

BY RUTH D. RAISFELD

What do John Grisham, Geraldo Rivera and Tim Russert have in common? They all are lawyers who chose not to practice law but to pursue other careers. Many lawyers reach a point when they can no longer face drafting another complaint, responding to another motion, arguing with an adversary, or chasing another client to sign papers or pay a bill.

Weary from the practice of law, some lawyers resign themselves to staying put, thinking they lack choices; others recognize that the skills, experience and talents they have developed are transferable to other roles in society and choose to embark on new career paths.

This article provides 10 steps to help you create and enjoy new opportunities that capitalize on the versatility of your legal background.

1. Self-analyze your personal and professional goals.

You cannot make a decision to change careers without first taking a long hard look at your goals and aspirations. There are innumerable books, organizations and seminars that can help you conduct a "life-audit" as well as career counselors experienced at assisting lawyers in analyzing and redefining their personal and professional objectives. So make an appointment with yourself to sit down and fill a legal pad with a self-evaluation of your hopes, dreams and desires.

2. Examine your academic, professional and personal experiences.

Most lawyers lead their list of credentials with the schools they attended and the law firms or organizations they have worked for. But closer analysis of fields of study, favorite courses and extra-curricular activities will yield clues to potential alternative careers. Further, create a list of the kinds of cases or transactions you have handled, the fields and industries in which you counseled clients, or the products and services they offer. With this more specific information about your experience, unique and additional areas of expertise and interests will emerge.

3. Define personal strengths and weaknesses.

Ask yourself a few questions. What do you do easily and what do you fear and dread? Do you want to challenge yourself to push beyond

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Alternate Careers



10 STEPS TO A NEW OPPORTUNITY

your limits or are you happy to do what you excel in? Do you like to work with people or work alone? Do you want to travel or work close to home? If you find writing too laborious, don't choose a career that will require you to prepare briefs, reports and long documents. If you are anxious speaking publicly, do not choose a career that requires speaking often and in front of large audiences. Sincere answers to these questions will inform the nature of career options to pursue.

4. Assess financial parameters.

By now you are thinking, "show me the money." Of course, you must assess whether you have the financial ability to invest in additional education and training, or to afford the start-up costs of a new business. If you do not have the financial resources to provide basic sustenance, including rent, business equipment and supplies, health insurance, petty cash, marketing, and other expenses, you may not be able to afford to change careers immediately. Do not give up. Consult with a financial planner. You can start to save for a transition or obtain a loan that will help you bridge the gap.

5. Gather information about the market you are thinking of entering.

There is no substitute for research and preparation, both skills developed as a lawyer. The Internet is your friend. You can obtain abundant information to help you hone-in on new and different occupations. Read trade journals, magazines, and blogs that cover the industry or field you are thinking of entering and ideas where you can make your mark will emerge.

6. Identify a niche.

Once you have gone through the process of self-evaluation, financial planning and information gathering, you're ready to identify

a niche. Among the new careers chosen by lawyers include teacher, stockbroker, real estate investor, college counselor, entrepreneur, executive director of non-profit agency, fundraiser, journalist, forensic expert and comedy writer. The only limit to what you can do is your own imagination.

7. Seek additional training and development.

While entry to some professions may be possible with the licenses and degrees you have achieved to date, you may need additional certifications or skills. Most lawyers love to learn so the notion of enrolling in new fields of study should not be daunting. Moreover, today additional degrees may be obtained over weekends, evenings, summers or distance-learning programs. Acquiring additional education is an invigorating and renewing experience that will re-energize you in pursuing a different occupational outlet.

8. Develop a list of contacts, advisors and mentors, and listen to them.

Sit down with that legal pad and write down the name of everyone you respect, whether you met them at school, work, church, on a train or at the manicurist. You will be shocked at the number of contacts you have who can help you evaluate your next career move. People are happy to help if you ask for advice. The one stipulation is that you have to be open to listen to them.

9. Prepare a business plan.

A basic business plan is available on the Internet, at a bank or through a government agency. Drafting a business plan will help you understand the requirements to enter a new career or start a business, provides the basis of financing, and offers a framework to evaluate and re-evaluate your goals.

10. Be practical, patient and persistent.

Remember that it took you about 25 years to become a lawyer and maybe another 10 to 20 to realize that you want to do something else with your life. Career change rarely happens over night. Set reasonable goals, stay optimistic and persevere. You may determine that the practice of law is right for you and you may return to work reinvigorated. Whatever path you choose, you are entitled to career happiness—but it's up to you to achieve it.

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