

Are You Asking the Right Career Question?

To make the right career move, be sure you're not asking the wrong career-change question.

By Cheryl Rich Heisler

"What else can I do with my law degree?" is a question that ought to be stricken from the annals of legal career consulting.

I know why curious or unhappy lawyers ask the question. I understand why law schools typically propel graduates toward careers within the traditional practice areas. What I can't comprehend, however, is why so many look at this important issue through such a narrow lens.

IT'S THE "WRONG" QUESTION

The trouble starts when new grads first realize that the practice of law isn't what they anticipated. Some awakenings happen early on (like when otherwise stellar students can't seem to comprehend what their law professors actually want from them upon examination). But more often, the "aha" moment pops up after the bar exam is over and the day-to-day grind of legal work begins.

It suddenly becomes clear that the struggle to learn about the law was easier than the struggle to put all that learning to use, especially while logging in long hours, fighting with opposing counsel, answering to multiple partners, and justifying your time to clients who already think you're underqualified and overpaid.

The subject matter starts to bore you. The need to laser focus on details becomes exhausting. The constant conflict over what may seem like petty particulars drains your energy and zest for life. You think you want to make a move—maybe even away from the law—and you think you want to do it in the easiest and most straightforward way possible.

But you're thinking too narrowly by simply asking, "What else can I do with my law degree?" At best, your answer will come in the form of a compendium of options not tailored to you as an individual. At worst, the list may not even offer anything all that different from the option you currently hold.

THE BETTER QUESTIONS

In my opinion, the much better questions for a frustrated working lawyer to ask are: "What do I want to do next?" and "How can my legal education and training help me get there?" Those questions, while admittedly more personal and more difficult to answer, help push the thinking beyond the box.

The focus changes. We're now looking at making a career pivot based on the person first and the credentials second.

Answering these questions requires searching the soul and values and unique qualities and passions of each individual lawyer rather than reviewing a long, outdated laundry list of jobs previously held by other random folks with law degrees.

THE FOLLOW UP MATTERS, TOO

"What do I want to do?" is the most basic, most honest, most raw question career changers can ask themselves, and it demands some serious self-assessment. The following questions also require you to think hard about what's right for *you*:

- What do I like to do? What industries or areas interest me? What skills—both technical and transferable—do I possess? What makes me feel productive? Where do I want to do this? Who would I like to be doing it with or for? What salary range do I need to fit into? Would I be willing to go back to school?
- Who can I think of who's doing something along these lines who might be willing to share their transition story with me? Who else might I be able to learn something from?
- How can I leverage my law degree to help me transition into a new role? This requires you to assess your technical legal skills. When unbundled, they offer a treasure trove of marketable and transferable skills.
- Can I write a brief? If so, then you can research, analyze, organize, argue, persuade, communicate, write, and manage deadlines. Can you write a contract? If the answer is yes,

then you must understand business, be able to draft, negotiate, see the other side, and hold firm or cave in when necessary.

Just possessing a law degree is evidence of your raw intelligence. Only stellar students get accepted into law school, complete the coursework, pass the bar exam and try their hand at practicing.

Realizing that you have a great deal to offer, even to a new industry, can be liberating. Your skills and your smarts, together with a passion for a new direction in an area in which you are already interested, can be a door opener for you.

Granted, there's a lot more to the process in terms of how to connect with a new industry and how to present yourself—both in person and on paper—but once you start asking the right questions of the right people, those answers are easily attainable.

GREAT MOVES REQUIRE GUTS

Making a career change is never easy. Leaving behind a profession you spent a great deal of time and money to enter is even harder. But if you're not finding career satisfaction in your attorney role and you believe the dissatisfaction lies deeper than just a bad boss or a bad environment, at least allow yourself to ask the right kinds of questions to help make your next career move a better, more personally rewarding one.

Former lawyers are out there—everywhere—making a difference and enjoying their work. Ask the right questions and you just may find yourself among them.

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