

## **Fact vs. Fiction: Public Interest Careers**

### **1. Is it more difficult to get a public interest job?**

Getting a permanent public interest job is more difficult for a Yale Law student than getting a large firm job. However, if you want to work in a small firm in a smaller city the effort is similar. This is because, other than large government employers, public interest organizations (and small firms) tend to have occasional openings (versus 50 new associates each year), and they don't have a lot of extra money. These two facts often mean they don't hire recruitment people, they don't join the Association for Legal Career Professionals, they don't visit law school hiring fairs, and they may not send law schools notices of their openings. It doesn't mean they don't want you, it just means you have to go to them. In comparison to the large firm fall feeding frenzy, this seems like a lot of work. However, it is just what a normal job search looks like when you are no longer a law student.

For the 1L summer, the effort may be reversed, with public interest folk having an easier search, due to the summer funding provided by the Law School. For the 2L summer, it depends on what type of public interest or private sector job you are pursuing.

### **2. Is the Fall Interview Program (FIP) a private sector only event?**

No. Every year CDO invites hundreds of public interest employers to participate in FIP, and 20-30 register. This is largely due to the reasons listed in the answer to question 1. But the low turnout is also due to the fact that when many of these employers come, they suffer from lack of student interest. It is a significant investment for an organization to use attorney time and travel funds (CDO covers registration, interview fees, and interview room expenses for PI employers) to come to YLS for FIP. If they have only one or two interviews scheduled, it is usually not worth their resources. They will instead ask those two students to see them at their offices and not register for FIP the next year. If there is truly a lack of student interest, this outcome is necessary. However, if few students sign up because public interest students do not realize that FIP includes public interest work, this is simply a negative self-fulfilling prophecy.

We are often asked why CDO doesn't run a special public interest job fair here at Yale. First, we prefer to incorporate public interest employers into FIP and SIP so that they can benefit from the same technology, timing, and accommodations as other employers. Second, the reasons (discussed above) that prevent many public interest employers from coming to FIP will prevent them from coming to a separate YLS Public Interest Job Fair. In addition, public interest employers may have internal hiring timelines determined by staffing needs or budgets which are not compatible with FIP or SIP. For some public interest employers their needs can be better met through joint interview programs, such as those YLS participates in with NYU in New York and Equal Justice Works (EJW) in Washington, DC.

### **3. Is it true you can't get a public interest job right out of law school?**

No. This rumor gets its start in the fact that U.S. Attorneys' Offices almost never hire right out of law school. They require at least two years of experience. Obviously there are lots of other public interest jobs and most will consider newly minted attorneys. The DOJ hires many new lawyers into their Honors Program, as do many other federal agencies. State agencies, legal services offices, and other public interest employers do as well. Having said this, there are some highly sought after public interest jobs, typically with high profile national nonprofits, where the competition is so stiff a new graduate may have a next to impossible task. This is when the fellowship route comes in handy. Fellowships are a great way to do the work you dream of, or to find a position in an organization that has no funding to hire you. Pick up a copy of *Public Interest Fellowships* in CDO or visit [www.pslawnet.org](http://www.pslawnet.org) for more on this avenue

to public interest employment.

#### **4. Why do lots of students who planned on going into public interest end up taking a private sector job?**

Lots of reasons. Some students are lured by the tremendous amount of money in the private sector and figure they'll earn a large salary for a few years, then come back to public interest (but see question 6 for more on that). Some spend the summer working for a firm that seems nice and begin to wonder if maybe firm work really wouldn't be so bad. Some hope to do a significant amount of pro bono work at the firm. And many students can't stand the uncertainty that a public interest job search often entails. It is difficult to be unemployed in March of your third year when all of your classmates have had their jobs nailed down since December, if not since August. Luckily the federal government honors programs comport with the private sector timeline. The popularity of fellowships is also aided by their earlier acceptances. The lateness of public interest offers, compounded with the rumor that positions are not available, cause those who are risk averse to jump ship to the private sector option.

#### **5. Can I get a job with a public interest organization when I have no experience in public interest law or its area of concern?**

Summer job, yes. Permanent job, more unlikely. If you are a 1L looking for summer work, don't worry about this. Try to demonstrate that you have a concern for the underprivileged and have given your time in the past to help folks (animals, environment, etc.). Join a YLS public interest organization, take a clinic, and get involved in pro bono projects offered at the school to gain experience and demonstrate your interest in public interest law generally and the specific area of concern if possible. If you are graduating and have not acquired any public interest experience, you are in a much more difficult position. Unlike a summer job where you can often ride on the fact that you can come for free from a highly ranked law school, employers for permanent positions expect a demonstrated commitment. You have had three years of law school and two summers to show this commitment and if you have not, it adds a burden to your job search. Topic area expertise, however, is sometimes not necessary if you have transferable skills and a public interest background.

#### **6. If I work at law firms after I graduate, can I make a switch later to public interest work?**

It is possible, but several facts conspire against you. First, you grow accustomed to the money. Just as you cannot imagine making \$160,000 a year now, after you've made it for a few years you will not be able to imagine making \$50,000. You will have expenses that seem necessary. Family and friends will tell you that you are insane. You'll wonder if it's fair to the spouse and kids (who, by the way, have been hanging out with other folks who made \$160,000 to \$2 million). Second, you will then have an uphill battle in actually getting a public interest job. Your resume does not demonstrate commitment to public interest; your experience from a corporate law firm may not demonstrate the needed skills or knowledge. Quite frankly, everyone is a little suspicious about whether you are serious about the cause and if you'll stay. These can all be overcome by making sure you do lots of pro bono work during private practice, maintain and cultivate contacts in the public interest community, and continue to live a simple life...but most people working in private practice find it difficult to do these things.

## **7. But if I work only for government and public interest organizations, can I get a private sector job if I later decide I need, or want, to leave?**

Yes, though the ease of the transition depends on what type of public interest job you have held and how long you have held it. It is obviously easier to get a job in private practice when you can show that your public interest job gave you skills and/or knowledge that are useful to the firm. Litigators in the public interest often make smooth transitions to private practice. Similarly, attorneys who have developed knowledge of government regulation in an area of interest to a firm often make lucrative career changes. To the extent that your experience is unrelated to your next desired job, and you have been in that position for a significant period of time, you must work harder to change jobs. The issue is not really private versus public, but moving to fields where the skills, knowledge, and contacts gained in your work experience are irrelevant.

## **8. But don't big firms provide better training?**

Not necessarily. Big firms typically have an organized training program while many public interest organizations and government employers do not. However, big firms typically do not allow a young associate, or summer intern, to handle the type or breadth of work that public interest employers do. It's quite possible that you'd spend several years reviewing documents, researching, and writing memos. A small public interest organization where you find an excellent mentor and are given significant responsibility may well provide training far superior to anything a law firm can offer. Public interest employers vary enormously in the quality of their training and mentoring. You should inquire at the interview and affirmatively seek mentors during your employment.

You must ask, training for what? Look closely at the skills and knowledge you are likely to acquire at a large law firm and see if these are transferable to the public interest work you desire. If you develop extensive knowledge of mergers and acquisitions at the firm, it is unlikely to be valuable in the public interest sphere. If litigation is your desired skill, learn what litigation skills you will develop at the firm and when.

## **9. Can I survive on a public interest salary?**

Only you know that. Can people survive on a public interest salary and lead happy lives? Sure. They do it all the time. Not only is this question enormously dependent on what you consider the essentials of life, whether you have a working partner, and whether you plan on raising some kids, but it is also dependent on the type of public interest work you pursue. The PIRGs employ an amazing group of committed attorneys and offer extremely low salaries; however people working for the federal government will probably start in the fifties and can work up to well over \$100,000. There are legal services organizations where the supervisors and directing attorneys make a very good salary. In addition, Yale's loan repayment program (COAP) lightens the debt burden significantly and enables graduates to pursue public interest work. Having said this, the comparison to large firm salaries will always be dismal. If you choose this life of a public interest lawyer, it's best to stop comparing.