

**EXPLORING CAREER CHANGES:
SERVICES AVAILABLE TO ATTORNEYS IN TRANSITION**

A Handout from the NALP Career Paths for Lawyers Committee — 2006

The decision to undergo a career transition can be a difficult one precipitated by deep dissatisfaction with one's current position. The path one takes to reach this point is often a lonely one, as one struggles with the intimidating decision of leaving a secure job for the unknown. The good news is that the transition itself need not be as difficult or lonely. There are many services available to attorneys seeking to make a career change and all have one thing in common — the involvement of others in the process. Whether utilizing a professional counselor or a personal mentor, the key to a smooth transition is working with someone who will help you delineate your goals and develop a plan.

This handout focuses on the private coaching services available to lawyers to assist with a career transition and also offers suggestions on free alternative sources of help.

Professional Career Coaches

Once the decision is made to embark on a career change, lawyers will find that there is no shortage of services designed to help ease the burden of the transition. The large number of lawyers seeking to make a career transition has given birth to the growing industry of career advising marketed specifically to attorneys.

Career advising companies employ career coaches or counselors, many of whom are lawyers themselves, to work directly with clients to develop career goals and assist them in achieving those goals.

What a career coach does

While each coach is different, the services provided are generally the same. A career coach provides each client with one-on-one counseling either in person or by phone, during which time job search planning is discussed. Generally, the first meeting is free and requires no obligation. This is an opportunity for the coach and potential client to get to know one another and for the potential client to determine whether to hire a career coach. In subsequent meetings, job search goals are defined, often by using aptitude or personality tests. Once job search goals are delineated, the coach provides the client with the tools needed to achieve these goals. This includes preparing effective résumés and cover letters and improving interviewing and networking skills.

In addition to providing set counseling appointments, coaches generally make themselves available to their clients on an as-needed basis via phone, e-mail, or fax. This allows the coach to provide feedback and encouragement when necessary without the client needing to wait until the next appointment.

Finding a career coach

It is important not only to find a career coach you like but one who will provide the best service for your money. To that end, a career coach must be licensed and have prior experience in the field. One useful resource for finding a career coach is the International Coach Federation, which refers coaches who have completed an ICF-approved training program (coachfederation.org). Word of mouth is another way to learn about effective coaching. With the field growing, thousands of professionals in every industry are seeking assistance from career coaches. Use your networking skills to learn of coaches who were of use to friends and colleagues. Finally, many career coaches have websites detailing their background, services, and fees. Most, if not all coaches offer a free, no obligation initial consultation. You can ask about their experience, training, and licensing, as well as determine whether this is someone you want to work with on your career transition.

What to look for in a career coach.

Most importantly, lawyers should feel comfortable with a career coach so they can open up and really discuss what it is they want from a career. Potential clients should also feel that their coach is available to them both during set appointment times and on an as-needed basis. By the same token, a potential client should not expect to use their coach as a substitute therapist, but the coach should be responsive when the client is in need.

A good coach should have extensive knowledge of the job search process and should provide clients with sound advice on how to achieve their career goals. However, a career coach should not do all of the work for the client. It is up to the client to make the final decision about whether to pursue a career transition and to take the steps necessary to complete the transition.

Finally, if a potential client, through the course of a conversation with a career coach, finds that he or she is not yet able to take the big step of making a career transition, the coach should not force the person to do so. A good coach is encouraging without forcing his or her ideas onto the client. Therefore, no potential client should feel forced into the idea of hiring a career coach.

Pros and cons to a career coach

Many lawyers will find it helpful to speak with someone else about their career concerns and goals because it allows them to gain another perspective on their situation. In addition, an attorney is more likely to work at this transition and not put it off if they are paying for the services of a career coach.

Undoubtedly, the main reason many hesitate in hiring a career coach is cost. The individual attention is wonderful but comes at a price. While the price of career advising has gone down over the years due to increased competition, it may not be worthwhile for someone to take on the added cost of a career coach, especially if that person is looking at a reduction in salary in a new career.

The good news is that there are alternatives to hiring a career coach, and those alternatives are detailed below.

Getting Career Advice for Free

For those not looking to spend money, there are affordable alternatives to professional career coaches that can still provide you with the support you need during your transition.

Law school career services

Your law school career services office is available to you as a graduate of the law school. In addition to providing job postings, books and other resources, reciprocity programs and career assessment tools, your law school career services office has counselors on staff who work with alumni in all stages of career transitions. Like a professional career coach, law school career counselors are available for in-person or phone meetings and can be contacted by phone, fax, or e-mail when needed. Counselors also know other graduates of the school and can work to put you in touch with others who may assist with the career transition process.

Undergraduate career services

Your undergraduate institution's career services office is generally available to you as a graduate. This is especially helpful for those attorneys seeking to transition into a nontraditional legal career or away from the law altogether. Most undergraduate institutions maintain databases of alumni with whom you can be put in touch, as well as resources on various careers. In addition, you can work with a career counselor just as you would through your law school career services office.

Networking/Mentors

Often it is best to speak with someone who is familiar with the career transition process — someone who has made the transition themselves. The same rules for networking apply as when you were in law school. Seek out those whom you wish to contact, schedule an informational interview, and ask them whether they know of anyone with whom you can talk. As your network grows, so will the useful advice you receive.