



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Dan Binstock, Esq.

## Your Career Is Your Business. So What's Your Business Plan?

Small and typically more self-aware groups of attorneys are approaching their careers as businesses. Regardless of whether or not they are happy with their current employers, these attorneys focus on their short- and long-term goals to ensure their careers are on course. In essence, these attorneys understand that their careers are indeed businesses, and as such, they have business plans. This article focuses on the methods used by these attorneys and provides some tips on how to make sure you are on the right career path.

### 1. Do You Have a Career Map?

Most attorneys will agree that besides their families and their health, their careers are probably the most important aspects of their lives. If, however, you are like most attorneys out there, you probably spent more time working on your last project than you have ever spent sitting down and planning out your career goals.

I will be the first to admit that when I was practicing in a large firm, I rarely took the time to assess my goals and priorities—where I wanted to go with my career, what was most important to me in my practice, what I enjoyed doing the most, and what I enjoyed doing the least. I pretty much reacted to whatever work I was given and tried to do it well. If I felt that I was doing a good job on the work I was being given, all was well. End of discussion. No need to think or analyze it any further.

Now, as a legal search consultant who spends his days assisting both associates and partners with job transitions, I see on a daily basis how crucial it is to have a “career map” of where you are and where you want to be. Those attorneys who take the time to develop a “career map” are much more focused, self-aware, and successful in their careers. Rather than reacting to external factors (e.g., receiving a lower-than-expected bonus or a less-than-stellar performance review), these proactive attorneys treat their careers like small businesses and maintain a constant awareness of where they are, their goals and priorities, and whether they are staying on course. They make changes based on their personal priorities and goals, not on external factors.

If you have not yet taken the time to do a career inventory and develop a career map, here are a few tips to help get the wheels turning.

### 2. Has Your Definition of Success Changed Since Law School?

Many attorneys find themselves in career dilemmas by having an outdated definition of success. I believe this starts during law school. For example, while in law school, most people had one single definition of success: landing a job in a prestigious firm (and one that pays a lot of money). The type of work or “fit of the practice” with your personality was of little importance as long as the firm had a prestigious reputation.

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While some scoff at this definition of success, I think there is nothing wrong with holding this view very early in your career. Though making the most money is certainly helpful for paying down law school loans, having a prestigious position will usually provide excellent training and will open many doors down the road. Unfortunately, many attorneys often stay hitched to their outdated law school definition of success, even though their lives and circumstances have changed significantly over the years.

As your career progresses, realize that your definition of success will likely change as well. For example, if you were 26 years old, single, and working 2,600 hours a year at a prestigious firm in a practice area that you did not really enjoy but were receiving glowing reviews and huge yearly bonuses, you most likely viewed yourself as a success. You were tough enough to suck it up, were admired and respected by peers and colleagues alike, made a very handsome salary, and were quickly paying off law school loans.

If, however, you are now 35 years old, married with 2.3 children, and no longer paying off law school loans, your definition of success may have changed. For example, now you may be much more centered on finding an area of the law that you truly enjoy and look forward to on a day-to-day basis.

Put simply, is your definition of success still the same one that you had when you graduated from law school? If so, and you are further along in your career, maybe it's time to reevaluate and update your definition of success.

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### **3. Do you spend most of your time doing what you like or dislike?**

Take a few moments to think about a typical day at work. What aspects do you look forward to the most? Speaking with clients on the phone? Meeting with clients in person? Sitting down in your office with a cup of coffee, closing the door, and churning out a brief? Going to court? Mentoring? Negotiating? Beating the other side to a pulp?

On the other hand, what do you enjoy doing least? Document production? Handling discovery? Talking to clients? Working on certain types of transactions? Going to court?

Now, think about what percentage of your day you spend doing what you enjoy and how much of your day is spent working on things you typically dislike? 60/40%? 80/20%? If you are spending most of your time doing what you enjoy, you are obviously in a good place, will likely be more successful because you enjoy what you are doing, and will perform at the highest level.

If, on the other hand, you are spending a majority of your time doing tasks or working on projects that you dislike, you are probably in an atmosphere that does not play to your personality and your unique strengths. Most attorneys in these situations—no matter how hard they work or how dedicated they try to be—typically lose steam within a few years and find themselves reassessing their careers and making substantial “course corrections” at a later time.

While the above may seem like an oversimplified and idealistic thought process, I am intimately familiar with the fact that you need to put in your time to reach a point where you will enjoy the practice much more and receive the opportunity to do what many attorneys consider the good stuff (e.g., counseling clients directly, attending client meetings, etc.) Still, you must make sure you are putting in your time for a position *that you really want and see yourself thriving in*.

Here's another way to assess your career. Take a close look at your superiors at work (or those that are in the position you are striving for, such as partner). When you observe what they do on a daily basis, do you get excited? If you could waive a magic wand and switch places with them today, would you? If your answer is a resounding yes, then you are most likely on the right course. If you are not sure whether you would switch places with your superior or the thought of having to make this decision gives you a knot in your stomach, you may need to reevaluate your path.

### **4. What Are Your Three- to Five-Year Goals?**

Many of us are caught up in what needs to be done today, tomorrow, or next week, but not much further. Thus, another good exercise is to map out your goals that extend beyond one or two months. Where do you want to be in three to five years? Do you want to be doing what you're doing right now? Do you want to be in the same practice

area? Do you hope to be with the same firm or company? What do you want your position to be? Of Counsel? Partner? General Counsel? How much money do you want to be making? With whom do you want to be working? How many hours do you want to be working?

### **5. So Are You on the Proper Course?**

Trying to answer these questions can be somewhat stressful because they cause you think about your career in a proactive sense rather than a reactive one. If you are a younger attorney, you have probably been told what you need to do to succeed at your firm or organization. Thus, there's something easy and comforting about just doing what you're told and having the map laid out for you.

As such, if you've analyzed your current situation and determined that 1) you are pretty happy following the firm's roadmap to success and 2) you know where you want to be in a few years and think you are on the right track, the phrase "Don't fix it if it ain't broke" leaps to mind.

What happens, however, when following that roadmap does not necessarily align with your own personal goals and priorities? This friction causes some attorneys to just avoid the subject altogether, crumple up their career maps, put their heads in the sand, and hope that things will somehow work themselves out in the future.

I believe the wiser course, however, lies in realizing the critical importance of having a clear map, taking the time to reflect on goals, and making proper "course corrections." Interestingly, each time I have seen someone begin this process, I watched him/her embrace it and grow increasingly excited about moving in a direction that congruent with his/her personalities, priorities, and goals. Even if you find that you are indeed on the right course, you will move forward confident in this new understanding and find you are better able to make the right choices as new opportunities present themselves along your own personal road to success.

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