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What Are Your Options? Exploring Alternative Careers

There are many more opportunities now for lawyers to find success on their own terms than ever before. Some of these careers are related to the legal profession and some are outside of the law.

***By Anne Whitaker
Counsel On Call***

You spent three years getting your J.D., followed by years of practicing law, only to realize that you are dissatisfied. You may have always thought you wanted to be a lawyer, only to find now that you have become one, you are disgruntled, stressed, and simply can't continue to live the way you are. Or perhaps you went to law school by default, not really knowing much about the practice of law, but you thought that a J.D. degree would open up possibilities for other careers. You found yourself swept up in the current of interviews for a traditional law job and now here you are, practicing law and wondering why.

If either of these describes you, know that you have a lot of company. Many studies show that between 33% to 50% of lawyers today are dissatisfied with their jobs. The biggest reason given for this dissatisfaction is loss of control—over the

kind of work they get to do, the interactions they have daily with other people, and their work/life balance.

There Are Many More Opportunities Now For Lawyers To Find Success On Their Own Terms

Regardless of the situation or reason for dissatisfaction, the questions asked are usually the same. “What in the world do I do now? Remain where I am and suffer, abandon my career as a lawyer, or is there an in-between?” Of course, the answers to these questions are different for each person. While many lawyers decide to keep plugging along, silently suffering, many are choosing to make a change. In the past 15 years that I have been coaching lawyers in their career choices, I have seen many lawyers transition from a traditional law practice into successful and fulfilling careers in a multitude of other areas. Some of these careers are related to the legal profession and some are outside of the law. There are many more opportunities now for lawyers to find success on their own terms than there were when I left the practice of law in 1991 to start my company.

Many successful law-trained professionals have gone on to contribute great things beyond the traditional practice of law. You would be amazed at the number of former practicing lawyers you may know of already. Some famous examples include Mahondas Gandhi (Indian political/spiritual leader), Tony LaRussa (St. Louis Cardinal’s manager), Herb Kelleher (chairman of Southwest Airlines), David E. Kelley (television and film producer, Richard Thalheimer (president of the Sharper Image), Rossana Brazzi (actor), and Fred Graham (CBS TV reporter). Once you start looking for them, you will find many other examples—they write novels, operate businesses, run schools, counsel people, and develop real estate, to name a few.

Lawyers Have A Superb Background And Work Experience That Will Assist In Pursuing Many Other Careers

What are your options outside of the traditional practice of law? What job can you get with a law degree? I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that there is no list of other careers I can give you that are definite options for you—your options are unlimited and the sky really is the limit. You can do pretty much whatever you want to do. Lawyers have been able to move into almost every field that exists. The truth is that a legal education is one of the most challenging, broadening educational experiences there is. We have a superb background through our legal education and work experience that will assist in pursuing many other careers.

For some, that is also the bad news—the options are limitless. There is no list of other careers for which lawyers may get hired, and no one-size-fits-all formula. It overwhelms many to hear that, as most professionals want a ready-made list of careers for former lawyers that guarantees they can find something else. It is no wonder it's overwhelming—it is very different from the law school experience. Deciding where to go after graduation was much more structured and established. There was a set list of places to go, roles to play, and a procedure to follow.

Once you realize that the traditional list of options has failed you, it's natural to want someone to hand you another list. Even if there was such a list, I wouldn't recommend that approach. You would probably end up in another stressful, unfulfilling job.

You Need To Know Whether You Are In The Wrong Career Or Just The Wrong Job

So what is a lawyer to do? First, you need to do some self-assessment about what is causing your dissatisfaction and what it is that you want in your career. Take some time, either by yourself or with the assistance of a career coach, to figure out what matters most to you. You need to know whether you are in the wrong career or just in the wrong job. (See TCL, Volume 2 [Number 1](#), [Number 2](#), [Number 3](#), and [Number 4](#)) Are you dissatisfied with the practice of law entirely or is it really the place where you are working or your colleagues who are creating the problem? Or perhaps it is the schedule that you are keeping, the long hours, and lack of balance.

Once you have assessed what is important to you and what you really want to be doing, then you can decide if you are going to be able to achieve those things as a lawyer. Do you need to switch practice areas? Working as a lawyer doing labor and employment law could be as different from being a divorce lawyer as it is from many of the non-legal jobs. Or maybe you still like practicing law but it takes so much out of you that there is no time left for anything else. If you could find a way to have more work/life balance, you might actually like practicing law again. Don't give up on being a lawyer until you have done some self-assessment and examined the possibilities for change.

Career Options Within The Law

If you have decided that you want to continue to practice law in some manner, start thinking outside of the box and consider what changes would make you happier. Would changing practice areas give you more of what you want? Explore that option and maybe even do pro bono work to experience it first-hand before making a change. Maybe you need to switch to a smaller firm, explore

part-time work options, or approach your employer about telecommuting. Do you want to start your own solo practice or small firm? This is not for everyone but is very rewarding for many. There are also opportunities with the government, with nonprofits, for-profit corporations, and universities.

Another avenue to consider is practicing law on a contract basis. I have seen this alternative blossom since the late 1980s from a new option considered strictly for lawyers who couldn't land a regular job, to a viable and fulfilling career choice for very talented lawyers. I can tell you of many examples of lawyers through the years who have decided to practice law this way, from those with four years of experience to former partners and general counsels. Some want to have more control over their lives and more work/life balance. They enjoy the predictable hours contract work affords, while still being able to do substantive work and work with great people. If you chose to do it through a company that specializes in this kind of placement, it is critical to make sure that you choose the firm carefully and work with one that has the same professional standards that you do. Your reputation is one of your most valuable assets, and working with a well-respected company on contract assignments that are in line with your career goals is a key part of making this path a good option for you.

Working on a contract basis can also allow you to explore nontraditional and non-law career alternatives, which we will examine next. Many of my clients have practiced on a contract basis as a stepping stone to a new career. Some have used the additional free time that contract work affords them to write books, return to graduate school, do volunteer work to test a new area of interest, or to turn the heat up on their career search. Others have used it to fund starting a new business.

If you have decided that you no longer want to practice law in any shape, fashion, or form and you want to look at careers where you can wear a completely different hat, then it is time to research what your nontraditional options are. You can look at what is available in law-related areas, and those that are completely outside of the law. The following is an overview of these options to get you thinking about what you might want to explore next.

Law-Related Careers

There are a variety of career options that are connected to the practice of law. Some of them require a J.D. and some do not. There are positions in almost every type of organization and every employment sector that are related to the law, including the private, public, nonprofit and international areas. There are few places where lawyers do not work these days. Great inroads have been made over the past 15 years and the opportunities continue to expand.

This is where you can put your creativity to use. Do some research through general career websites, networking, and informational interviewing to learn more about a particular option and how it meshes with your goals and your personal vision for your life. Remember that there are many skills you have developed as a lawyer that are transferable to other fields. For example, lawyers have developed good analytical skills, oral and written communication skills, and negotiation skills. Research, critical thinking, and attention to detail are all skills that are honed in law school and in practice. Your problem-solving skills will continue to help you in many other professions and roles. If you have practiced in-house, you often have developed some of the same skills that are required in non-lawyer jobs: business acumen, management skills and industry expertise.

Consider corporations, trade and professional associations, large and small businesses. Take a look at federal, state and special district governments; international organizations; colleges and universities; and law firms. Politics, international business, and compliance or regulatory bodies are additional areas to examine. What kinds of roles can lawyers play in those settings? Common ones include consulting, mediation, journalism, sales, contracting, and legal administration.

The most obvious are bar associations and law firms that have a variety of needs, for which former lawyers are well suited. So do companies who provide services and products to lawyers such as computer software companies, financial planners, staffing agencies, and legal publishing companies. Start examining all of the various companies and positions that are related to the practice of law and generate a running list. Then check it out to see if any of them interest you.

Non-Law Career Options

If you want to consider options completely unrelated to law, the choices are even broader. Using a J.D. to go into a career outside of the law is becoming more common. According to a survey by NALP, nearly 10% of new law graduates are going into non-legal careers. There are no studies that show which jobs outside of the law are the most satisfying or successful for lawyers, but there are some areas that our legal training can point us towards. Your legal experience can transfer very well into the communications fields, including creative and technical writing, contracting, reporting, training, editing, writing novels, publishing, and public relations. There are also many positions in the business world for which lawyer's skills can be of value including director, analyst, human resources, and the compliance area. In real estate, lawyers can transfer their skills into real estate development or become an agent or a broker. Many lawyers decide they want to be their own boss and so start their own businesses. You can also consider using your teaching or training skills in another field, or if it's

counseling you enjoy take a look at doing that as a psychologist, corporate coach, or career counselor.

Just a reminder that you first need to spend some time deciding which interests, skills, and abilities you want to take with you into your next career. You can then do some market research to identify what careers and roles would offer you those opportunities. Take the planning and strategic thinking that comprises so much of what you do as a lawyer and focus it on analyzing “what is out there.” You can read a good general resource book that surveys other fields in detail, and contact your undergraduate career services center as well. Once you have identified a few options, do informational interviews to learn more about them and how they mesh with your goals and your personal vision for your life.

Most People Make A Gradual Transition Instead Of A Leap—It Helps To Have Support

A word of caution here. You may encounter a case of “paralysis by analysis” when you are looking at too many options. There is a natural resistance to change, no matter how much you may need it and want it. It helps to have someone else’s support and guidance with the assessment process and creating an action plan. Consider using a career coach or get the support of a friend who is going through a career change as well. There are also a multitude of resources you can tap into, including books on alternative careers for lawyers¹, websites that are lawyer-specific² and materials on generic career options³.

Most people do not make a drastic change overnight. The majority of my clients who have made successful career changes have done it a step at a time—a gradual transition instead of a leap. Just asking the questions “What else do I want to do?” and “Where can I do that?” is a powerful beginning to making a change.

"The only thing that stands between a man and what he wants from life is often merely the will to try it and the faith to believe that it is possible." - Richard M. DeVos

This article can be found online at:

<http://www.thecompletelawyer.com/volume2/issue2/article.php?ppaid=406>