

Exploring Career Alternatives

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"I think that there can be great depth and meaning in the practice of law - we just have to keep struggling to find it!" Robert Girvan

Why did you go to law school? I have heard many answers to this question. My father expected me to follow in his footsteps and always thought I would take over his practice. I took LSAT and did very well so why not? I wanted to contribute to social justice and help people. I wanted the lifestyle and status that I thought went with law practice. Law practice carries many responsibilities and high expectations in the community.

Young lawyers may feel disillusioned by what they find when they begin practice. Middle age lawyers may feel burned out and report that they find the tasks meaningless. The practice of law may not be what was expected. Senior lawyers are ready to retire but find that they have not saved enough to be able to do so. Sometimes lawyers refer to the golden handcuffs as the trapped feeling of good income and expectations of the firm and family that keep them in positions that they don't find fulfilling.

If you feel dissatisfied or trapped consider the opportunities. What options are available for lawyers who want to change careers? Legal education is one of the most versatile training that exists and offers a door to many opportunities. Politicians, business owners, chief executive officers, community leaders, authors, play writes have used legal training as a base from which to launch other careers. Some of the skills developed are critical analysis, an organized thought process, as well as writing and presentation skills to mention a few.

There is also a range of opportunities requiring different talents and work environments. The world of law is not limited to large law firms and billable hours or sole practice with the associated stress. Think of the options including in house counsel, government, policy, teaching, mediation, education and international opportunities. It may be you haven't found the niche that fits. It is important to find something that you are passionate about—that you can believe in.

If you are feeling restless, overwhelmed, uncertain about your career choice don't just put up with it. Take some action to look at how to make things better. The following are some suggestions to explore.

Mentors

Mentoring is career role modeling. A mentor can be especially helpful for new lawyers who are uncertain about their practice choices, procedures or managing the files. If you are planning to join a law firm look for a firm that incorporates mentoring as part of the structure to support new associates. There are many different types of mentoring programs available. The Law Society offers mentoring through the Equity and Diversity program. The Women's Law Association offers a mentoring program that pairs a senior women lawyer with a new lawyer in similar practice areas.

Peer Volunteers

OLAP peer volunteers are lawyers who have struggled with various challenges. They understand that personal situations impact work situations and need to be addressed. They can provide support, guidance and perspective to help with a decision or a strategy to improve the situation. The program is confidential and you don't need to face these uncertainties alone.

Coaching

It can be helpful to speak with a career coach. Career coaches help you identify other skills and develop confidence. A career coach works with you to develop strategies that can help you network and find the "hidden" work opportunities. If you are stuck and need ideas a career coach can help you with creative ideas and workable plans to change your situation.

Vocational Counselling

Sometimes you do not know where your skills and talents are. Aptitude testing that highlights your interests may help you discover other areas of possibilities. It may identify a skill that you didn't know you had or had ignored.

Networking

When looking to change careers there is nothing as powerful as networking. There are many ways to do this and all of the suggestions here can help. As you know, most job opportunities are not advertised and most positions are filled by contact with someone who knows of an available position and a possible candidate.

Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program (OLAP)

OLAP can help you explore the options for help. Call and speak to one of our case managers. We can help you connect with these and other resources to review your personal circumstance or help with a plan to manage your work and your decisions.

The Ontario Lawyers' Assistance Program is a confidential program for lawyers, judges, law students and their immediate family members. To contact OLAP phone 1 877 576-6227 or check out the website www.olap.ca

Resources

Vicki Wilson www.inneract.ca Career Coaching

Deborah Aaron: What You can Do With a Law Degree, Niche Press, LLC

Heidi Greenberg: The Lawyers Career Change Handbook, Harper Collins, 2002

Deborah Schneider, Gary Belsky: Should you Really Be A Lawyer, Niche Press, LLC 2005