



# EXPLORING ALTERNATIVES

TODAY'S JOB MARKET IS TOUGH, BUT THERE ARE OPTIONS.

BY **HANNAH KIDDOO**

**IT IS HARD TO IGNORE THAT THE CURRENT JOB MARKET IS TOUGH. IN A 2013 REPORT, THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR LAW PLACEMENT** found that the employment rate for new law school graduates fell to 84.7 percent compared to 91.9 percent in 2007. A 2012 membership study conducted by the State Bar of Texas found that 4.5 percent of respondents reported being unemployed and an additional 15.7 percent reported earning \$45,000 or less.

These kinds of statistics continually creep up in reports, news stories, American Bar Association articles, and social media posts. They are real. And they are especially difficult to ignore for the attorney whose employ-

ment situation contributes to the data's conclusions. Just ask Houston-based attorney Adrea Yoss. Attracted to the allure of a lucrative career outside of the sciences, Yoss studied at Ohio Northern University Claude W. Pettit College of Law. She narrowed down her interests to the civil side of the field, graduated in 2007, and spent some time with an Ohio firm before returning to Texas to face a challenging job market. Yoss tried some e-discovery and title work, which she found rewarding, but it wasn't a permanent option.

Now, Yoss is searching for the right full-time position while taking on some cases and contract work. She's not

opposed to working in a firm setting, but she's having a hard time finding the opportunity to do so, which makes the idea of an alternative career all the more appealing. "I didn't expect that it would be so hard to find a job," said Yoss. "I didn't realize that you have firms that would offer you so little. It's been kind of eye-opening."

On Nov. 1, 2013, Yoss and more than 120 other attorneys gathered at the CityCentre in Houston for a State Bar-sponsored Alternative Careers for Lawyers seminar. Their backgrounds were diverse, as were their reasons for attending; some, like Yoss, were younger lawyers having a tough time finding the right fit in the legal world; others had been practicing for decades and now wanted a second career and a new adventure. Many were simply curious about their options.

During the free event, attendees heard from Kate Neville, attorney and founder of Neville Career Consult-

some tips," said William Rankel, a Houston attorney who has struggled to find consistent legal work since graduating from Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law in 2009.

"When I started law school in 2005 in Springfield, Massachusetts, it was quite a different market than it was when I graduated," said Rankel. "It's probably been the worst experience of my life having to go to law school and graduate and not being able to find work."

Michelle Hunter, executive director of the State Bar of Texas, was also on hand to speak with attorneys. Hunter, who is a lawyer, shared her path to this career with the crowd. After spending a decade in general practice, Hunter took on various roles with the State Bar and found that she enjoyed management projects. She went back to school to earn an MBA and then worked her way up to her current leadership position. "My law

*There's nothing wrong with you if you decide you want to do something different. It's much more common than people think. But at the same time, there's nothing wrong with liking the practice of law. So long as you like it, great!*

ing. Her daylong session included conversations about how the skill sets gained in law school and the legal field can be applied in nontraditional ways. She worked with attorneys to help them identify their strengths and interests, as well as how to express those aspects to employers who might not typically consider hiring lawyers. "In general, lawyers are very smart people," said Neville following the session. "It really is up to individuals to translate and make the case for themselves and to show how they can add value."

Still, Neville understands that the prospect of an alternative career can be daunting, especially when a person has been out of the job market for a few years. "Many people feel like they aren't able to answer the question, 'What are you interested in?'" said Neville. "Being proactive and reaching out to people—a lot of lawyers are worried about how that will be perceived."

Neville tackled the topic of overcoming this self-doubt and concern and maintained that attorneys seeking alternatives should not feel like they are the only ones facing the issue. "Do not feel trapped by decisions you made as an undergraduate or in your early 20s," said Neville. "There's nothing wrong with you if you decide you want to do something different. It's much more common than people think. But at the same time, there's nothing wrong with liking the practice of law. So long as you like it, great!"

Neville also covered strategies for networking, crafting resumes, and building an effective presence on social media platforms. "I think it definitely will give people

degree and the knowledge I gained in law school gave me a good base as far as doing other things because it taught me organization and analytical thinking, which are of course very necessary in the practice of law, but transfer well to other areas, too, such as management," said Hunter.

Hunter and State Bar President Lisa M. Tatum first discussed the idea of the Alternative Careers for Lawyers session after hearing from many frustrated attorneys who weren't as financially stable as they wanted to be. "We do know a lot of attorneys who are not using their law license in their careers who are successful—some who changed the area of practice that they started out in," said Hunter in an interview after the event. "We wanted to develop something that would give people some tools to decide whether they wanted to do something else with their law license or whether they wanted to change within the practice of law to another area."

Citing ratings for the seminar, in which 97 percent of respondents said it met or exceeded their expectations, Hunter added that the response to the program has been positive. Spots for the initial session in Houston filled up in a matter of hours and a February offering in Dallas was just as popular.

Attorneys pursuing alternative careers is not a new concept. The State Bar of Texas, as well as the ABA and numerous other state bars, offer many resources on the subject—but a course dedicated to it is a first for the bar. And Neville believes the idea is one that could eventually spread to state bars across the nation. **TBJ**