



Getting from

BY MICHELLE A. BORCHANIAN

A Lawyer's Non-Traditional Legal or Non-Legal Job Search

Just over two years ago, I left the traditional practice of law after seven years of private practice and embarked upon a new career as an academic administrator at Ave Maria School of Law, located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Although this change has proven to be one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, the process of leaving the traditional practice of law and crossing over into a new field has been at times, stressful, frustrating, and a bit overwhelming.

Although lawyers change careers for a number of reasons, this article will not discuss those reasons. Instead, it will focus on the steps needed to conduct an efficient and thorough non-traditional legal or non-legal job search.

Step One: Get in the Proper Frame of Mind

Athletic coaches can often be heard instructing their players to "get your head in the game." This piece of advice also holds true for lawyers preparing to change careers. Changing careers is an involved process and may, at times, inflict stress on a lawyer and those closest to him or her. In order to meet the challenges that lie ahead, it is essential that a lawyer first develop a positive frame of mind prior to embarking upon a new job search.

A positive frame of mind is accomplished through flexibility, humility, determination, and humor. Flexibility is essential when called upon to open one's mind to new ideas, new challenges, new people, and new environ-

ments. Humility is important when faced with learning new skills, the possibility of taking a pay cut to secure an entry-level position in a new career, and adapting to being the "new kid on the block." Determination will assist a lawyer in picking himself or herself up and moving on when it appears that he or she has reached a dead end. Humor transcends rejection and frustration, two feelings that are traditionally linked to every job search.

Step Two: Narrow the Search

Searching for a non-legal or non-traditional legal job can be overwhelming. Once the decision has been made to leave the confines of the traditional practice of law, many options are presented—too many to consider seriously. Narrowing the areas of inquiry becomes an essential component in the overall job search.

Each potential career should be thoroughly researched in order to determine whether it is suitable to the needs of the lawyer and to his or her personal and professional development. Items to consider when investigating a potential career include: opportunity, salary, education or special certification requirements, personal or professional contacts in the field, geographic location, variety, work environment and schedule, and related areas.

Ideally, the lawyer should narrow the list of potential careers to three. Anything beyond that number will not allow the lawyer to truly focus on the careers identified. To

the extent possible, narrowing the search to areas that are somehow related, whether by geographic location or skills required, will reduce the amount of extra work needed to achieve success.

If the lawyer is having difficulty determining the types of non-legal or non-traditional legal jobs that are available, I recommend reviewing the following books: *America's Great Places to Work with a Law Degree & How to Make the Most of Any Job, No Matter Where It Is* (Kimm Alayne Walton, J.D.); *Nonlegal Careers for Lawyers* (Gary A. Munneke and William D. Henslee); *Jobs for Lawyers: Effective Techniques for Getting Hired in Today's Legal Marketplace* (Hillary Jane Mantis and Kathleen Brady); and *What Can You Do with a Law Degree: A Lawyer's Guide to Career Alternatives Inside, Outside & Around the Law* (Deborah Arron). These books identify potential legal and non-legal careers for lawyers considering a career change.

Step Three: Research Every Option

Perhaps the single best way for a lawyer to investigate a new career is to conduct a series of informational interviews. An informational interview is something different than a traditional job interview. The most notable difference is that the purpose of an informational interview is to gain information, not a job offer. Through the interviews, the lawyer looking for a job targets a series of individuals who are currently employed in the

Here to There

area. By questioning these people about their background, past work experience, and daily activities, the lawyer can obtain a sense of how to tailor his or her career search and find out more about the new field. Without the pressure of a job offer, the interview is more relaxed, which provides for the free exchange of information. The information gained through informational interviews is invaluable to the overall job search.

Book and Internet research are also encouraged. These types of research tools will be most helpful in answering questions about a specific job market and the salaries associated with a specific job, providing contact information for networking purposes and background information on targeted companies, identifying “movers and shakers” in a given profession, and distributing information about the company or position sought.

Step Four: Identify Transferable Job Skills

The first step toward preparing a cover letter and résumé to send to potential employers who have been identified through research is to identify job skills that the lawyer can transfer from the practice of law to a new career. Chances are, upon first glance, a lawyer would be hard-pressed to identify a set of skills he or she possesses that would easily transfer to another field. However, lawyers possess more transferable skills than they may think. Skills that are valued in the general marketplace are infused within the everyday tasks accomplished by a lawyer during a basic workday.

Identifying these transferable skills takes time and creativity. A simple way to identify skills is to list tasks undertaken each day in a current job and then expand the list to include activities performed on a less regular basis. Once the list is complete, a lawyer should review each activity carefully, one at a time, and extract the skills required to perform each activity. In identifying these skills, a lawyer should consider the following general areas: communication, writing, research, organization, leadership, teamwork, and advocacy. Armed with a set of skills that can be transferred to any profession sought, the lawyer is ready to move ahead to the next

step—the revision of his or her résumé and cover letter.

Step Five: Revise the Résumé and Cover Letter

A legal résumé will differ from a non-legal résumé, but not considerably. The key to crafting a non-legal or non-traditional legal résumé is creativity. A résumé must be written with the prospective employer in mind. As a lawyer, putting oneself in the shoes of a legal employer is simple—using past work experiences, the individual knows what experiences to stress, what skills to highlight, and what buzz words to use. Entering into an unfamiliar job market changes this approach. A lawyer may not be familiar with the inner workings of a profession and is therefore forced to rely upon outside information, rather than personal experience, to craft a set of skills and accomplishments that might attract a prospective employer.


So, is this an impossible task? Certainly not! In steps three and four, the lawyer was encouraged to research a prospective field using various means, and then develop a set of transferable job skills that would be valued in the chosen profession. Relying upon the information received from these steps, the lawyer must carefully rewrite the employ-

ment section of his or her résumé and generalize the job descriptions under each entry. It is no longer necessary to describe legal employment using only legal terms. Instead, legal jargon must be substituted with new jargon acquired during the research process. Additionally, specific information regarding the types of law practiced, arguments created, and various documents researched and drafted must be replaced with general language that sets forth the skills used to create the legal documents, research the specific issues, and learn the various areas of law practiced. This process is time consuming and will take extra effort, but the result will be the creation of a résumé that can be used for opportunities beyond the law.

Also, remember when revising a résumé that non-lawyers may not be aware of the importance of items listed under the education component of a résumé such as law review, moot court, clinical experience, or related items. Likewise, membership in bar organizations may not be as significant. These items may need to be completely removed from a résumé, or explained to impart their importance to the new profession chosen.

For a lawyer seeking non-legal or non-traditional legal work, the cover letter is the first place the lawyer pleads his or her case to a prospective employer. Cover letters are a significant source of information. Within a cover letter, a lawyer can persuade a prospective employer that the skills acquired during the practice of law or learned during law school are the same skills necessary to thrive in a specific position. In the cover letter, a lawyer should draw parallels to his or her legal experience and explain to the employer how these transferable skills (see Step 4) will benefit the prospective employer and the company. Examples include the following: “the practice of law has enabled me to handle a multitude of responsibilities and learn the importance of time management,” or “preparing cases for trial has provided me with the ability to analyze problems, decipher and evaluate facts, reach solutions, and convincingly relay my position to others.”

A lawyer’s reference list must also be reviewed and revised. Quite reasonably, a lawyer’s list of references likely includes former legal employers and law school professors.



Fast Facts

A lawyer should narrow the list of potential careers to three.

Perhaps the best way for a lawyer to investigate a new career is to conduct a series of informational interviews.

Skills that are valued in the general marketplace are infused within the everyday tasks accomplished by a lawyer during a basic workday.

***Perfect jobs rarely fall into a person's lap—
instead, an effective job search takes time, patience,
perseverance, and planning.***

Although these individuals maintain excellent credibility as far as references go, their comments will only extend as far as the law. As a result, when revising a list of references, it is important to seek individuals who will be able to provide insight into the lawyer's broad personal and professional skills, beyond that of only the law.

Step Six: Practice Interviewing

Preparing for a job interview with a non-legal or non-traditional legal employer is akin to preparing a new résumé or cover letter. The key to interview success is to research everything possible about the prospective employer, the employment area, and the particular position sought prior to walking through the door. Lawyers are trained researchers, and interview preparation is where these skills will be put to the test.

Be prepared to be challenged. Non-traditional legal and non-legal employers can be suspicious about an attorney's desire to leave the traditional practice of law. Prospective employers may question an attorney's sincerity about making a career change or may presume that the attorney is looking elsewhere because he or she couldn't "cut it" in the legal world. Realizing that these questions may become part of the interview process, it is important to prepare answers to them.

Practicing answers to general interview questions is also encouraged. Sample questions typically used during the interview process can be found in many interview books, such as *The Essential Book of Interviewing: Everything You Need to Know from Both Sides of the Table* (Arnold B. Kanter); *Best Answers to the 201 Most Frequently Asked Interview Questions* (Matthew J. DeLuca); and *101 Great Answers to the Toughest Interview Questions* (Ronald W. Fry). Practicing answers to interview questions will enable the attorney to become comfortable with selling himself or herself to a new employer and utilizing the language of the new profession. Also, by practicing, the lawyer will become more proficient at point-

ing out transferable job skills to the prospective employer.

Step Seven: Build a Network

As in the legal field, many non-traditional legal and non-legal jobs are found through personal contacts. While cold-calling and blind résumé mailings may lead to employment, the single best way to locate a job, any job, is by networking.

Informational interviews are the lawyer's greatest asset in breaking into a new career. As described above, an individual seeking to learn more about a chosen field will, through research, identify certain "movers and shakers" in that same field. By placing a call and asking to set up a time to meet to talk with this person about his or her field/career, the person seeking the job will gain both exposure to people who can assist him or her in creating job opportunities and gain information about a chosen career. Although a lawyer may not be actively seeking a job offer from the person granting the interview, the lawyer is wise to have résumés available to hand to the person if the opportunity arises.

Joining a group or organization that is populated with professionals engaged in the line of work sought provides another excellent opportunity to network. Attending dinners, receptions, or talks hosted by these organizations provides the opportunity to both learn more about a particular career and become acquainted with professionals working within the career. Often, these types of social events also provide the opportunity to learn about job leads and pass résumés to individuals who may put them into the hands of someone who may be hiring.

Step Eight: Follow Up All Leads

Whether gained from informational interviews, personal connections, or an individual's own research, a successful job search will be accomplished by following up on all leads. At times, it may become burdensome to make yet another telephone call, send another résumé, schedule another informational

interview, but follow-up is necessary. By being diligent and following up on all leads, a lawyer can expect to maximize every opportunity that comes his or her way.

Follow-up also includes another element—the thank-you note. In these days of electronic communication, where information is available at the snap of a finger, never underestimate the effect of a simple, hand written thank-you note. When was the last time you received a hand written note of thanks? Thank-you notes are acts of gratitude and kindness and every meeting, every informational interview, every phone interview, should be followed up with a thank-you note. A prospective employer may not remember what an attorney said in his or her thank-you note, but chances are the employer will remember whether or not a note was sent.

Step Nine: Practice Patience

More than likely, a lawyer has considered changing careers for months, or even years, before taking the actual plunge. As a result, once the decision is made to move forward, there exists a tendency to expect miracles to happen overnight, and that "perfect job" to drop down from out of the sky. Additionally, conditioned by their professional experience to generate results, lawyers often become frustrated when results are not immediately realized during a non-traditional legal or non-legal job search.

Perfect jobs rarely fall into a person's lap—instead, an effective job search takes time, patience, perseverance, and planning. Logically planning the job search strategy using the steps outlined above will assist the lawyer in reaching his or her career goals in the most efficient time possible. ♦



Michelle A. Borchanian is the Director of Career Services of Ave Maria School of Law, located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is a member of the State Bar of Michigan, a 1994 graduate of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law, and received her B.A. from the University of Michigan–Dearborn. Ms. Borchanian practiced real estate and probate law for seven years prior to joining Ave Maria in 2001.