



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Career transition is an issue that many lawyers face. At the OAAP, we regularly help lawyers sort through issues related to changing their areas of practice, leaving solo practice to join a firm, and, in some cases, leaving the practice of law altogether.

Lawyers who seek help with these major sources of discontent in their professional lives are often like Dorothy and her friends on their trek to visit the mighty and powerful Wizard of Oz. Although they begin their search by looking for an elusive answer they believe is locked away in a seminar, a book, or a counselor's brain – they soon find that the answers lie within.

My experience with both my own career transition and that of many other attorneys has taught me that the secret to finding these answers is to start with some questions. Solutions to the most troublesome career dilemmas are found in self-examination – not over the rainbow.

If you're looking to make a change, begin by asking yourself what you want from your career but don't have right now. Is it more money? More free time? A sense of satisfaction? Although leaving the law may be the right choice for some people, it is rarely the only choice. Frequently, we feel that the only solution to a problem is the most drastic one, but it is much easier – economically and psychologically – to make changes in your current career than to start all over again in a different job, practice area, or location. There is a Japanese term, *kaizen*, which means continuous improvement through

small, incremental changes. Over time, this strategy can bring about dramatic change without provoking the anxiety that the prospect of an extreme career makeover can produce. Like Dorothy in the Emerald City, many lawyers discover that they had the answer to their career dissatisfaction issues all along, but never realized it.

Limiting your practice to your areas of expertise can greatly increase your job satisfaction. One relatively new lawyer came to a workshop on time management and productivity. He explained that if he didn't increase his efficiency, he would have to leave solo practice because he was struggling financially. I asked him about his practice and discovered that he was so concerned about making ends meet that he took on any and every client who came to him. He was losing money because he was spending extra hours researching unfamiliar areas of the law. Then he felt so guilty about charging clients for his "learning curve" that he billed only half his time. I suggested that, instead of trying to find more hours in the day, he should try to focus on one or two areas of the law with which he was comfortable. Months later, he reported back that he had less anxiety about making mistakes, had more clients in his specialty area, and had forged good relationships with other lawyers in his community by referring cases to them.

Sometimes, learning how to set boundaries and gaining another perspective can prevent burnout. One family law practitioner complained that her life was out of balance because of demanding clients who required a lot of attention and frequently were short on payment. At a seminar, a colleague provided her with

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- Mental Health
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some feedback, saying: “What I love about family law is watching my clients move through change, but I had to learn the hard way not to set myself up as their rescuer. Now I am clear from the start about billing and my policies about phone calls.” Remind yourself that you don’t have to take every case, and follow your instincts. Whenever I hear lawyers complaining about a problem client, invariably they say the same thing: “I knew this case was going to be trouble, but I took it on anyway.” Listening to what your gut tells you will save you a lot of grief in the long run.

For some lawyers, the root of their discontent is difficult to target but can become clear when they understand their own motivation. They no longer feel engaged by their work and want to leave the law or their specific area of practice. Examining what attracted them to a career in law can be a way to regain that lost passion. Whose expectations are they pursuing – their own or others? What did they most enjoy about their practice at the start? What can they do to reclaim that? While pro bono work or volunteering for a charity outside the office can rekindle a sense of purpose, what really matters to each of us requires a personal reply.

Ultimately, whether through reflection, talking with friends and colleagues, or consulting with an OAAP attorney counselor or a career development professional, it becomes apparent that the answers are closer than we imagined. In our wide-ranging search for career contentment, we may discover that there truly is no place like home.

If you are searching for greater career satisfaction, call one of the OAAP attorney counselors at 503-226-1057 or 1-800-321-6227 to discuss how you can find fulfillment in the law.

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