

# CAREERMOVES

for Associates

TRENDS & TIPS FROM THE NALP FOUNDATION

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## Specialization -- It Happens! Should it be by Plan or Circumstance?

One day leads to another, one month to the next, and before you know it, you'll be an associate approaching partnership. Along the way, will you have simply fallen into work assignments and subsequently, a practice area by demand or default, or will you have made an intentional and strategic approach to the type of work you do – and the future direction of your career?

While some associates focus on a specific type of practice from the early stages of their careers, others tend to arrive at areas of concentration due to the press of business demands rather than due to their own preferences. By the time they are in the senior ranks, many associates find themselves specializing in a particular area of practice, either by plan or by circumstance.

What do members of the Class of 2000 report regarding specialization? Responding to surveys for *After the JD: First Results of a National Study of Legal Careers*, these young associates reveal that many of them are developing a specialization fairly early in their careers as illustrated in the table below.

	50% or More Time in One Area	Self-reported as “Specialist”
Solo	49%	37%
Office of 2-20 lawyers	65%	36%
Office of 21-100 lawyers	75%	40%
Office of 101-250 lawyers	81%	44%
Office of 251 lawyers	79%	37%
Government	78%	38%
Legal service/public defender	85%	54%
Public interest	65%	47%
Non profit/education	48%	46%
Business	63%	51%
Other	100%	25%
Total	71%	40%

Source: After the JD -- First Results of a National Study of Legal Careers, 2004. The NALP Foundation, Overland Park, KS 66223, P. 37.

More than two-thirds of *AJD* respondents representing three years into their new careers indicated that half or more of their work has been in a single substantive field, although only 40% described themselves as “specialists.”

Measuring “specialization” as spending at least 50% of time in one area, this study revealed that public sector jobs within specific agencies, medium-sized and large firms were most likely to move an associate toward working primarily in one field. Indications are that new lawyers in these practices are frequently assigned to a particular concentrated area and eventually make a conscious or unconscious commitment to specialize in that area.

Unless you are already certain of your preferred direction, choosing the environment which suits your career development is important. Do you prefer to work independently on multiple, small projects or to work with a team assigned to a larger project with significant supervision? Your choice of employment may make a substantial impact on the outcome.

### **Specialization Emphasis in Various Settings**

Smaller firms and public agencies that are not specialized frequently have urgent needs in multiple directions for their lawyers. As a result, there are few opportunities for the lawyers to create specializations in a widely varied practice with few lawyers. New lawyers in these settings are often immediately given a large number of comparatively small projects along with significant responsibility levels. By taking primary responsibility for numerous smaller projects, these new lawyers learn in an environment of considerable independence and develop practical skills under limited supervision.

In contrast, typical work assignments for new lawyers in medium and large firms and in specific government agencies frequently fall into the pattern of relying on specific associates for specific types of cases. Associates work under supervision of partners or senior associates, often in a team set-

ting. Although associates in this environment do not assume overall responsibility or control, and do not operate as independently as in smaller firm environments, they receive more concentrated training in terms of direction and feedback. With a wider range of clients and demands, these associates are able to experience in-depth knowledge of a limited number of specialty areas and are able to more easily move into a specialization niche.

The decision to specialize or not is an important one, both in terms of the type of employer and your own satisfaction. While it is possible in some cases to fall into a specialization that you enjoy, the more certain route is to explore various options and direct the focus of your concentrations.

By the time you are a senior associate, opportunities for partnership are the greatest when you add the greatest value to your organization. Examine the makeup of your employer, ask yourself early in your career if specialization is an asset for career progression, and take the steps that support your decision.

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## **More from After the JD**

The first report from the After the JD longitudinal study has a wealth of information of interest such as information on what types of work new lawyers do, the satisfaction of lawyers, their mobility and special sections on gender and minorities. The entire report is available in bound, printed format for \$25, or it can be downloaded free of charge at [www.nalpfoundation.org](http://www.nalpfoundation.org).

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