

When Did “Alternative” Become A Dirty Word?

Cheryl Rich Heisler

When I was a little girl (Ok, back when dinosaurs roamed the earth), my parents were always admonishing me to have an “alternative” plan. If I was going out and taking cash, they would always give me a credit card, just in case. When I set my sights on one college, they leaned on me pretty hard to apply to a few “back-up” schools just so that I could keep my options open. When I announced that I would marry my college sweetheart, who they always loved, we just about came to blows over whether or not I should date “just a little more” to be sure that David was meant to be my one and only.

Fast forward to today. At least in the world of post law school careers, the word “alternative” is often uttered in hushed, solemn tones. “J.D. Preferred” and “J.D. Advantage” are now the politically correct terminologies. That’s not to say that law schools don’t regularly honor those highly visible alumni who have utilized their legal backgrounds across a wide range of alternative careers. In fact, grads who have left the law and made names for themselves outside of the legal realm reflect brilliantly back upon their legal alma mater. These respected alumni come back and they often give advice, lectures, and money.

But many of those same institutions are totally thrown when confronted with the reality that not every one of their current students will want to (or will actually be able to) begin their careers as practicing attorneys. I regularly go to law schools to talk about alternative careers and I almost always have a full-day’s worth of students wanting to discuss what other options they might pursue with their legal backgrounds. These fledgling lawyers are hungry for ideas and information, strategies and tactics for developing alternatives. But they are also starving for approval for going down those “other” roads! The message they have been receiving, whether overtly or subliminally, from their friends, family and law schools, is that they should go forth into the world and practice law. Any other path is seen as an aberration, outside of the “normal” bell curve for graduating law students.

This same anti-alternative bias gets reflected back on experienced lawyers as well. But once you have tried practicing law and determined that you don’t like it, or that it feels too contentious, or too competitive or too limited, why not look into alternative career options? Not only is there nothing wrong with having alternative choices, it actually sounds kind of fun and savvy to think outside the legal “box” and explore what else can be done with raw smarts, honed research, writing, and analytical tools and good communication skills.

I’m not implying that expanding career options for lawyers is easy. It’s tough breaking out of any mold. It takes time, self assessment, market assessment, interpersonal networking, sales and an unwavering dedication to the effort. Despite the famous “a law degree is a ticket to do anything you want to do” quote, it’s just not that simple. Nevertheless, knowing that there ARE alternative career choices available, even if you have to work hard to identify and switch into them, is a mind-expanding concept.

Choosing not to practice law is OK. Not being able to find a traditional legal role in a job market that has undergone a seismic shift over the last few years should likewise not be viewed as the end of the legal world. Rather than wringing our collective hands, wouldn’t the profession benefit significantly from expanding the way we view ourselves? Shouldn’t more law schools begin actively courting various other employers and educating them about how law school grads might add value to their industry? Shouldn’t more unhappy lawyers openly explore career transition with the goal of finding a career about which they can feel passionate?

Perhaps my views on this are outside the mainstream. I have never liked being told there is only one right way to do something. To me, the world of work is wide open to change and random possibilities. It’s just the way I view things, how I’m wired. I suppose you might say that, in this situation, I have no alternative.

Cheryl Rich Heisler is the President and Founder of Lawternatives™, a career consulting firm that helps lawyers and law students identify new career possibilities inside, outside and around the law.

