

Executive Summary:
Oregon State Bar New Lawyer Survey
May 2007

In April and May 2007, the Oregon State Bar (OSB) conducted the second survey in its five-year longitudinal study to collect information about the attitudes and experiences of Oregon lawyers during their first years of practice. The 2007 survey included topics ranging from employment and practice issues to student debt and OSB services.

Methodology

Data will be collected from the same respondent pool over five years in order to track changes in attitude and experience. The first survey was conducted online in April 2006, and the second in April and May 2007. Before the 2007 survey, an introductory letter was sent to all bar members who were admitted to practice in 2005 and for whom Oregon's was their first bar exam. (The latter requirement was intended to eliminate lawyers who may have been practicing in other states for any number of years, since the survey's purpose is to gauge the opinions and experiences of new lawyers only.) The letter informed recipients about the upcoming survey and requested that they provide their e-mail addresses to OSB if they had not already done so. Several weeks later, an e-mail was sent to all members of the survey pool who had registered e-mail addresses with the bar. The e-mail directed them to an online survey, hosted by a survey provider site. About a week later, a reminder e-mail was sent to the same list of recipients.

Response Rate

The survey e-mail was sent to 377 OSB members; however, 20 of the e-mails were returned as undeliverable. Thus, there were 357 potential respondents for the survey. The bar received 161 responses, for a response rate of 45%.

Demographics

A large majority of participants (91%) were white. More than half (55%) were female, and slightly over half (53%) were married or had a domestic partner. Ages ranged from 26 to 53, with about half of respondents (57%) aged 30 or younger. (For more detail on demographics, see "Survey Responses: Oregon State Bar Survey of New Lawyers, 2007.")

Discussion of Survey Responses

Please note that the figures reported below represent only those respondents who answered whichever particular question is under discussion. Not all participants answered every question on the survey.

Employment

Most respondents (87%) were employed as lawyers at the time of the survey. A majority of survey participants (72%) had been working as a lawyer since the previous survey was conducted a year earlier, with others moving into lawyer work from prior non-lawyer positions or unemployment. About 11% of respondents were in non-lawyer positions at the time of the survey, and 2% of respondents were not employed.

Lawyers

Of those participants who were practicing law, over half (56%) worked as an associate at a firm, with a full quarter of respondents working at firms that employ 15 or more lawyers. Survey participants who were not with a firm worked in a variety of capacities (sole practitioner, in-house counsel, judicial clerkship, public sector, nonprofit/legal services, etc.). Of lawyers who had been in the profession for more than a year, most (81%) were employed in the same position as a year before.

Salaries varied widely, from less than \$30,000 to more than \$80,000. Nearly half (49%) of respondents indicated a salary in the \$40,000-\$60,000 range. About 14% made less than \$40,000; 18% made \$60,000-\$80,000; and 19% reported salaries of \$80,000 or more.

Participants reported a broad range of primary practice emphases, the most popular being criminal defense (17%), real estate/land use/environmental (10%) and plaintiff representation in civil litigation (10%). About 9% of respondents said that no one area of law made up more than half of their practice.

Certain aspects of law were reported to be more challenging than others. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “very difficult” and 5 being “very easy,” four issues received responses that averaged under 3.0, meaning that they were relatively difficult. These included business development (2.68), balancing career and personal/family life (2.78), understanding legal procedures (2.81) and billable hours requirements (2.86). The least challenging aspects of law were maintaining civility and professionalism (4.05 on the 5-point scale) and receiving challenging work (3.93).

Respondents indicated that they are rather satisfied with the legal profession and matters related to practicing law. They were most satisfied with lawyers who work at their firms (4.30 on a 5-point scale), but also gave positive ratings to other lawyers (3.60), clients (3.51), being a lawyer (3.74) and the legal profession in general (3.48). Of respondents who had worked as lawyers for more than a year, 49% said that their level of overall job satisfaction had risen since their first year of practice, while 20% said their satisfaction level had decreased in that time.

Non-lawyers

Respondents who had never practiced law were more likely than lawyers to have changed employers over the previous year. Nearly 42% said they were in a non-lawyer position with a different firm or company as compared to a year before. Participants who

had never practiced law were divided as to whether they expected to work as lawyers later on. When asked how likely they were to practice law at some point in the future, 42% of non-lawyers said they were either somewhat or highly likely to do so, while another 42% said future law practice was somewhat or very unlikely.

Student Debt

About 85% of participants reported outstanding debt from law school and/or undergraduate studies. Reported debt ranged from none to \$90,000 for undergraduate work, and from none to \$154,000 for law school. Among those respondents who had undergraduate debt, the average undergraduate debt amount was about \$17,500. For those participants with debt from law school, law school debt averaged about \$76,700. Average total educational debt (undergraduate and law school combined) was a little more than \$84,000.

The Oregon State Bar

Bar services were given generally favorable ratings, with all programs rated above 3.0 on a 5.0 scale. The most popular services were CLE publications (4.03) and the OSB website (3.99). Other services included in the survey were CLE seminars (3.79), Casemaker (3.39), the Oregon New Lawyers Division (3.35), the Lawyer Referral Service (3.31) and the Professional Liability Fund (3.75). More than half of respondents had used most of these services. The only two with a usage rate of less than half were the Lawyer Referral Service (66% said they had not used) and Casemaker (57% said they had not used).

Comparison to 2006 Results

The 2007 survey repeated several questions from the 2006 survey. These included questions on practice area, nature of employment, compensation, educational debt, level of challenge with aspects of being a lawyer, satisfaction with the profession and with OSB services, and demographic information. While it is probably best to wait for future years to look at trends in these areas and others, a brief comparative discussion of results from the 2006 and 2007 surveys may be helpful.

The largest difference seemed to be with compensation. As might be expected, respondents' salaries appeared higher in 2007 than 2006. In 2006, for example, 64% of respondents made less than \$50,000. By 2007, that number had dropped to 42%.

With respect to student debt, average undergraduate debt among those who reported it was slightly higher: \$17,507 in 2007, compared to \$17,002 in 2006. However, average law school debt among those who reported it went down slightly, from \$80,064 in 2006 to \$76,712 in 2007.

Categories of practice remained relatively similar over the two years. Two differences of potential note include decreases in sole practitioners (from 9.8% in 2006 to 5.7% in 2007) and in judicial clerkships (from 9.0% in 2006 to 4.3% in 2007).

There was no clear pattern with respect to practice emphases. Participants who reported a "general" practice fell substantially (from 17.9% in 2006 to 8.8% in 2007). Practice areas with notable increases included plaintiff representation in civil litigation (from 5.2% in 2006 to 9.5% in 2007), criminal defense (from 9.0% in 2006 to 16.8% in 2007),

family law (from 3.7% in 2006 to 6.6% in 2007), real estate/land use/environmental law (from 6.0% in 2006 to 10.2% in 2007) and workers' compensation (1.5% in 2006 to 3.6% in 2007). It should also be noted that, based on responses to the 2006 survey, three new emphasis areas were added as response categories to the 2007 survey: immigration, intellectual property/patent and labor/employment.

Responses to the questions regarding level of difficulty with different aspects of being a lawyer showed relatively similar patterns over both years, as did responses to the questions about satisfaction with different aspects of being a lawyer. Level of satisfaction with OSB services, too, remained fairly consistent for those services included on the survey in both years.

No large changes were noted in demographic information.