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YOUR VOICE

An open letter to potential law students: Know the truth

BY NICOLE BLACK AND HEATHER MORSE

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Nicole Black.

With the recent news that some BigLaw starting salaries are rising to \$190,000, it's no wonder that law school continues to be a top destination for recent college graduates. However, the truth behind those starting salaries—and given the volatility of the legal job market and the effects of globalization and technology on the business of law—should give one pause before taking out \$200,000 in school loans.

So the question remains: Should you go to law school? The answer, according to two legal industry experts: It depends.

Nicole Black and Heather Morse are two leading voices in the legal industry when it comes to discussing business of law trends, from the intersection of technology and the practice of law to the inner workings of

successful law firms. Both are frequently asked for their advice by potential students considering law school. Here's what they have to say about the wisdom of attending law school in 2018.

Nicole: I recently received an email from a young man who was considering attending law school, and was seeking my opinion on the advisability of doing so. He told me he'd approached other lawyers for their input on the value of a law degree in 2018 and had received "mixed signals."

Heather: Given the financial investment to attend law school, with no guarantees of a high-paying job at the end of three years, I'm not surprised to hear that. To be honest, I'm often shocked by the lack of due diligence by the students. I recently had the opportunity to sit down with a 1L who is attending an Ivy League law school. "What type of law are you looking to practice?" I asked her. "BigLaw," she replied. This led to me to immediately jump on my Legal Watercooler (<https://www.legalwatercoolerblog.com/>) soap box about the current state of the business of law, especially where law school students are concerned.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS

Heather: If you're in it for the money, the truth is that very few lawyers will see those highly coveted and published \$190,000 salaries as first-year associates. In fact, according to US News & World Report (<https://money.usnews.com/careers/best-jobs/lawyer/salary>), the median salary for a lawyer in 2016 was \$118,160. And, a stat (<https://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/top-law-schools/articles/2018-03-21/understand-the-cost-payoff-of-law-school-before-getting-a-jd>) rarely touted is that the median private sector salary amongst 2016 graduates was \$68,375. Unless you are graduating at the top of your class from a Tier 1 law school, the average student loan debt of more than \$100,000 could be crippling as you enter the workforce.

Nicole: In addition, economic forces continue to contribute to the declining legal job market and are causing increased stress and lack of job satisfaction for current lawyers. Also problematic is, as Heather mentioned, that recent graduates tend to emerge from law school deep in debt with no light at the end of the tunnel given the depressed market. Because it's such a stressful profession, burnout is common. As a result, lawyers suffer from high rates of depression, substance abuse and suicide.

Heather: Another big concern to keep in mind is the bar passage rate in your state, and for your school in particular. In my home state of California, the overall pass rate from the February 2018 exam

(http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/pass_rate_for_febbruarys_california_state_bar_exam_drops/) was 27.3 percent, with a first-time pass rate of 39 percent. Before attending law school, I would ask myself, “Am I willing to take on \$100,000 or more in debt with these types of odds?”



Heather Morse.

Nicole: It’s also important to acknowledge that there’s a decreasing demand for entry-level lawyers. Technology continues to supplant and replace much of the legal work traditionally performed by newly hired associates, thus reducing the need for the same. To add to this, many law schools aren’t doing a great job educating students to succeed in the face of all the changes. They’re failing to adapt to changing times and, instead, many are focused on maintaining the status quo as long as it’s profitable.

Heather: We’re seeing those trends played out in the law firm. Law schools teach you how to think, but they don’t necessarily teach you how to practice law. Corporate clients are no longer willing to pay the costs associated with the on-the-job training needed in those first few years. Therefore, law firms are hiring fewer recent law school graduates; and when they do, they’re only hiring from a select number of schools. Many firms have now adopted a strategy of only hiring third- or fourth-year students who have been trained by an Am Law 100 firm.

ARE THERE GOOD REASONS TO GO TO LAW SCHOOL?

Nicole: For starters, it’s a great education that will provide foundational skills, such as analytical thinking and persuasion capabilities, that easily translate and provide value to many different career paths, both legal and nonlegal.

Heather: For those passionate about social justice, a law degree is a powerful tool. Now more than ever, we need good lawyers out there who can right wrongs, to cut through red tape, to make a difference for their clients.

Whether in private practice or public service, being a lawyer is still a noble profession, and we will always need good advocates.

Nicole: Access to justice is another important and somewhat related consideration that aligns with social justice. Legal services funding has been drastically cut in recent years, resulting in reduced access. Rural areas in the United States are particularly underserved and in need of dedicated lawyers who are focused on making a difference in the lives of those who need their assistance the most.

Heather: To me it comes down to the “why.” Keep asking yourself those why questions to find your motivation. I spoke to a friend recently who is considering going to law school as a second career (he’s in his early 40s). After a series of “why” questions, his motives for law school were sound, and he asked if he could call me once he began his application process.

FINAL ADVICE

Nicole: While it’s difficult to reduce it to one or two pieces of advice. I would suggest:

1. Take some time off to travel and explore the world and grow as a person.
2. Intern in a law office to learn what it’s truly like to practice law in order to decide if it’s really what you want to do.
3. Consider night school or a lower-tier law school that offers scholarship options so that you can pay for law school as you go and avoid debt.
4. Read the book *Tomorrow’s Lawyers: An Introduction to Your Future* by Richard Susskind from cover to cover prior to committing to law school.
5. Ensure that you have a thorough understanding of the effects of the changing legal landscape and how they’re affecting the delivery of legal services. That way you can take steps to position yourself to take advantage of the changes once you graduate.

Heather: I couldn’t agree more with No. 2. Right after college, I worked in a highly regarded law firm while studying for my LSATs. I learned very quickly that the corporate law firm lifestyle was not the place for me. Unfortunately, I did not have a mentor at the time and did not realize that corporate law (or BigLaw) wasn’t an actual discipline of law, and there were other choices. So my final pieces of advice would be:

1. Find a great mentor.
2. Realize that the decision to attend law school is not a choice between right and wrong: It is a choice between right and right. How you make that decision is a defining moment. (See *Defining Moments: When Managers Must Choose Between Right and Right*, by Joseph L. Badaracco.)
3. Should you decide that practice of law is not the right choice for you, keep in mind that the legal industry provides numerous career pathways, with or without a JD.

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