

Become the Best Version of Yourself - for you and for your clients

by Margaret J. Disilvestro



I had a law school classmate who knew exactly the type of law he wanted to practice when he graduated. His certainty meant this legal unicorn took only the classes that pertained to his chosen practice area. No fluff. No, “this sounds interesting,” detours for him, no sir. For the rest of us mere mortals, however, law school is a time of exploration and theory-testing to figure out which career path we believe best melds our skills and aspirations.

The U.S. Department of Education estimates that nearly one-third of first-time college students change their major at least once before graduation.¹ While the Bureau of Labor Statistics does not attempt to track data regarding the average number of career changes for American adults,² it logically follows that the trend continues beyond the collegiate experience. This author wonders whether the academic gymnastics could be attributed to the reality that few twenty-somethings can predict where they will be or what they will be doing in ten, twenty, or forty years.

There is a consensus, though, that job changes are on the rise, correlating to the increased presence of millennials in the workforce.³ LinkedIn reviewed the data of a sample of its users and found the number of companies its users reported working for in the first five years following graduation increased

from 1.6 for users who graduated between 1986 and 1990 to 2.85 for users who graduated between 2006 and 2010.⁴ This same turnover is seen in the legal industry as larger firms grapple with the brain-drain happening as young talent leaves for smaller and mid-sized firms which offer more flexibility to their attorneys.⁵

For me, as for many others in my class, the search for my perfect career continued well past my days in Green Hall. I seem to ascribe to the Forrest Gump method when charting my employment trajectory.⁶ “Life is like a box of chocolates,” and so too is the career of this Peter Pan among you who is still trying to figure out how she wants to use the education she slogged her way through one outline at a time.

Before 1L year, I knew without a doubt that I wanted to be a “business lawyer,”—whatever I thought that meant—and I got my business bachelor’s degree to prepare for it. After two meaningful internships at the Sedgwick and Douglas County District Attorneys’ Offices though, I was headed for a career in criminal prosecution, no question about it.

By the time I graduated and passed the bar exam, however I was working at Textron Aviation Inc. drafting and negotiating private plane sales and trade-in contracts and taking

classes at night to get my private pilot's license. I didn't grow up wanting to fly, but when your company offers to subsidize your pilot's license, you take them up on it.

As I approached the two-year mark on this career foray, I got restless again. I contemplated what I was "missing" and how I could break up the repetitive pattern that I found myself in. Initially, I tried volunteering. I am proud to say I have kept the commitments I made during that time to Junior League of Wichita and the United Way's Read to Succeed program. Both do incredible work in my community and are a great conduit to focus our collective energy to create lasting change.

Still craving a different challenge from 8-5, I looked back through my rose-colored glasses at my days in the fast-paced District Attorney's Offices and decided the courtroom was where I would find that pep to put back in my step. Any experienced litigator will tell you the life of a trial attorney is a challenge for a multitude of reasons.

The concept of planning ahead and controlling your own calendar goes out the window the minute you step into this arena. Even if you are able to convince your client or opposing counsel that a certain pace is appropriate for the case or that certain dates should be work-free (ex: major holidays), you are competing for the attention of a judge who has three cases scheduled for every available court minute and may want to handle your case at a different pace than you do.

There is also the reality that client expectations don't always mesh well with having a personal life. The issues that brought them into your office can't be planned to occur around your social calendar. Trying to explain to a client who is fighting to get more time with their children that you can't try their case on a certain day because you will be chaperoning your own child's school field trip is a difficult conversation which some practitioners avoid by simply skipping the field trip.

At the risk of sounding like a naïve millennial, I think this is a mistake. Part of my rationale in making my most recent career change to the private practice/law firm life was that it gave me the flexibility to make those decisions for myself. While I still work most weekends and my clients are no less demanding than the private plane purchasers of my prior career, my firm gives me the autonomy to manage my caseload so that I can be present for the big moments in life...when the judges allow it that is.

If I could give some advice to those hot on my heels coming out of law school, it would be: go to the field trip/anniversary dinner/doctor's appointment and keep trying on careers until you find one that lets you do that. Be present for yourself so that your clients get the best version of you when you are representing them. ■

1. U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., NAT'L CENTER FOR EDUC. STAT., BEGINNING POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS LONGITUDINAL STUDY (BPS:12/14) (2017), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018434.pdf>.
2. *Frequently Asked Questions*, BUREAU OF LABOR STAT., <https://www.bls.gov/nls/nlsfaq.htm#anch43> (last modified Jan. 18, 2020) (discussing the difficulty in defining a "career change" as one of the main roadblocks to tracking this data with any degree of accuracy).
3. Guy Berger, *Will This Year's College Grads Job-Hop More Than Previous Grads?*, LINKEDIN (Apr. 12, 2016) https://blog.linkedin.com/2016/04/12/will-this-year_s-college-grads-job-hop-more-than-previous-grads.
4. *Id.*
5. *Turnover High At Many Firms Despite Greater Pay, Benefits*, LAW360 (Oct. 17, 2017, 8:08 PM) <https://www.law360.com/articles/975882/turnover-high-at-many-firms-despite-greater-pay-benefits>.
6. FORREST GUMP (Paramount Pictures 1994).

About the Author



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