SMU Dedman School of Law

Plan Your Own Path

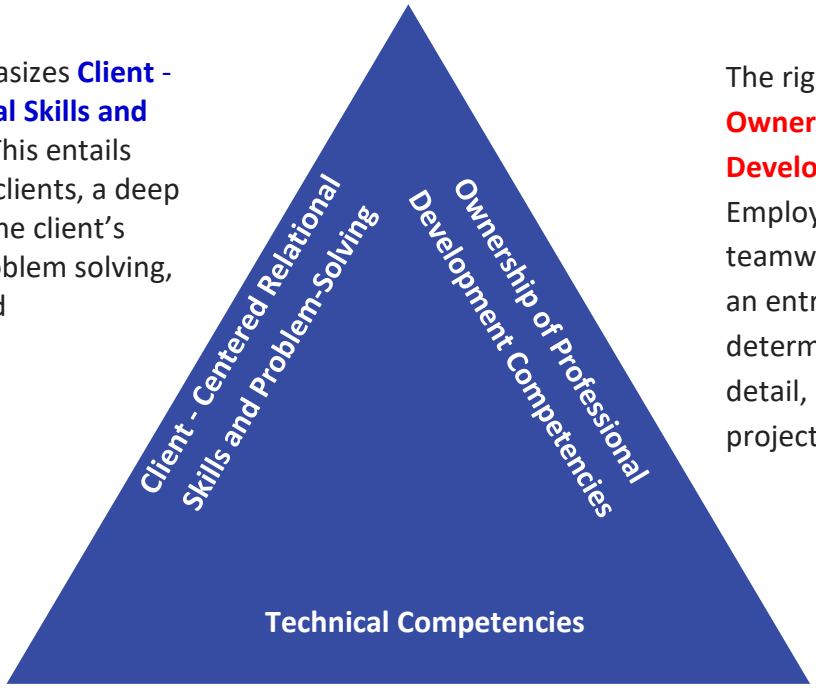
Labor and Employment Law

OVERVIEW

Labor and Employment Law governs the relationship between employers and employees. As a general rule, labor and employment lawyers either represent employers/management or employees/unions. A labor and employment practice encompasses four key specialties: (1) counseling clients in compliance with employment-related statutes and common law, on issues including workplace safety and health, union activity, equal employment opportunity, family and medical leave, and wage and hour laws; (2) employment disputes and litigation on behalf of employers or employees; (3) ERISA and employee benefits; and (4) labor relations, assisting either management or labor union clients in all aspects of collective bargaining, grievance and arbitration processes, and litigation.

This handout helps you plan your path to a labor and employment law career, covering essential competencies for clients and legal employers. As you plan, ensure you incorporate all three sides of this triangle.[1]

The left side emphasizes **Client - Centered Relational Skills and Problem-Solving.** This entails responsiveness to clients, a deep understanding of the client's needs, creative problem solving, and client-centered communication.



The right side centers on **Ownership of Professional Development Competencies**. Employers and clients require teamwork, a strong work ethic, an entrepreneurial mindset, determination, attention to detail, integrity, and effective project management skills.

The base comprises fundamental **Technical Competencies**, including knowledge of the law, legal analysis, legal research, communication in the legal context, and legal judgment.

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[1] *See* Neil W. Hamilton, *The Gap Between the Foundational Competencies Clients and Legal Employers Need and the Learning Outcomes Law Schools Are Adopting*, 89 UMKC L. Rev. 559 (2021).

This guide is arranged by the three crucial sides of the triangle.

TRADITIONAL TECHNICAL COMPETENCIES

Enroll in foundational courses during your second year, such as:

- Labor Law
- Employment Law
- Employment Discrimination

During your 2L and 3L years, build portfolios of knowledge and experiences focusing on the competencies you want to highlight:

Recommended Courses – Labor and Employment Law Electives:

- Advanced Labor and Employment Law
- Disability Law
- Employee Benefits & ERISA Litigation
- Employment Law: Addressing Social Change in the Workplace

Related Courses:

- Civil Rights Seminar
- Critical Race Theory
- Immigration Law
- Intellectual Property
- Selected Topics in Gender Law
- Women and the Law

Upper-Level Writing Requirements: In your third year, choose a labor and employment law-related Edited Writing course or Directed Research paper topic (with Faculty pre-approval) to improve and showcase your research, writing, and analytical competencies.

CLIENT-CENTERED RELATIONAL SKILLS AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Thoughtfully evaluate experiential opportunities. These are excellent ways for you to cultivate superior client focus, innovative problem-solving, and effective communication skills.

- **Externships**: These externships are offered through the Government and Public Interest Externship Program (includes classroom component)
  - National Labor Relations Board (Ft Worth)
  - Disability Rights Texas
  - Lambda Legal
  - U. S. Department of Labor (Dallas)
  - U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Dallas)

- **Clinics**:
  - Civil/Consumer Clinic

Be sure to work closely with your Office of Career Services advisors to obtain additional experiences (internships, judicial clerkships, public service opportunities) to grow your knowledge and skills in this area.

OWNERSHIP OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMPETENCIES

Experiences beyond the formal curriculum are vital to your professional growth. Aim to acquire experiences that closely replicate as much as possible the work lawyers engage in within the labor and employment law space.

- **Student Organizations:** Commit yourself to relevant, on-campus organizations and actively pursue leadership, project management, and teamwork opportunities within the organization.
  - Labor and Employment Law Students Association

- **Public Service Opportunities:** These pre-approved placements at 501(c)(3) organizations and government offices may provide you additional perspectives that are valuable to your career development

- **Board of Advocates:**
  - ABA Labor and Employment Law Section's Mock Trial Competition

- **Law Journals:**
  - Author a note or comment on a labor and employment law topic and seek to have it published in one of our journals or elsewhere

- **Dallas Bar Association Sections:** Explore your interests and immerse yourself in the legal profession by becoming part of these Dallas Bar Association sections.
  - Labor and Employment Law

- Employee Benefits & Executive Compensation

Faculty: Start building a connection with a professor who is familiar with your work and can write you a letter of recommendation or serve as a reference. Here are some of the full-time faculty members who teach in this field.

Joanna Grossman
Grant Hayden

Cultivate Your Personal Network: Reach out to labor or employment law attorneys to arrange informational interviews through the Mustang Exchange or connections you establish during your law school journey. You should also ask your Career Services advisor to help you identify graduates and law firms in this space in the location(s) where you want to work.

Full-time and adjunct professor who teach labor and employment law courses may have strong networks. Ask them for assistance making these connections.

Attend programs featuring labor and employment law attorneys sponsored by the Office of Career Services or student organizations. These kinds of programs are great opportunities to learn more about entry-level careers and to connect with speakers who are often alumni and more willing to assist you.