

Career Management:

Beyond The Law – A Litigator's Path To A Non-Legal Career



By Hilary Denk

MY FATHER PERSUADED ME to apply to law school with this argument: "You don't have to practice law. A lawyer can do anything. It's just a great education." He was right.

Learning about the history, philosophy, purpose and practice of law can be a challenging and fascinating endeavor. Making a living as an attorney, however, is often frustrating, unsatisfying and demoralizing. Hence, an industry is growing to serve attorneys who want a second career.

Attorneys are spending hundreds of dollars an hour for career counseling and buying books such as *Running From the Law* by Debrah L. Arron. After 10 years of practicing law, Arron started a business counseling other attorneys who want to do the same thing. Maybe the attorneys seeking a new career are those who went into law school with non-legal career plans but after three years of law school were brainwashed into seeking a traditional job, if only to pay off law school loan debt.

According to Maggie Carttar, Director of Placement at the University of Kansas School of Law, one shouldn't feel obliged to practice law. In *Non-Traditional Job Opportunities*, Carttar recommends that all law students take and pass the bar exam in their home state immediately after graduation, in case they decide later to enter the legal job market. Carttar observes that it is easier to enter a non-legal position after practicing law for a period of time than to enter a legal position after holding a non-legal po-

Hilary Denk is a former practicing attorney and the CBA's director of YLS and government affairs.

sition directly out of law school.

Recent graduates of DePaul University College of Law appear to follow this advice. In response to the standard placement survey sent to 1994 DePaul graduates, 79% of those who responded were employed practicing law, with 61% in private law practice, 16% in government positions and 2% in judicial clerkships. The interesting question is how many will stay in the traditional practice of law.

Unscientific research illustrates some startling results. A poll of my 10 closest attorney friends, age 35 or younger, indicated that five practice law, four left the practice for other careers, and one never practiced law but took a job in banking. Of the five who currently practice law, one is conducting a job search for a non-legal job and two are counting the days until they settle a couple big cases and can retire.

There are many reasons young lawyers leave the practice for other careers. For those in my informal survey, the pressure to produce unreasonable billable hours was a main source of stress. Other complaints include the excessive competition for business, the lack of civility among colleagues, the enormous overhead of running a law practice, the long hours of work with little personal satisfaction and no guarantee that paying one's dues will lead to partnership or financial success. Changing careers, though, requires planning, re-ordering priorities and taking risks.

Making The Decision

Ronald L. Krannich points out in his book *Change Your Job, Change Your Life* (Impact Publications, Manassas, Virginia, 1994)

that most people fall into jobs by chance, fail to examine many job and career alternatives suitable to their skills and interests and pursue careers that are less than rewarding. Even after two years of practicing law, many lawyers feel it is too late to make changes in their career direction. Attorneys attain a lifestyle that is difficult to change, especially given financial responsibilities such as supporting a family. Krannich assures his readers that with vision, determination and a well-organized plan of action, one can find a rewarding career. He also warns that since employers feel no responsibility to keep any employee indefinitely, each person is responsible for his or her own fate. Thus, you must plan ahead before your current job dissatisfaction becomes apparent in your job performance. If you dread going into work every day, it is time to make a change.

Approach the plan to start a new career in much the same way you would prepare for a trial.

First, there is a period of investigation, where an attorney determines if a lawsuit is advisable. Similarly, deciding whether or not to change careers requires investigation. The areas of employment and the types of environments where you can practice law are quite varied, so determine first whether it is the practice of law, or just your current job, that is causing discontent. Problems such as personality conflicts have little to do with the work itself, but can make your job more difficult. Running from the law may not be the solution to this type of problem, so it is imperative to conduct this initial investigation carefully before taking the next step.

Talk to people practicing in other areas of law and working in different environments. Consult with your law school career counseling center to find out about other job opportunities and discuss your current employment problems. If you graduated from a law school out of state, contact your *alma mater* and request a letter of introduction to the career counseling

office at a local law school, thereby allowing you to use the local services. Most law schools frequently make these reciprocal arrangements. In addition, try a law school career services office before spending hundreds of dollars on professional independent consultants. Most law schools offer free or reduced-price career service to alumni, and they serve your needs at a very low cost.

After investigating a matter thoroughly, an attorney files a lawsuit and conducts discovery. Likewise, once you have determined that a career change is necessary, you should enter into a period of discovery to determine what options are available to attorneys with your skills and interests.

Options Beyond The Law

The number of options beyond the law are vast and dizzying. Gary Munneke found the task of naming the options too difficult in his book *Careers in Law* (VGM Professional Careers Series, 1993): "It would not be possible to catalog or classify all the different things lawyers do outside the law. Their activities are as varied as society itself. As a group, lawyers have disparate interests, at least in part because there is no single standardized path to law school."

As daunting as the task may appear, Federal Reports Inc. of Washington, D.C. has been monitoring non-traditional law-related employment opportunities for attorneys since 1979. The most recent report lists more than 600 jobs that lawyers are doing, broken down into 27 different categories. (Federal Reports Inc., 1010 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Suite 408, Washington, D.C. 20005, (202) 393-3311.) This organization also publishes several other resources of interest to job-seeking attorneys, as well providing career counseling. According to the authors of Federal Reports Inc., alternative careers are rapidly growing in popularity and are found in every employment sector and virtually every industry and economic endeavor.

Non-Traditional Job Opportunities is another resource for discovering the types of employment attorneys can find outside the traditional law practice. This volume, compiled from reports of the National Association of Law Placement from 1982 to 1984, is available from a law school career counseling office. Non-traditional jobs are defined as positions in which legal skills and expertise are utilized, but which do not re-

quire a law degree. This 25-page pamphlet includes information about job opportunities in businesses, associations and other organizations. An evaluation of *Wall Street Journal* job announcements from 21 consecutive days teaches a job seeker to look at all types of positions as job opportunities.

Many employers value the skills lawyers possess. The most difficult task in making a career change is to discover what options are best for you. Some of the resources described above are helpful and are available at law school career counseling offices.

Many other resources are at your disposal: conduct research at your local library and law library; read job listings in all local newspapers and trade journals in your fields of interest; network with attorneys you meet through your membership in bar associations; conduct informational interviews on an informal basis by taking a potential contact to lunch; make phone calls once a day or once a week to people in your field of interest and ask direct questions about their work; contact college and law school alumni who may assist you; and don't forget to consult folks from your place of worship or from other civic organizations. Always be very appreciative of any assistance you receive.

In litigation, the care you take in discovery may make or break your cause of action when it is time for trial. Similarly, the time you take to determine a career path forecasts success in the next step, the job search.

The Job Search

Above all, be discreet about your job search. You do not want to jeopardize your current position during the search. Conduct all of your job search activities on your own time and do not keep your resume and cover letters on your office computer. Do not tell any but your most trusted work colleagues about your job search, and request that potential employers keep your application confidential.

Plan your search by systematically using many of the same resources that led you to determine your new career path. Making a good impression on the persons you contacted during the "discovery" phase may lead to tips about unpublished job openings and offers to write reference letters or make telephone calls on your behalf. Follow every job lead to its conclusion, whether

the result is a rejection letter or a job offer. In your interviews and cover letters, highlight the many skills you have developed while practicing law.

The Encyclopedia of Second Careers by Gene R. Hawed provides a marvelous description of the personal qualities of good lawyers — qualities that apply to almost any professional career:

Lawyers link the legal system and society; to perform this role, they must understand the world around them and be sensitive to the numerous aspects of society that the law touches. They must comprehend not only the words of a particular statute, but the human circumstances it addresses as well. Lawyers must remain constantly informed about legal and nonlegal developments that affect their profession.

The practice of law involves a great deal of responsibility. Persons...in law...like to work with people and...win the respect and confidence of their clients, associates and the public. They must deal with people in a courteous, efficient manner and not disclose matters discussed in confidence with clients. Integrity and honesty are vital personal qualities; lawyers must always adhere to strict rules of ethics.

The essential skills of a lawyer are the ability to write, read and analyze, to think logically and to communicate verbally. Lawyers must have an exceptional ability to think quickly and speak with ease and authority. Intellectual capacity and reasoning ability are essential to analyze complex cases and reach sound conclusions. [L]awyers need creativity when handling new and unique legal problems.

This is an ideal description of an attorney that helps attorneys look for a way to describe what skills they have acquired during their time practicing law. There may be other skills that are specific to the job being sought depending on individual experience, but don't jettison your experience as an attorney as a waste of time. Capitalize on the experience and put it into a positive light no matter how difficult the practice of law has been.

If a career beyond the law is in your future, prepare for it as you would for a multi-million-dollar lawsuit. Investigate your reasons for dissatisfaction with your current job, discover all the career options that interest you and fit your skills, and discreetly plan an organized job search that will lead to success. In the process, remember that you may want to re-enter the legal practice. As my father always says, don't burn any bridges you may want to cross in the future. ■