



THE CANADIAN
BAR ASSOCIATION
Alberta Branch

CONSIDERING A LEGAL CAREER OUTSIDE A MAJOR CENTRE?

Adapted from REAL BC's Rural Education & Access to Lawyers "Student Guidebook"

It is important that law students and new lawyers give careful consideration to planning their career path. This planning is even more important if an individual is considering developing a career in a small community or rural area where the structure of a large firm environment is not available. The following section outlines a series of frequently asked questions and tips for success that can assist in your career planning process.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the work in regional or rural areas and small communities boring?

Work, as always, will be what you make of it. That being said, a common concern among those considering a career in a smaller community is that they may end up doing boring and/or insignificant work. Feedback from lawyers around the province indicates that the opposite is true. While large deals and big cases may seem appealing in the abstract, practically speaking, smaller files often allow for more client interaction and increased personal satisfaction at achieving a successful outcome. As well, you will find that it is not only small files that you will be exposed to in some of the smaller centers. A diverse array of challenging work is available in various centers throughout Alberta. Find out from the community you are interested in what the work actually entails.

What are some of the advantages of working in a regional or rural area?

The advantages of working in a rural area or small community are numerous and include:

- Early opportunities for client interaction
- Early opportunities for practice establishment
- Abundant opportunity for court appearances
- Enhanced sense of community.
- Likely better work life balance

What are the qualities that a law firm in a regional or small community is looking for?

Law firms in small or regional communities look for many of the same qualities that law firms in urban areas value. In addition however, firms in small communities are concerned with matters such as your commitment to living in the community long term and your ability to interact with clients at an early stage of your career. Other qualities such as an ability to work independently and to source business are also highly valued.

Why are there very little articling or job postings in small communities?

Opportunities in small communities in Alberta are for the making, not the taking. Many lawyers and firms in these communities are extremely busy and do not have the resources to hire student coordinators. As a result, they are often focused on the practice of law instead of recruitment. If approached by the right student however, they may consider creating a position.

How much money can I expect to make?

Salaries for articling students and new lawyers vary widely by region and practice area. The best sources of information on money are the lawyers practicing in the geographical location you are interested in. It is important to consider when researching salaries that the best financial opportunities may be those that you make yourself.

Tips for Success in Exploring Career Opportunities in Regional and Rural Areas

There are a number of strategies that are useful in exploring career opportunities in regional or rural areas in Alberta.

Tip #1 — Be Proactive

Unlike their larger firm counterparts, firms in regional and rural areas may not have the resources to aggressively pursue students. As a result it is up to the student to be proactive in their search for a position in these areas. Below are a few proactive steps that you can take:

- Contact the Canadian Bar Association elected representative and the Law Society of Alberta Benchers in the geographic area that you are interested in practicing in. Links to the appropriate information are as follows:
Canadian Bar Association Alberta Branch — <http://www.cba-alberta.org>
Law Society of Alberta — <http://www.lawsociety.ab.ca/>
- Use the Canadian Bar Association Alberta Branch Lawyers Directory to get a list of lawyer contact information in the geographical area you are interested in. Contact the lawyers in the area and see if you can speak with them briefly to discuss any opportunities that may exist in the area. The Directory is available by contacting the CBA office.
- Take a road trip to the geographical areas that you are interested in and schedule a follow up coffee meeting with any lawyer who has been especially helpful.

Tip #2 — Establish a Connection

Lawyers and law firms in smaller communities and regional centers make a large investment in their students and employees. As a result, they are often concerned that the student has a connection to the community in which they are working. Students should be mindful that your ties to a community and future plans may become a topic of conversation with potential employers.

A connection to the community can exist from past experiences or could be the expression of a desire to establish yourself in a new community for reasons such as family, lifestyle or work. Demonstrating your knowledge of the community in question and a familiarity with issues that may arise in a smaller community, such as general practice areas and conflicts, is a key to impressing a potential employer and showing them that you are serious about establishing a long-term career in the community.

Tip #3 — Identify a small number of target communities

It is important to note that the more focused you are in regards to the community that you wish to work in, the higher your chance of success in securing a position. The so called “shotgun” approach to applications does not work well in small communities and regional centers. As a result you should be clear on which communities you would like to work in and the reasons for your decision to do so.

Tip #4 — Establish Rapport

As you are conducting your search for a position in a small community or regional centre in Alberta you can increase your chance of success by establishing a rapport with lawyers in the area at your earliest opportunity. A useful strategy for this includes attending local bar association events and following up with lawyers that you meet at these events.

Tip #5 — Highlight your Strengths

Due to the limited size of most law firms in rural areas and regional centers, each individual at the firm must make a unique and valued contribution. Don't be afraid to highlight the areas in which you can make a real contribution to the firm. This may include a strong interest in establishing a complimentary practice area or knowledge and aptitude with technology. In order to prepare to highlight your strengths in an interview, review your CV and past experience as well as your future goals and list three areas in which you feel you could make a unique contribution to a firm. Ensure that you discuss these areas in your interview.