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Career Corner

Changing Jobs, Changing Lives: Eight Strategies for Successful Career Change

By Kate Scurria Neville '92



Most HLS alums head to large firms after graduation, but if national trends are any indication, far fewer stay. According to the National Association of Law Placement (NALP), almost 80 percent of large-firm attorneys leave their jobs within five years. For some, the position was a mismatch from the start. Others find that, after several years, they've gotten what they came for or that large firm demands have become incompatible with changes in their personal lives.

Whatever their reasons for departure, attorneys who enter the lateral market often find the transition surprisingly difficult. On occasion, the right opportunity appears out of the blue, but such luck is rare. Most job hunts require both time and hard work.

Placement firms may seem like an obvious solution because "headhunters" generally take the initiative. But while knowledgeable about the market, headhunters are paid by employers and represent only those positions that employers are willing to pay to fill. For lawyers seeking to move into a different area of the law practicing in a new environment or to explore opportunities outside of legal practice, such openings are rarely a good match.

By the same token, lawyers who seek out career counseling quickly discover that many career counselors are generalists who know very little about law, lawyers, and the legal field, while those who specialize in law often focus exclusively on positions that involve traditional legal practice. For lawyers interested in exploring a wide range of possible career options—both within and beyond legal practice—neither of these is ideal.

For most lawyers in transition, finding a satisfying job will require a combination of creativity, perseverance, and hard work, along with a bit of luck. Here are some tips that my clients have found helpful:

1. Investigate before you leap: Many attorneys get to a point where they "just can't stand" their job anymore and jump at almost any chance to leave it. It is important, however, to do research before you leave a position because once having made the jump from a large law firm, an attorney often becomes less marketable. Law firms provide strong administrative support, high salaries, intelligent colleagues, and contacts that help open doors. It only makes sense to investigate your options—both internally and externally—before walking away.

2. Be proactive in exploring career options: Many attorneys are unhappy for years before they start exploring alternatives. This delay comes at a cost. A traditional rule of thumb is that an attorney's professional options become much more limited five years out of school. Furthermore, those who wait to take action are often impatient when they start and can be disappointed to learn that a job search typically takes *a minimum* of six months to one year and often longer, depending on whether one is pursuing the "low-hanging fruit" or investigating options further afield.

3. Cast a broad net: Networking is by far the most successful job hunting tactic. In job searches, the key introduction often comes from an unexpected source—the cousin of a friend, for example. Uncomfortable with the thought of networking? Keep in mind that, approached appropriately, most professionals are happy to talk about what they do and to share their perspective. Also remember you may be doing them a favor as well. It's often in their interest to meet more junior professionals well-positioned to move forward.

4. Confirm the accuracy of your assumptions: As a career counselor, I've found that lawyers often hold strong opinions on subjects they actually know very little about. To wit, such broad generalizations as "Litigation can't be done part-time" or "I can always go in-house." Before closing off or settling on an option check to be sure that your underlying assumptions are grounded in fact.

5. Acknowledge the expertise of others: Some deference is required when approaching others who have pursued different types of professional training. You may well be able to perform just as impressively as someone who followed a more traditional path in entering a field, but you also need to show that you can respect their distinctive accomplishments. The last thing you want is to spark the stereotype of the arrogant, opinionated lawyer.

6. Tailor your materials: Many attorneys submit their standard resume for any job that interests them. A far better strategy is to highlight achievements and experience relevant to the job you're seeking. Taking the time to tailor your resume and cover letter for each application or request for an informational interview, while tedious, shows you are serious about your candidacy.

7. Recognize that every job involves tradeoffs and identify your bottom line: It can be easy to believe "the grass is always greener," but in fact every job has its pros and cons. You are more likely to land a satisfying job if you figure out what it is that you want out of your professional life before making a career move. Identify your priorities, articulate what you are looking for, and determine what tradeoffs you can accept.

8. Concentrate on Moving Forward: Instead of focusing on the negatives of a current situation, begin to envision positive alternatives. For those who are not sure what comes next, the idea of leaving a job—even one in which they are unhappy—can feel like jumping off a cliff. Many attorneys, however, find that their search in fact provides a release, and they actually enjoy the process.

Kate Scurria Neville, HLS '92, is the founder of Neville Career Consulting, LLC, www.nevillecareerconsulting.com which serves attorneys considering a professional transition, whether within the practice of law or to another field. Having practiced law at Simpson Thacher & Bartlett and in-house for New York City government, Kate then shifted to work in management consulting and policy analysis in both for-profit and non-profit entities. After serving as an advisor in Georgetown Law School's career services office, she decided to use her experience to help other attorneys navigate successful career moves.