

SHOULD YOU TAKE OR CREATE A NONTRADITIONAL LAW JOB?

Many attorneys drift along a career path almost through inertia. A summer clerkship, chosen virtually at random, results in experience in a specific practice area that usually makes it easier to get the next job by citing the first.

Many lawyers eventually find they are ambivalent about their career choices or are pulled in different directions. They might want to do public-interest work but can't because of the low salary. They'd like to work part-time but worry about the impact on their partnership potential. They want to do corporate work but feel family pressure to teach.

Whether you are in the early stages of your career or nearing retirement, it's never too late to make a change. After all, as the saying goes, life is not a dress rehearsal. Should you take a nontraditional law job? Honest and unflinching self-evaluation may help you make that decision.

IDENTIFY THE "SHOULD" IN YOUR LIFE

Why have you chosen a traditional law path so far? Force yourself to be really honest. Are you trying to please significant (and sometimes insignificant) others – parents, siblings, spouse, children, law school peers, placement officers? Do you feel others expect you to take a given path? Follow in someone else's footsteps? Do you feel pressure to conform?

This may be the most difficult – and important – analysis you make in exploring your career options. The power our significant others have over our life choices is amazing. And sometimes our own beliefs about what they expect prove wrong. Once you identify what your priorities are, the process becomes significantly easier. As many career advisers chant, the bottom line is, "Do what you really want to do, and everything else will fall into place."

How you identify your internal career conflicts can be significant. It sometimes helps to take a piece of paper and make two lists: what you hate in your current job and what you like. Then add to the list what you really spend your free time doing – not what you think you'd like to do. You might think you love walking on the beach, but do you really do it?

Look carefully at these lists; they may provide you with unexpected clues as to the type of position you may want to pursue. Can you find a job that better incorporates your interests? Don't be afraid to think creatively. If you find you spend all your time at bar association events, maybe it's time to work for your state bar. If you have a passion for music, perhaps you want to explore the development department of your local symphony.

ESTABLISH YOUR PRIORITIES

Take another piece of paper and create two more lists: what you want from your life and what you don't want. Address some of the following questions:

- **Success:** How do you define success? Is money an important priority for you? If so, how much do you need to feel successful, and comfortable? How important is it to you to drive that Porsche? Will you feel like a failure in an economy car? Next, focus on what's most important to you – money, time, or work environment? For example, a nine-to-five government job may offer a smaller salary but may actually pay the same amount per hour as a megafirm post where you are expected to work long hours seven days a week.
- **Hours:** Do you like predictable nine-to-five work hours? Do you enjoy a situation with unpredictable hours, where you can take a day off midweek but might have to work nine days in a row?
- **Pro Bono:** How much time do you want to devote to pro bono activities? Is it important to

you to do pro bono work yourself, or do you prefer to be able to underwrite the work of others?

- **Peers:** Do you enjoy your peers? Feel alienated? Underproductive? Sluggish?
- **Psychic Rewards:** Do you feel compelled to work for an organization whose charter you endorse? Do you need “psychic rewards” from your work, or would you rather be in a position to donate heftily to your favorite charities by working where you will generate a large income? Would you burn out if you worked in a practice area where you feel emotionally invested in the outcome?
- **Physical Clues:** How do you feel every morning when you get up? Refreshed and comfortable? Or anxious and depressed? Do you look forward to going to work? Do you dread Mondays? Do you watch the clock all day? Do you feel trapped? Isolated? Frustrated? Listen to your body. Do you ache, get frequent headaches, have stiff shoulders and neck, or backaches? These can be physical manifestations that you need a change in your life.
- **Independence:** Do you like working for others? Would you rather be your own boss? Are you more creative in a structured environment or on your own? Do you need others around you to thrive, or do you blossom when you are autonomous?
- **Financial Risk:** Do you need the stability and predictability of a steady paycheck twice a month, with somebody else worrying about making the right insurance arrangements and tax deductions? Or would you be happier as skipper of your own ship? Can you take the financial risk?
- **Family:** What are your family priorities? If you don't have children now, do you expect to? How much time do you want to allocate to family per week? Will you be a primary caregiver to children, elders, or other dependents?
- **Avocations:** Do you have an avocation or passion outside the law? How much time do you want to devote to those interests?

- **Travel:** Is travel an incentive or a detriment? Some jobs require extensive domestic and international travel. For those with wanderlust, that can be heavenly. But for parents of small children, for example, it can be a nightmare. However, if you like to travel, consider that your job may provide you with the opportunity not only for work-related journeys but also for frequent flyer bonuses, which can earn you free vacations.

TAKE RISKS

There is no law that dictates you are entitled to only one career choice in life. Many successful professionals switch directions several times during a legal career. Change is never easy but is often rewarding. Focus on ways to minimize the risks in making a career move. Many jobs are won through serendipity – being in the proverbial right place at the right time. Get your interests out on the grapevine – you never know who might be looking for someone with just your skills. Consider your options. There are many different ways to use a law degree. Developing a network of associates with similar interests is a way to get started. Some ideas are:

- **Informational Interviews:** Identify individuals who are working in the career areas you believe might be appropriate, call them, and ask to set up informational interviews. Most lawyers are happy to meet with you over coffee or lunch and talk about their careers. Ask them about their career development and what they like and don't like about their jobs.
- **Other Resources:** Many areas have clearinghouse programs, through local law schools or bar associations, that list nontraditional jobs. For example, San Francisco's *Public Interest Clearinghouse* publishes a regular newsletter of public interest jobs, many of which are “nontraditional” opportunities for lawyers. The ABA Law Student Division's *Career Series* publishes information about nonlegal job opportunities. There also are other nonprofit and for-profit agencies that are designed specifically to assist lawyers who seek nontraditional jobs or that offer programs for such job-seekers.

- **Broadcast the News:** Once you've decided to job-hunt, tell everybody you possibly can.

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