Many law students and graduates experience a disquieting feeling that the traditional practice of law was not the career choice they envisioned when they started law school. Others recognize they made a mistake after a few years in practice. Very often these individuals have been reluctant to move away from traditional practice, assuming that a nonlegal career would mean opting for a second-rate choice.

These feelings may be magnified by your family and friends who are unfamiliar with the many alternatives available to lawyers today. They may issue dire warnings, based on visions of you unemployed or stuck in a minimum-wage job. Yet there are lawyers who are doctors, writers, business CEOs, news reporters, CPAs, labor organizers, engineers, scientists, teachers, and just about everything else imaginable.

The story of Alan Levin is typical of the many lawyers whose experience in a nonlegal career has been a good one. As a student at Delaware Law School (now Widener University School of Law), Alan served as chair of the ABA Law Student Division in 1979-80. After graduation, he began what could have been a traditional career in the practice of law. However, when his father became ill, Alan was needed to assist with the family business, Happy Harry's, a small chain of drugstores in Delaware. Alan continued to work in the business, which he took over upon his father's death. In the ensuing years, he built Happy Harry's into a retail powerhouse in the mid-Atlantic region. Although he never returned to the practice of law, his legal training arguably contributed to his success in the business world.

You may not become a corporate president like Alan Levin, a Major League Baseball manager like Tony La Russa, or

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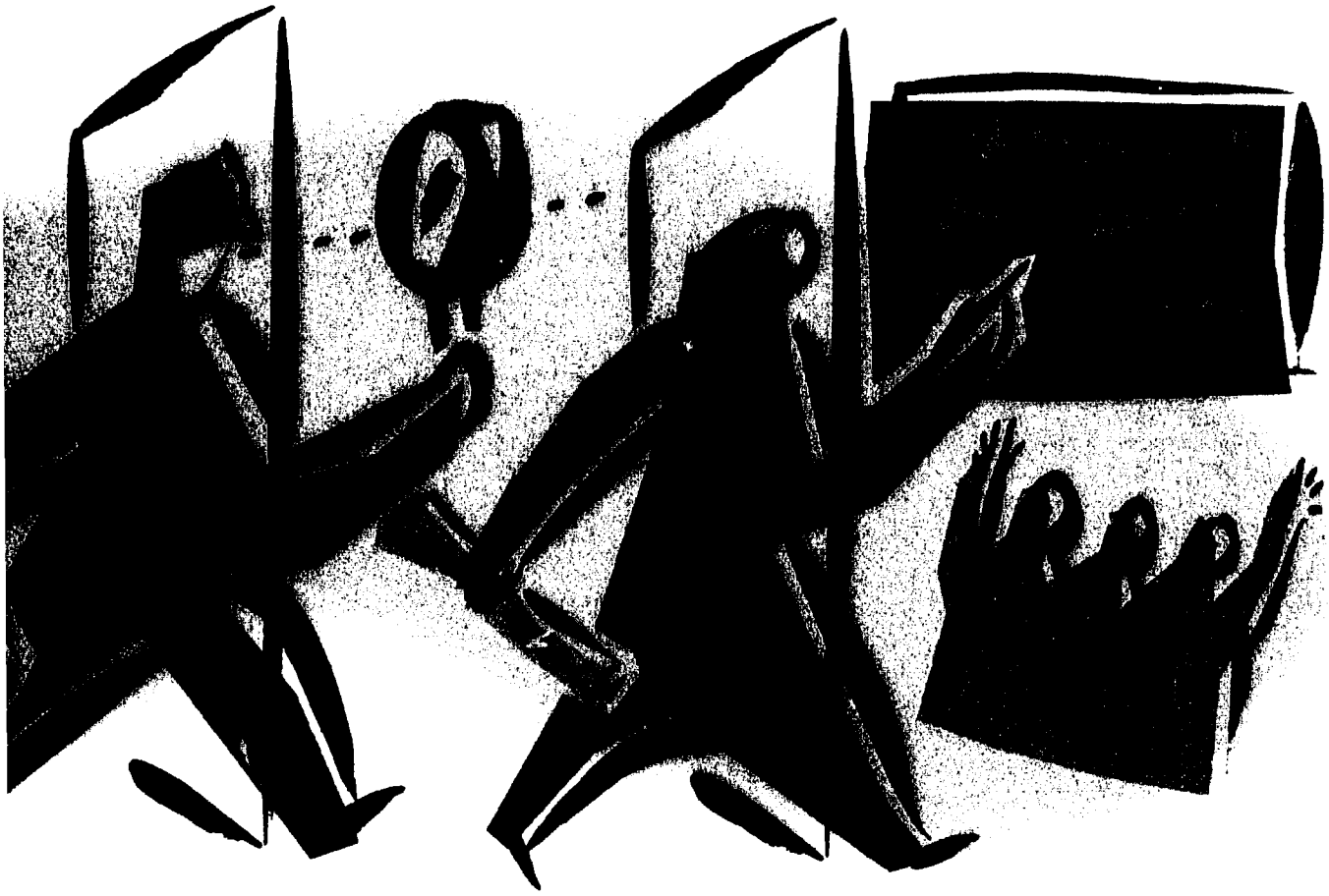

Plenty, say the authors of **Nonlegal Careers for Lawyers,** *the latest book in the* ***ABA Career Series*** *excerpted here*

BY GARY A. MUNNEKE AND WILLIAM D. HENSLEE

a best-selling author like John Grisham, but you can do something with your law degree besides practice law. A nonlegal career is realistically attainable by those whose legal training provides a leg up in the business world. Many entry-level nonlegal positions provide opportunities to attain higher positions later. By no means should you necessarily consider a nonlegal job as a second choice or a dead end.

Nonlegal careers have a special appeal to legally trained people who have other areas of training or experience. If you're one of these individuals, your legal training expands your career potential because you now offer special skills that have dozens of applications in the working world.

Law school broadens career potential both for someone who specializes in another field and for the lawyer who simply knows that traditional practice is not for him or her. A summer job in a law firm might lead to the conclusion that you don't want to do this for the rest of your life, but the thought of wasting your legal education panics you. Rather than think of law school as wasted time and money, you need to envision how a law degree can help you in any career you choose.

What is the magic of a legal education? Individuals who get into law school are among the best and brightest of the nation's college graduates, and those who spend three or four years obtaining a legal education have valuable skills to use in society. Even if you fail to realize it at the time, the skills you acquire in law school are not provided by nonlegal training. Legal skills such as spotting issues, analyzing problems, conducting research, and persuading others are useful in almost any job. These skills are basic to your value in a nonlegal position, and they are fundamental to obtaining your entry into the business world.

Just as practicing law is not for everyone, neither is a nonlegal career. Looking

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at the universe of legally trained individuals, who is best suited for nonlegal work? Who is most likely to succeed and find satisfaction outside the practice of law? The answer is not an easy one, but there are a few clues:

◆ **Values.** Practicing lawyers share basic values about representing clients, zealously advocating positions, and protecting confidential information, to name a few. These values are taught in law school, nurtured in practice, and sustained by the disciplinary system. Although not all lawyers agree completely on questions involving interpretation, there's a kind of internal cohesiveness in the commonality of values that manifests itself in a shared professional identity.

The less one's identity is subsumed in the professional identity of a lawyer, the easier it is to leave the law. This doesn't mean that lawyers who pursue nonlegal careers won't bring many lawyerly values to their occupation. It simply means that their sense of self-worth is not dependent on sharing a set of values with other lawyers.

◆ **Self-image.** Lawyers who leave the traditional legal profession may sacrifice some built-in support groups. Family may not understand their choice. Career services offices may lack resources to guide their pursuit. Classmates and other lawyers may feel threatened or abandoned by their decision to work outside the practice of law. Thus, lawyers who embark on nonlegal careers must have a strong internal sense of what they want to do and who they are. They must be resourceful and independent, perhaps a little iconoclastic.

◆ **Skills.** Most nonlegal careers require special skills. These may include understanding a technical language, knowing unique procedures, appreciating professional values of the nonlegal field, and utilizing special training on the job. Lawyers who lack these skills at the outset must find ways to develop them. Although these skills can be developed before, during, or after law school, they're almost always a prerequisite for success. Legal training alone is seldom enough.

◆ **Network.** Lawyers who wish to pursue a nonlegal career must find ways to maintain lines of communication with people in the area of their nonlegal interest. This is somewhat easier for lawyers who come to law school with a pre-existing nonlegal career or who maintain contacts with nonlegal areas through their clients, friends, and associates.

◆ **Dreams.** No one ever completely escapes that childhood question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" As long as the answer to this question is "a practicing lawyer," it will be difficult to find satisfaction outside the practice of law. Similarly, if the answer to the question never has been "a practicing lawyer," it will be difficult to find happiness within. An honest self-appraisal focusing on your fundamental aspirations in life is useful. As simple as it sounds, law graduates who choose a nonlegal career because that's what they want to do are most likely to succeed.

Lawyer applicants for nonlegal positions may feel that the qualities an employer is looking for are an impenetrable mystery. This simply is not so. With a little imagination and some practice, you can understand the qualifications required for any position. You should be able to analyze the requirements by asking four basic questions:

1. Will the position require any specific technical skills? For example, an accounting undergraduate degree might prove helpful in the financial area. The ability to understand the terminology of a contract probably would be necessary in the contract administration field.

The first question you might ask is if there are skills that might be acceptable substitutes for the specified technical expertise. Are there related skills that might enhance job performance? Perhaps you're interested in real estate. Legal training might provide basic skills that would be useful in this work, and you may have enhanced those skills if you happened to have concentrated your studies in real estate and related fields.

Carrying the analysis one step further is extremely important if no specific technical skills appear to be required. By analyzing your own experience and training, you can pinpoint those skills you have acquired that would put you ahead of the competition. An analysis also may serve to eliminate consideration of certain paths for which you do not have the necessary technical background.

Many skills are transferable—that is, portable from one occupation to another. Too often, those seeking employment describe their skills in job-specific terms. If they view their legal skills as transferable, and then translate those skills into the language of the new field, they'll have overcome a major hurdle in finding a nonlegal job.

2. What degree of educational development is required for satisfactory job performance? When a business is seeking to employ someone

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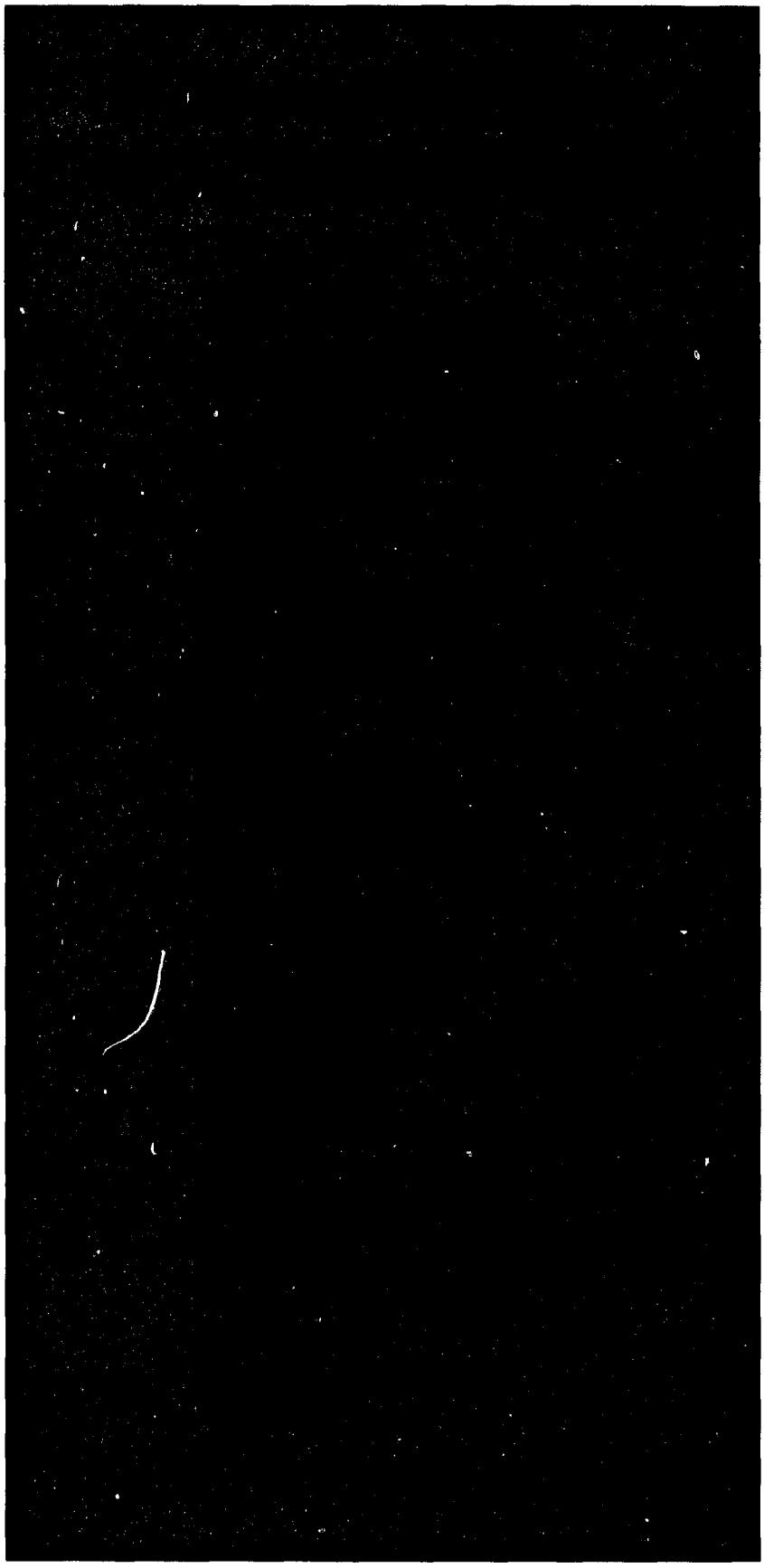
for its legal department, it's obvious that a law degree is required, simply because bar admission is basic to the job. Very seldom will nonlegal positions specifically call for a law degree. It's your task to figure out why a law degree better qualifies you for the position, no matter what degree the employer has asked for.

3. What personal qualities are required, and what are desirable? Assume from the outset that every organization is seeking the most intelligent and highly motivated people it can find, and that these considerations are tremendously important at the administrative and managerial levels. Assume also that leadership potential and the ability to work effectively with others are prime considerations. In addition, other qualities might contribute effectively to success in the area under consideration. Some of the intangible characteristics employers look for include initiative, ability to plan, adaptability, versatility, ability to concentrate, decisiveness, and ability to express oneself.

All of these are good qualities, and each contributes to successful job performance. At this point, however, you need to isolate those traits that are most conducive to performance in a specific area. For example, you might determine that originality and creativity are more important to the marketing function than to contract administration. As you analyze your personal strengths against the probable qualities needed in the area you're considering, you'll be able to assess both your competitive status as a candidate against other possible applicants for the position and your interest in the field.

4. What industry-specific knowledge and procedural know-how are required for you to meet the demands of the position? If you're just entering the business world, the employer may not expect you to have this knowledge. It's not something you can learn by taking certain courses in school. You learn this by experience on the job. On the other hand, if you do possess expertise in the nonlegal field, your background may be an advantage.

The importance of this last question as you begin a nonlegal career search is that it defines the type of position you're



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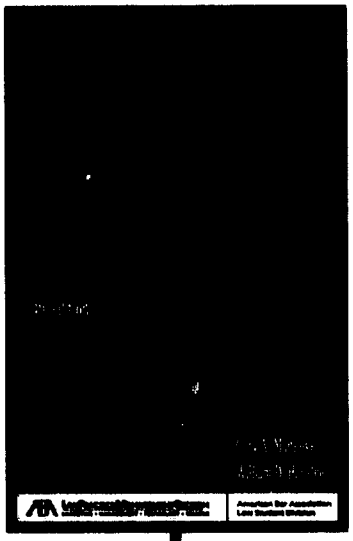

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Nonlegal Careers for Lawyers explains when and how to choose a nonlegal career, the specialized skills legal training provides, and how to plan and conduct a job search. You'll find information on careers in business and industry, government and public service, associations and institutions, and entrepreneurial ventures. To order this book and others in the ABA Career Series, call 800-285-2221 or visit www.ababooks.org.

seeking. If you don't have a solid background in a field you're considering, you may find that employers will want to consider you for a general entry-level position. The most common title given to this post in the corporate world is management trainee, and that is precisely what you would be.

Management trainees are trained by management in the industry knowledge and procedural know-how required for more advanced positions. Government or other organizations may prefer to use the title *intern.* In a few industries there are specific titles for entry-level positions, such as claims adjuster in the insurance industry. Despite the variety of titles, the general principle of learning the business on the job still applies.

In answering the four questions above, you'll naturally want to assess the special qualifications that your legal training enables you to bring to the position. These include the following:

- **Your knowledge of legal terminology and its interpretations.** For example, how can someone possibly monitor contract performance if he or she cannot read and understand what the contract requires? If your organization enters into a contract, how many of your co-workers would be able to read that contract and understand what must be done to comply with its terms? If pending legislation will impact your organization, other employees may know of the legislation. But they're not able to predict its potential effect because they don't understand the language—a language that is second nature to you. Having this type of knowledge has served to place many legally trained persons in nonlegal positions.
- **Your analytical ability.** Legal educators often talk about "learning to think like a lawyer." Don't take this ability for granted. Critical thinking is a skill that applies itself easily to all types of problems, not just legal cases. It's not a common skill, as you'll discover when you deal with people who cannot see the forest for the trees, and with others who cannot see the trees for the forest.
- **Murphy's law.** "If anything can go wrong, it will." This expression is a familiar one in the business community. The ability to analyze problems and suggest remedies is a highly valued skill. Furthermore, it's a skill not easily acquired, as no doubt your own memories of law school will attest. Your analytical skill does not lose its vitality simply by being translated into a different context.
- **Persuasiveness.** Essentially, this skill involves marshaling your facts in a logical and orderly manner in order to persuade someone as to the soundness of your conclusions. In any given situation, you have a number of facts and supporting data. Consider the different ways you would present these facts to a client you were counseling, or as a defense lawyer in a jury trial, or in an appellate brief. This persuasive skill is just as valuable in the business community and increases in value as you move upward in the business world.

At the outset of your career you'll undoubtedly be receiving orders and information. As you progress, you'll be giving orders and information. The better able you are to persuade others to your point of view or suggested course of action, the greater your chance of success with your project or idea.

- **Self-confidence.** Through the ritual of being called on by professors to discuss cases, and being challenged to defend your responses, you've learned to listen critically, hold your ground, and respond logically. You may not fully appreciate the value of this talent until you enter the business world. If you've learned one thing in law school, it's that you can teach yourself anything.

Two key words in an employer's lexicon are productivity and profitability. If you can demonstrate that your special skills, including both legal and nonlegal talents, can help an employer with these objectives, you'll improve considerably your chances of landing the job.

* * *

There are several keys to success in finding a job in a nonlegal career: Be creative. Look in places where no one else has sought to look. Don't let the naysayers get you down. Think of careers outside the law more as opportunities, not as second choices. And always remember that your legal training will prove valuable in whatever you choose to do.

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