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Why More CPAs Are Adding a Law Degree to Their CPA Credential

Accounting professionals spend considerable effort building their credentials. The CPA certificate is the foundation. Many go on to add specializations: the CITP for technology, the ABV for business valuation, the CFF for forensic work, the PFS for personal financial planning. Each credential signals deeper expertise in a specific domain and opens roles and responsibilities that the CPA alone does not. For a growing number of CPAs working at the intersection of tax, business advisory, and regulatory compliance, the next logical addition is a law degree. For my own estate planning, I chose a CPA who was also a J.D.

The J.D./CPA combination is not new. It has long been one of the most powerful credential pairings in professional services. This is particularly true in tax and estate planning, where the technical depth required spans both disciplines. Most sophisticated work genuinely requires both. What has changed is the broadening of contexts where the combination creates competitive advantage: in forensic accounting litigation support, in regulatory compliance advisory, in M&A due diligence, and in the general counsel roles that increasingly seek accountants who can think like lawyers.

Where the CPA and J.D. Create the Most Directly Overlap

The overlap between accounting expertise and legal practice is widest in several specific areas, and CPAs who have gone on to earn law degrees consistently report that their accounting background accelerated their effectiveness in these fields:

- **Tax law:** the most direct connection between the two credentials. Tax attorneys and CPAs work on the same problems from different sides of the credential line. A J.D./CPA who can structure a transaction and advise on its tax implications without handing off to outside counsel offers something neither credential alone provides.
- **Forensic accounting and litigation support:** CPAs who work in forensic accounting already operate at the edge of the legal system, preparing analyses for disputes, providing expert testimony, and working alongside attorneys on complex matters. Bar admission expands what they can do in that environment and allows them to take cases, not just support them.
- **Estate planning and wealth transfer:** a practice area that has always attracted CPA/J.D. combinations because the most sophisticated estate planning work requires deep integration of tax knowledge and legal document drafting that is difficult to deliver effectively through a referral relationship between separate professionals.
- **Mergers, acquisitions, and business transactions:** CPAs who work in deal advisory bring financial modeling and due diligence skills that most transaction attorneys lack. Those who also hold bar admission can help structure transactions in ways that create a substantially different value proposition for clients.
- **Regulatory compliance and advisory:** particularly in financial services, healthcare, and technology, where regulatory complexity has grown faster than the supply of professionals who can address both the financial substance and the legal framework simultaneously.
- **General counsel roles:** a growing share of general counsel positions at mid-sized companies are going to professionals who combine legal and financial credentials. The ability to evaluate legal risk through a financial lens, and financial decisions through a legal lens, is genuinely rare and consistently in demand.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics occupational outlook for lawyers projects steady growth in legal employment through the next decade, with particularly strong demand in areas serving corporations and financial institutions -- exactly where CPA/J.D. combinations tend to be most competitive.

What the J.D. Adds That the CPA Alone Cannot Provide

CPAs who have worked extensively with legal counsel understand the credential boundary intuitively. They can analyze the financial implications of a legal structure. They can identify the tax exposure in a contract. They can reconstruct financial records

for litigation. Without bar admission, they cannot render legal advice, represent a client in a legal proceeding, or draft documents that require a licensed attorney's signature.

That boundary is consequential. It determines who can take the client relationship at the highest level of sophistication, who can appear in tax court, and who can build the kind of integrated practice that the most complex client engagements actually require. A J.D. doesn't make a CPA start over professionally. It removes a ceiling that limits what their existing expertise can accomplish.

The Path to Adding a Law Degree

For CPAs evaluating a law degree, the practical path runs through the LSAT and law school admission. The Law School Admission Council provides a comprehensive guide to the full application process. A few considerations that are particularly relevant for practicing CPAs:

- **Part-time and evening programs:** many law schools offer programs specifically designed for working professionals, allowing the J.D. to be completed in four years rather than three while maintaining CPA practice. For established professionals with client relationships and a practice to protect, this may be the only realistic option, and many legal employers actively value attorneys who stayed professionally active during school.
- **LSAT performance and its financial implications:** merit scholarships at law schools are distributed heavily based on LSAT scores, which means a stronger score directly reduces the total cost of the degree. CPAs tend to perform well on the analytical reasoning sections given their quantitative background, and dedicated preparation several months in advance produces the best results. Kaplan's LSAT preparation is a well-regarded option for structured study.
- **Tax LL.M. as an alternative or supplement:** some CPAs who already practice in tax choose to add an LL.M. in Taxation rather than a full J.D. An LL.M. in Tax from a well-regarded program adds significant technical depth and opens certain roles but does not provide bar admission. The right choice depends on the specific roles and practice model the CPA is building toward.

Funding the Investment

Law school is a significant financial commitment on top of what most CPAs have already invested in their undergraduate education and CPA examination preparation. Private law school tuition regularly exceeds $55,000 per year, and part-time programs extend that cost over four years rather than three. Modeling the investment with the same rigor applied to any major capital allocation is essential before committing.

External scholarships help. The ABA Legal Opportunity Scholarship Fund awards $15,000 over three years to incoming first-year students committed to diversity in the profession, with the 2027 cycle opening January 15, 2027.

HKM Employment Attorneys runs an annual scholarship program awarding $1,000 to eligible students in pre-law, paralegal, or J.D. programs near 39 U.S. cities. Applicants need a 3.0 GPA or higher and a short essay on how they plan to use their legal

education to serve their community. Students near Indianapolis, IN; Chicago, IL; Denver, CO; or Seattle, WA are eligible. Applications are open annually. Full details are at hkm.com/scholarship.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the J.D./CPA combination worth the additional time and cost?

For CPAs working in tax, forensic accounting, business advisory, or regulatory compliance at a sophisticated level, the answer is often yes. Still, it depends on the specific practice model and career trajectory. The combination opens roles and client relationships that neither credential alone provides. For professionals building toward general counsel positions, tax court practice, or high-end estate planning, the return on investment is generally well documented. For CPAs satisfied with the scope of their current practice and those who don't see a specific limitation that bar admission would remove, the investment may not be justified. The honest test is whether there is a specific type of work you want to do that bar admission would enable, and your CPA alone does not.

How do law schools view CPA applicants?

Generally, very favorably, particularly for programs with strong tax, business law, and financial regulation programs. Admissions committees at these schools understand the value that accounting expertise brings to legal study and practice, and CPA applicants can write compelling personal statements that connect their professional experience directly to their legal goals. The LSAT score and undergraduate GPA remain the most important quantitative factors, but a practicing CPA's professional background can meaningfully differentiate an application. Law School Transparency provides detailed data on admissions outcomes by school that is worth reviewing when identifying realistic targets.

What bar exam considerations apply specifically to CPA/J.D. candidates?

CPAs who pursue a J.D. sit for the bar exam under the same requirements as any other law graduate, meaning they must pass the Uniform Bar Exam or the state-specific exam in the jurisdiction where they plan to practice. Most states also require the Multistate Professional Responsibility Examination (MPRE). CPAs who have completed certain academic requirements may have already developed some of the analytical skills that the bar exam tests. However, the exam covers legal doctrine and professional responsibility in ways that require dedicated preparation regardless of professional background. Starting bar preparation early and treating it as seriously as the CPA exam is the right approach.

Are there scholarships available for CPAs pursuing law degrees?

Yes. The ABA Legal Opportunity Scholarship Fund awards $15,000 over three years to incoming students committed to diversity in the profession. HKM Employment Attorneys runs an annual scholarship program awarding $1,000 to students near 39 U.S. cities, including Indianapolis, Chicago, Denver, and Seattle. Applications are open annually. Full details at hkm.com/scholarship.

At K2 Enterprises, we are committed to providing unwavering support and expert instruction to CPAs. Explore the wealth of resources on our website, where you'll find valuable insights into selecting the most suitable accounting software to equip your firm for the journey ahead. If you work in accounting or finance, K2 Enterprises provides continuing education programs to enhance your skills and credentials. Need help solving your practice's accounting technology needs and selecting the right software for accounting or CPA Firms? Visit k2e.com, where we make sophisticated technology understandable through our conferences, seminars, and on demand courses.