JOSEPH LARSON, 28
GRADUATE | CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF LAW, OMAHA, NEB.

It wasn't supposed to be this hard—not with a Juris Doctor in hand.

Like so many recent law school graduates, Joseph Larson bought into the idea that a law degree was something of an employment magic bullet. "When I went to law school, I never thought I would have a problem getting a job," he said. "I heard that pretty much everybody got a job, and that's not the case right now."

With a master's degree in fiction writing and more than a year's experience in sales at UnitedHealth Group Inc., Larson figured he could put his writing and presentation skills to good use as a lawyer.

He graduated in the top third of his class at Creighton University School of Law in Omaha, Neb., in May, with plans to become a litigator. He worked part time at Omaha's Gross & Welch while in school, completed a summer clerkship for a federal district judge and received an award given for the top 15 student-written law review articles of the year nationwide. But for more than a year, his efforts to land an attorney position near his hometown, St. Paul, Minn., fizzled. He networked and interviewed for months with attorneys at a variety of firms in the area to no avail. It didn't help that the Twin Cities is home to four law schools, all with new graduates seeking work.

"The majority of the people I've talked to have been complimentary about my resume, but they just aren't hiring right now," Larson said. Government positions proved no less elusive.

Four months without a job forced Larson to deviate from his plans and become more flexible about the types of legal jobs he would accept. The would-be litigator opened up to the possibility of doing everything from insurance defense to an in-house position. In the meantime, he interviewed to be a substitute teacher at his old high school to generate some income.

Just when it appeared that Larson was headed to the classroom instead of the courtroom, the clouds broke. Midway through September, he was hired at Holstein Law Group, a three-attorney firm in Minneapolis specializing in employment law and business litigation.

Larson had interviewed with the firm last fall, but like so many others it wasn't hiring at the time. Larson liked the attorneys and stayed in touch, and as the firm faced a growing caseload, he got the call.

"It's all about networking and following up with people," he said. "You just keep in touch and hope that they need help at some point."

—KAREN SLOAN