



# *The Road*

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# Less Traveled

By Samantha Bronson

**C**areer paths after law school are increasingly leading in directions beyond traditional law firm practice. Instead, many with legal backgrounds pursue creative employment options that draw upon the communication, critical thinking, and writing skills honed during their JD education. It's this flexibility of a law degree that can open doors to a variety of innovative and rewarding career options, as many USF School of Law graduates demonstrate.



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— Johanna Hartwig, Senior Director, USF School of Law Office of Career Planning

**L**ee Faller Burgess '08 began her legal career in the most traditional of ways—practicing commercial litigation for a large international law firm—yet she quickly veered off that path. Less than a year in, she realized that she'd always been passionate about helping others, tutoring in high school, college, and law school.

Her one-on-one law school and bar exam tutoring company, Amicus Tutoring, was born. "It really marries my passion for the law and my passion for teaching," she says.

Burgess has also taught as an adjunct law professor and co-founded two online resources aimed at law students and those studying for the bar. All those avenues, Burgess says, reflect her own approach to using her JD.

"It's not about opting out or leaving the law," Burgess says. "It's about finding your place."

As the private legal market contracts, that "place" may be outside traditional law practice for many attorneys. Although law students may be thinking more creatively and broadly about career options earlier than in generations past, there has long been a flow of practicing attorneys choosing to take their careers down different paths, says Johanna Hartwig, senior director of the USF School of Law Office of Career Planning. Compliance and risk management, education, business, even healthcare administration are but a few of the areas one can find people with legal training.

"There is a very wide range of career options and the reason is that employers know that a JD education prepares a student well in terms of critical thinking, communication, writing, and many other skills," Hartwig says. "Because of that, a lot of employers want people with JDs even if they don't have

experience or expertise in that particular area already."

The flexibility of a law degree translates to countless options for innovative career paths, something that USF law graduates have long pursued. These types of nontraditional jobs often fall outside of the traditional definition of legal employment used by law school rankings publications, yet they are no less rewarding and a legal education is invaluable to success in these roles.

Some USF graduates, like **Adrian Tirtanadi '12**, choose different paths that still directly utilize their law degrees. Tirtanadi, who launched Bayview/Hunters Point Community Legal with several other USF graduates in January, and serves as executive director, describes the nonprofit as a "primary care law center" for residents of one of San Francisco's poorest neighborhoods.

So far, about 35 clients have retained the nonprofit to handle legal issues, primarily concentrating on public benefits, family law, and landlord/tenant issues. For matters that require more specialized expertise or litigation, Tirtanadi helps clients find other attorneys who can assist.

Services are provided to clients—the vast majority of whom earn less than \$14,000 per year—free of charge, with a request for a minimal donation per meeting. As the organization continues to grow, Tirtanadi hopes to tap into the client network to do community development work with other nonprofits in the area. Many clients, he says, want to donate their time and many nonprofits have projects they need assistance with, but lack a volunteer base.

"I knew I was going to do this before I went to law school," says Tirtanadi, who worked in community development for a nonprofit prior to law school. "It was the reason I went to law school."

**Dana Reedy '05** didn't necessarily see herself practicing law, but she did just that at Reed Smith's Oakland office after law school. It wasn't long before she realized working in a firm wasn't the right fit.

"I really thought, after looking at my peers and partners, particularly female partners, 'I don't see how this fits into my life in five years, 10 years,'" Reedy says.

When she got engaged, she saw it as a chance to consider a career change and left the firm. She eventually looked into real estate and passed the exams. Still not entirely sure of the field, she began working for Coldwell Banker's Orinda office.

She realized her law degree could help get her fledgling real estate business off the ground, especially in an area where other agents could tout their decades of experience or longtime family ties. Reedy had neither, but she had a JD after her name. That, she says, helped counter her lack of real estate experience and secure her initial clients.

“The law degree gives you a ton of credibility,” Reedy says. “Having it sets me apart. People make an assumption that if you’re a lawyer you’re either really smart or you work really hard.”

The degree, Reedy says, also benefits her during negotiations and in everyday client interactions. Though not acting as an attorney, she says her training provides her with a keen understanding of such things as the need to disclose everything—and the implications for not doing so. Complex wording in real estate contracts instantly makes sense and she knows when to advise clients to seek legal counsel.

“For me (the degree) has helped me become successful faster,” Reedy says. “It’s given me confidence.”



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— Faisal Shah '86, Founder, MarkMonitor



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**Greg Blaine '91**, CEO of California Property Services, also found success in real estate.

After college, he worked at his parents’ condo management business and eventually moved to Los Angeles to work in radio or television broadcasting. As he waited for a job with Stephen J. Cannell Productions to start, he began in Coldwell Banker Commercial’s training program. In three and a half years, Blaine rose from entry-level worker to a vice president of three offices. His commercial real estate career looked promising, but when ownership changes appeared on the horizon, Blaine decided it was time for graduate school.

“Rather than go to business school, I felt the best way for me to spend time in getting a graduate degree would be in something I couldn’t get in the marketplace, and that piece, to me, was the law,” Blaine says.

Blaine had no plans to practice law; instead he saw the degree as a strategic step in entering senior management in commercial real estate. After law school, he eventually returned to his family’s business to grow it and manage the company’s investments. The JD, he says, clearly benefits him in the busi-

ness world. Not only has it made it easier to interact with a wide range of attorneys, including estate, tax planning, and land-use, but it also improved his writing skills and provided a useful background on how business works structurally.

“I think I would have been successful without the law degree, but who can ever really say?” Blaine says. “With my law degree, I felt more comfortable going farther. It added leverage to what I already knew and I’ve used that leverage effectively.”

Understanding the structure of the banking system, for example, helped him start a conversation with a banker and ask the right questions to obtain better financing. One experience then leads to another, all building on the combination of legal training and business experience, he says.

“I enthusiastically recommend having a legal background and applying it to a business career,” Blaine says. “The possibilities are fascinating and endless.”

**Faisal Shah '86** shares that view. Shah, founder of several companies, including MarkMonitor, credits his legal background for his business success. After law school, Shah followed a traditional career path, joining Lillick McHose and Charles in Los Angeles, but had a nagging desire to fulfill a childhood dream of owning a company. Two years after being named partner, Shah received an unexpected offer from his college roommate—leave his law practice, move to Boise, Idaho, and work as general counsel for a nutritional supplement start-up.

On leave of absence from the firm, Shah accepted with the caveat that they also consider taking the company public. At the start-up, he learned entirely different legal practice areas, including intellectual property, trademark, patents, and copyright law. When the company was acquired, Shah was at a crossroads: “Do I now step on my own track and start a company? Or do I go back to the law firm?” Shah says.

He withdrew from the firm and six months later came up



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— Elisa Stephens '85, President,  
Academy of Art University

with a business idea during a Boise law firm's seminar on trademark infringement on the Internet.

"It was 1999 and the Internet was still nascent, but it was clear it was going to explode in popularity and use," Shah says. "I realized intellectual property misuse was going to be a big problem on the Internet."

That led to the creation of MarkMonitor, an online company with a suite of brand protection solutions, including anti-counterfeiting, anti-piracy, and domain registration solutions. The company grew from two employees to more than 400 and last year was sold to Thomson Reuters. Shah also founded FTF Technologies Inc. (First to File), an online patent management system that was sold in March to CPA Global.

What if Shah hadn't gone to law school? "This couldn't have happened. Ever," he says. "Even my aha moment came as a result of the knowledge I had from law school and my legal practice."

MarkMonitor was designed for attorneys, so Shah drew on his legal experience to create a product they would actually use. He tapped into his background in selling the product, connecting with attorneys by understanding the issues they face. His legal background also helped on an operational level, Shah says, because he understood the legal ramifications and nuances involved in starting a business.

The business world no doubt has its share of notables with JD after their names.

Consider **Marjorie Scardino '75**, who until last year was the CEO of Pearson. Before stepping down, Scardino spent 16 years at the London-based global and educational media conglomerate, leading a period of aggressive acquisitions and tripling the company's sales and profits. Before joining Pearson, Scardino was chief executive of The Economist Group. She also had been a partner in a Savannah, Ga., law firm and co-founded the *Georgia Gazette*, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1984.

Closer to USF, **Elisa Stephens '85** has established herself as an influential player in San Francisco. As president of the Academy of Art University, Stephens has grown the private

university to more than 18,000 students and has pioneered the creation of online education programs in art and design.

Although it seems only fitting that Stephens would lead the academy founded by her grandfather and then later led by her father, her path was not a direct route. After law school, she worked with in-house counsel at an engineering startup that later transitioned into a holding company. While there, she helped the academy on legal matters.

"There seemed to be more and more legal issues coming up and they would forward them to me," Stephens says.

Before long, Stephens was the academy's in-house counsel, working on a broad range of issues, such as insurance, contracts, employment, First Amendment, copyrights, and trademarks. By early 1992, she was appointed president.

These days, Stephens puts a buffer between her and the academy's legal dealings, but says her background assists her as president "every day." Not only can she foresee potential legal complications and have a sense of which are worth fighting, but Stephens says her degree taught her that the devil is in the details. The big picture vision can only happen if all the details are attended to, every day, she says.

"Legal education teaches you great discipline, perseverance, and respect for the complexity of matters," Stephens says.

That's a background that is invaluable in a whole range of fields, says Hartwig, and it's a point the law school is working with students on by connecting them with resources and making sure panels include more than just practicing attorneys. Yet whether graduates decide to pursue a less traveled road early in their careers or later, Hartwig points out the benefit—a different path simply may align better with a particular person's skill set and personality and offer greater fulfillment for them, while still building on their legal training.

As Burgess explains, "Just because you choose something alternative to the typical career path, it doesn't mean you are opting out of the law. You are finding your own place in the community to support the law, support clients, or your passion." [USF]