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Your Career: Ten Steps to Making a Career Change

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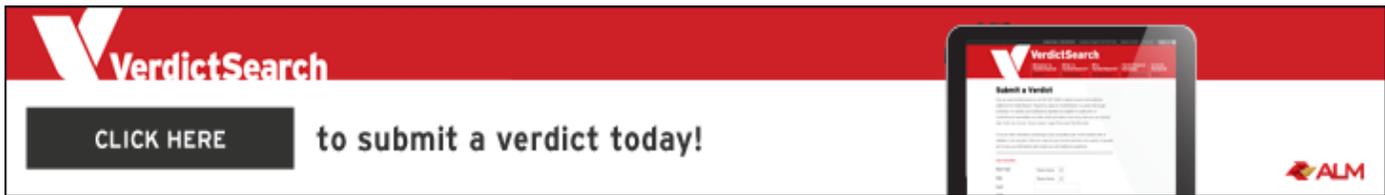
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Your Career: Ten Steps to Making a Career Change

It's the time of year to contemplate fresh starts. If you're reconsidering your professional path, take a methodical approach, says Susanne Aronowitz of Golden Gate University School of Law.

Susanne Aronowitz

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Many of us anticipate the beginning of a new year with a sense of optimism. If you have been thinking about a change in your professional life, you may have an earnest but ill-defined New Year's resolution to make it happen in 2014. It's rare for such an opportunity to land in one's lap. Rather than relying on chance, here are some tangible strategies to bring those plans to fruition.

1. Identify what needs to be fixed

Before you make a change, remember to clearly identify what needs changing. Many of the attorneys I work with assume that if they are dissatisfied at work, the only answer is to quit the practice of law altogether.

Set aside some time to analyze what's actually bothering you. Are you frustrated with your level of responsibility? Are you engaging in work for which you have not been properly trained? Are you disenchanted with the type of matters you are handling? Are you utilizing skills that are not your strengths? Do you have conflicts with colleagues? Do you need to earn more money?

Each of these situations requires a different approach. Like a good doctor, you will need to diagnose the problem before you can determine the most effective cure.

2. Identify what is working well

When we are dissatisfied at work, we tend to focus on the problems and overlook the positives. Indeed, we often feel trapped by a fear of exchanging one challenging set of circumstances for another. For most people, however, there are elements of our jobs that work well.

Take time to focus on what is going smoothly. Do you enjoy meetings with current and prospective clients, but dread long hours of writing and rewriting briefs? Maybe there are attorneys in your office who feel exactly the opposite. With support from your supervisor or partners, it may be possible to rearrange your current role to prioritize the things you enjoy most. If not, the positive aspects of your job may offer clues about the type of work you want to be doing, or serve as a bridge to a new opportunity.

3. Ask yourself, "What are my non-negotiables?"

You may know that you are unhappy, but until you can articulate where you want to end up, and why, you are unlikely to make any meaningful progress toward obtaining a position that is a better fit.

Can you identify what aspects of your job or professional identity are most important to you? What are your priorities around work-life balance? What are realistic goals given your financial situation and family structure? Could you move to another city? Take a pay cut? Accept a new title?

If you don't yet know the answers to these questions, consider them a starting point. Knowing what you can and can't live without will give your career exploration direction and clarity.

4. Get help

As lawyers, we are experts at presenting a variety of solutions and offering a structure to help our clients achieve their goals. It is much harder to do this for ourselves. Allow yourself to become the client and find an expert who can help you see the possibilities, identify some concrete strategies, and keep you focused on your goals. Start by reaching out to your alma mater; most law schools offer career-related services and networking resources for their alumni for free, or at relatively low rates. You might also consider hiring a career counselor or career coach; even a few hours of an expert's time can position you for success. At the very least, paying a reputable professional to help may serve to validate your decision and motivate you to take the process seriously.

There are many excellent books aimed specifically at guiding lawyers through career transitions, and these can be effective in helping you clarify your goals and concerns. I have found "The New What Can You Do with a Law Degree" by Larry Richard and Tanya Hanson and "Navigating Detours on the Road to Success: A Lawyer's Guide to Career Management" by Kathleen Brady to be particularly effective resources.

5. Find time to research

Many of the job seekers I work with tell me that the job they want either does not exist or that they could never get hired. When I ask follow-up questions, it often becomes apparent that these pronouncements are based on vague or outdated assumptions. I've learned that people who feel trapped in their jobs are not well positioned to see a way out. This tendency is made worse by procrastination and burnout.

However, if you are truly committed to obtaining a different kind of professional position than the one you have now, you must accept that it will take time and energy that you don't think you have to spare.

Start by devoting one hour per week to learning more about the jobs you are interested in. Use your legal training for careful research and due diligence to explore your options. Read industry publications, monitor employment trends, and look for opportunities to read about lawyers who switched jobs.

Effective research can provide momentum. Just get started.

6. Talk (but mostly listen)

One of the most effective (and luckily, easiest to access) strategies is to talk with professionals whose work seems interesting to you. Begin by reaching out to people in your network. If you do not personally know anyone who has the job you want, consider finding people through your college or law school alumni community, LinkedIn, and the networks of your friends and acquaintances.

As you discover people whose work interests you, ask them to meet to learn more about what they do. In my experience, people who enjoy their job are happy to talk about it. Use these conversations to test your assumptions and gauge the possibility of moving in a similar direction. Treat the meeting like market research to get an understanding of what skills and experience their organizations value in prospective employees. Ask about their career trajectories and if they think people like themselves are in demand.

Ask your interviewees for a candid assessment of how your current credentials would measure up. Do they perceive gaps between where you are today and what you would need to be a credible candidate? If so, understand what those gaps are and use the steps below to formulate a plan to fill them.

Stay in touch but don't be a pest. Ask if you can check in with additional questions as your plans proceed. Cultivating warm relationships with people in your desired professional setting during the early stages of your exploration will allow your new network to develop organically, at a time when you are not directly asking for a job or a reference.

7. Assess the credentials necessary for your desired role

In the course of your exploration, you may discover that you lack some of the expertise you need for the role you seek. Rather than being dissuaded, embrace the opportunity to expand your knowledge and skill set.

Think creatively: Are there ways you can seek new responsibilities in your current role to build these skills? For example, if you lack management experience, could you take on a formal supervisory role over junior members of your office? Many lawyers ask me about how to get a job at a college or law school. I encourage them to seek volunteer opportunities that would help them gain experience with things like event planning, fundraising, strategic planning and administration.

If you are trying to switch from one practice area to another, are there continuing legal education or pro bono opportunities you can use to help acquire expertise and skills? Could you write an article with a colleague at another firm linking your current area of practice to a field of law you'd like to learn more about?

Planning to leave the law after all? Your local community college probably offers reasonably priced courses on bolstering your non-legal skill set.

8. Remake yourself in the image of your target role

As you proceed, take steps to make sure your prospective employer will recognize what you have to offer. Use insights from your informational interviews to update the descriptions on your resume with terminology that will resonate with your target employers. Join professional organizations in your desired field to demonstrate your commitment and to build relationships with other professionals. Make sure the affiliations on your LinkedIn profile are current.

9. Spread the word

Let people know what you are seeking and why you are passionate about this new direction. Make sure your friends, colleagues and acquaintances understand your motivation and qualifications for the new role. Empower them to advocate for you within their networks. It is impossible for people to share resources and opportunities if they have no idea you are interested in making a career move.

10. Give yourself time

Making a significant career transition requires many steps and may take months or even years. Unlike the perennial favorite New Year's resolutions, it might not be as straightforward as a few hours at the gym each week, or a promise to call a difficult relative more often. There are many facets to a successful job search, and this is even more true when the goal is to land in a completely different kind of practice area or professional setting than the one in which you began. It's critical to stay positive, even in the face of setbacks. You'll be in no position to sell yourself to your new boss if you are constantly bemoaning missed opportunities or regretting decisions that were made long ago. ("I should have completed that MFA! I should have taken different classes in law school.") Remember that confidence is key to this process.

Hopefully 2014 will be the year you find your way to a satisfying new position! When that happens, don't be surprised to find that the tables have turned; you will likely receive several invitations for informational interviews from colleagues who are inspired by your successful career transition.

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