Deciding to go to Law School

If I don’t know what kind of lawyer I want to become yet, should I still go to law school?

First of all, the practice of law covers many different kinds of careers: from private practice to large law firms, corporate counsel to governmental positions, boutique practices to trial litigation. The common thread tying together these different kinds of legal practice is what Gary Munneke calls “an orderly process of dispute resolution.” Therefore, if you enjoy solving intricate problems and want to have a challenging and dynamic career then the study of law could be a good fit for you. And don’t worry about not knowing what specialty you would like to practice: most lawyers don’t find their niche until they have explored upper level classes in law school or have had a few years of experience working on different kinds of projects.

Do all lawyers have to do trial work?

No. Most lawyers don’t work in court rooms. Litigation is just one kind of legal work. Lawyers also engage in negotiation, counseling, mediation, arbitration, and education. In addition to the wide variety of substantive fields of law, there are several types of organizations that you can work for which deliver countless kinds of services. The important part is finding a work environment where you feel comfortable.

What kind of strengths are most important for lawyers to possess?

While each field of legal practice has particular skill sets specific to the demands of the discipline, generally speaking, all lawyers must be able to think critically, organize many different kinds of information, and prioritize underlying ideas and concepts. Additionally, strong reading and writing skills are necessary.

What is the day-to-day life of a practicing lawyer like?

Much variation exists in the practice of law across numerous areas and over the years of one’s experience. The first years of practice, which involve repetitious and detail oriented work, are generally the most demanding. The hours can be long and unpredictable with mandatory travel often required. It’s a general rule that in order to bill a client for eight hours a lawyer has to work ten hours. Yet, in the meantime, there’s the satisfaction of fulfilling and challenging work which demands critical, creative thought and analysis which combine with a high ceiling for financial reward. New and meaningful friendships are often also formed with your peers at this time. Simply put, the practice of law is not simply a job but a way of life.
**Do I need to have a specific kind of personality in order to be a successful lawyer?**

It’s helpful to ask yourself if you naturally tend more toward being a specialist in a specific area or a generalist who is most comfortable working across disciplines. In *Full Disclosure: Do You Really Want to be a Lawyer* there’s a very good discussion of the differences between specialists and generalists. Basically, specialists prefer independent roles and working with others as an authority figure rather than as a team member whereas generalists prefer a variety of different tasks and a cooperative sharing of responsibility. It’s often said that the practice of law favors specialists more than generalists since subject matter expertise demands focused commitment from the legal practitioner. Generalists, on the other hand, are well-suited to become managers of departments or of the organization in which they work – therefore both kinds of temperaments can succeed in the practice of law. The goal is to recognize which category you would identify yourself with.

**How much money do most starting lawyers earn?**

Currently, starting salaries range from $20,000 to over $150,000 with a median salary just over $50,000. When calculating your probable starting salary as a lawyer, it’s important to consider what Munneke calls the “opportunity cost” of law school: not only may you incur considerable debt to pay for your education, but you also have to think about the money you are not earning while you are studying. When you consider the loans to be repaid and the money you have not earned in the meantime, the full financial responsibility becomes clear.

**Why do many lawyers end up changing careers after graduating from law school?**

Frankly, lawyers occupy a distinguished position in American society. Many people are drawn by the prestige of the career to the study of law without sufficiently determining if the practice of law suits them personally. A broad impression of what it means to be a lawyer is insufficient – you need to do research and talk with both lawyers and law students before committing to the major investment of time and money for law school. Ask yourself, why do you want to go to law school? Is this your desire or have people simply told you that you would be a good lawyer someday? How do you envision spending your days, evenings, and weekends? The existence of so many unhappy lawyers in large part is due to not enough prospective law students carefully thinking through what it means to be a lawyer. Working as a lawyer in the law profession is a way of life and not simply a job.