

Careers in Transition

By Linda S. Jevahirian

This article is reprinted from the November/December 1990 issue of Legal Assistant Today Magazine. Although a significant amount of time has passed since the seminar and the publication of this article, the concepts related to transitioning into alternative fields are still very current.

"Careers in Transition: Paralegals in Progress" was presented as a seminar at William Rainey Harper College, Palatine, Illinois, on June 14, 1990. The purpose was to demonstrate how paralegals can transfer their skills to positions which afford them opportunities for advancement. The speakers are featured in this article.

Paralegals who have maximized their skills in traditional law firm and corporate positions can effectively apply their talents to related industries. Keynote speaker, Peggy Simonson, Career Guidance Specialist, and Director and Founder of Career Directions, Inc., Rolling Meadows, Illinois, focused on the tools of strategic career management. According to Simonson, there has been an increased awareness since the 1980s. More people are realizing that they are responsible for their own career management.

Career management is consistent, directed action in a chosen field. Strategic career management begins with clarification of yourself, your values and your goals. Simonson cites eight anchors¹, which are the driving forces:

- Technical Functional Competence. The focus is on a specific kind of work, being an expert at that skill, and not wanting to accept work outside of that specialty.
- Managerial Competence. The emotional and interpersonal crisis of being in charge, directing, coordinating and a large degree of responsibility are important.
- Security and Stability. Benefits, continued employment and active community involvement are the focus of this anchor.
- Service/Dedication. The primary purpose is to achieve some life value through work.
- Pure Challenge. Solving difficult problems, creating something new, variety and challenge are paramount.
- Lifestyle Integration. Career decisions are affected by a need to balance family and personal life. Identity is related to total lifestyle versus a particular career.
- Entrepreneurship. Creating something new, overcoming obstacles and taking risks drives these individuals.
- Autonomy and Independence. Setting your own schedule and lifestyle as opposed to being at the direction of another.

¹ The pioneer work on "Career Anchors" was done by Edgar Schein in his book, *Career Dynamics: Matching Individual and Organization Needs*, [Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1981

Simonsen identifies three types of career change. A “single whammy” occurs when an individual likes his or her job, but changes to a different organization doing the same work. This often operates only as a temporary panacea.

A “double whammy” is illustrated by an individual taking a different position within the same type of organization or industry. This is usually easier to do within the organization of present employment.

Individuals who make a major career change go through a “triple whammy.” The skills and knowledge gained are applied to a different position in a new industry. Most often, this is the type of change desired by legal assistants seeking a transition. Simonsen stated, “You really are taking your skills and your knowledge and saying ‘Hire me on the basis of what I know and what I can do for you, not on the basis of what my past job title has been,’ and then, you need to help another organization see how it relates.

“You are in effect saying, ‘Don’t just look at where I’ve been, look at what I can do in the future,’ and its up to you to be the translator of that. To go into an organization and hope they will see how that background transfers is naïve.” Most personnel and hiring managers do not have this kind of knowledge. The key is to define yourself by your field, not by your job title.

Simonsen suggests finding a support system when making a career change. A shoulder to cry on, a foot to kick you when you slow down, and a head to understand your intellectual endeavor is necessary.

Above all, when making a career change:

- Be clear about identifying your skills and strengths
- Know what kinds of opportunities are available by keeping your antennae up
- Clarify the image as well as the content of the position with a solid, thorough research plan
- Know who you are competing with

Law

Judith Young decided to become an attorney when she became tired of the attorneys at Unocal leaving her at the office to work while they played golf. Yes, golf was the motivating factor.

Young was employed as a paralegal at Unocal at a time when the attorneys hardly knew how to use her services. Soon after, she was considered part of

management. Before enrolling in law school, she worked her way up to senior paralegal.

Now a successful criminal attorney with an office in Arlington Heights and another in Chicago, Young is launching her third law office. She has two indispensable paralegals working for her, which has brought her full circle. She is clearly a paralegal advocate.

Management

After two years as a research associate for the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Chicago Crime Commission, Linda Birtley realized that government spending for the social sciences was diminishing. Through her own networking, she landed a position as a paralegal at Jenner & Block in Chicago.

Assigned to *MCI v. AT&T* a large antitrust lawsuit, she was able to apply skills in data management, research and computer knowledge, which she had acquired while working toward her master's in sociology at the University of Missouri at St. Louis.

Working as a paralegal provided Birtley with substantive work while formulating her future plans. Her intentions were an understatement. What was to be a short-term job turned into a promotion to information management, where she remained for almost four years.

An interest in the corporate arena led her to pursue a position as a legal records and Information Manager at Santa Fe Southern Pacific Corporation, again as a result of her own networking and investigation into persons doing records management. Within months, Santa Fe was threatened by a takeover, which led her to a position as a Litigation Support Manager at Hinshaw, Culbertson, Moelmann, Hoban & Fuller, Chicago, where she has worked her way up to Legal Support Services Director, with seven departments reporting to her.

Never planning on a career in the legal environment, Birtley has found her niche. While there are distinct challenges and rewards, there are also ramifications. A loss of autonomy and control over your time, peer-group shrinkage, indifferent relationships with attorneys, and longer work hours can be expected when making the transition to management.

Birtley suggests there are more and more openings in the areas of information management and automation, and for paralegals to be creative in finding ways to apply their skills in these newly developing fields.

Amoco Corporation has very little paralegal turnover. According to DiAnn Baumeister, Manager of Legal Support Services, Amoco has responded to paralegal career needs by designing a career path, developing specialization and delegating a

high level of responsibility. The career path is a three-step process from entry level to paralegal, and then to senior paralegal.

Baumeister, a glowing example of how the career path works, supervises thirty-six employees, including paralegals and paralegal clerks. Hired as a legal secretary thirteen years ago, she was quickly promoted to a paralegal position within a year, and completed her Legal Assistant Certificate at Roosevelt University. And she will tell you that she feels like she is still growing!

The corporate structure at Amoco lends itself well to paralegals who want career opportunities in different areas of the organization. At least seven former paralegals are currently employed in such diverse departments as information resources, human resources, the computer section of the law department, real estate and tax.

In 1988, Winston & Strawn of Chicago established a full-time management position for their paralegal program. Managing over seventy-five paralegals and several branch offices is Linda Smart.

As a student at Northwestern University, Smart worked summers typing at Kirkland & Ellis. One thing led to another and, after learning the ropes, she was promoted to a paralegal position. From there, her opportunities snowballed.

In 1978, several partners from Kirkland & Ellis left to form Reuben & Proctor. Smart was invited to join the organization. Her duties ranged from legal assisting to interior decorating for this start-up operation. In eight years' time, the paralegal staff grew from three to twenty. She was responsible for interviewing and training, while continuing as a paralegal.

Reuben & Proctor merged with another Chicago firm, Isham, Lincoln & Beale, which doubled the paralegal staff. For four short months, Smart managed the paralegal staff 30% of the time, and continued to do paralegal work the remaining 70%. Her position was quickly concentrated in recruiting, hiring, training, distributing work, orienting and evaluating paralegals, monitoring billable hours, training attorneys and automating litigation support.

As a result of Smart's expertise, Winston & Strawn offers a four-rung legal assistant ladder: Paralegal trainee, paralegal, senior paralegal and a paralegal supervisor for each of four practice areas. The senior paralegals act as team leaders, while the paralegal supervisors couple their legal assisting with their administrative duties.

Smart's prescription for advancement? Hard work, identifying the needs of the organization, aggressively going after the position, seizing opportunity, taking risks and learning how to be flexible with people.

According to Jennifer Baker, Executive Consultant, Peterson & Co. Consulting, Chicago, being successful is the result of, "Doing something, doing it very well, and looking forward."

After obtaining a legal assistant certificate and a degree in philosophy, Baker worked as a paralegal in a general practice firm. Feeling a need for more challenge, she landed a position with Xerox Corporation at their Chicago office, preparing equal employment opportunity cases. Four years later, Xerox was hit with the largest class action antitrust lawsuit in the history of the United States. She accepted a position with the Litigation Support Center in Connecticut and commuted from Chicago for two years.

This management experience led to her position at Peterson & Co., where she was hired four years ago. Jennifer has worked herself up to executive consultant, after passing through the positions of staff consultant and senior consultant. With no rigid structure to the promotional process at Peterson, Baker may soon be a vice president.

Marketing

Law firm marketing is on the rise, as are positions in marketing management. In 1985, the National Law Firm Marketing Association has twenty members. In 1990, the membership has grown to six hundred.

The credentials of law firm marketing administrators range from promoted paralegals to Ph.D.s and J.D.s. Much like the paralegal profession, the marketing profession lends itself to a variety of different titles and duties depending on the organization. An administrator's role can include market planning and/or market research. It can also include media relations, marketing training sessions for attorneys, and marketing management reports. The salary can be up in the six-figure range.

Where does one begin? Marceline Johnson, Director of Marketing at Chapman & Cutler, Chicago has a B.S. in French and education; however, not all marketing directors are bilingual. She worked initially in a combined paralegal and marketing specialist position, after completing the Legal Assistant Program at Roosevelt University. Johnson worked her way into full-time marketing, and is now enrolled in the professional services curriculum at DePaul University.

Johnson's words of advice are get to know what all the people in your organization do, and become known as an individual who can take charge. Organizational skills, delegating skills and enjoying people are paramount to this profession.

Johnson's work includes setting up seminars, training attorneys how to public speak, entertaining clients, training associates in how to meet client needs, and overall responsibility for carrying out what the firm wants to accomplish.

Denise Stana is a perfect example of paralegal turned saleswoman. Armed with a background as a paralegal, legal administrator and secretarial service entrepreneur, Denise finds her position as marketing representative with Corporation Service Company, a national firm based in Wilmington, Delaware, ultimately exciting. Because she knows how it feels to be on the receiving end of sales calls from the law support companies like CSC, she can better serve her customers. And, of course, her experience dealing with crisis situations as a paralegal groomed her well for this client-satisfaction-centered business.

Entrepreneurial Services

When Shari Sommers was working on her undergraduate degree in political science at the University of Illinois, she designed her own curriculum. After graduating from the Roosevelt University Legal Assistant Program, she turned down a job offer because she could not afford a cut in pay from her waitress position.

When she finally landed her first paralegal position at Amoco Corporation, it was because she told her friends what she wanted. According to Shari, getting what you want is often the result of a combination of timing and networking, coupled with a strong sense of self and determination.

Shari moved from Entry-Level Paralegal to Senior Paralegal, and then to Paralegal Manager at Amoco. While working on her initial case, an antitrust assignment, she was responsible for reading company documents dating back to the 1920's, from which she learned about how businesses are formed, and how they operate.

Amoco offered Shari the opportunity to take classes in effective business systems, computer skills, time management, interviewing, and performance evaluation. She has found direct application of these skills in her present position as a business owner and operator.

Skadden Arps offered Shari an opportunity as a Paralegal Manager at a time when the firm was expanding to Chicago. In six to eight months, the paralegal staff grew from ten to forty-five, including a 24-hour staff. This crash course in crisis management was an added bonus to a position, which also gave her a chance to round out her background in management.

Through her involvement with the Legal Assistant Management Association (LAMA), Shari met Denise Templeton, who is now her business partner in Templeton Associates in Minneapolis.

What is behind this powerhouse of skill and information? Self-discipline, self-motivation and a belief in herself, combined with the guts to take a risk or try something new, and to apply what she already knew to something she knew she could learn.

Shari will tell you, “Just as pretrial organization is important for a successful trial, so is pre-job organization for successful career moves. You must decide what you want to do because: You can do it!

People who are geared toward leadership, creativity and risk experience a sense of exhilaration when faced with the challenge of an entrepreneurial lifestyle. Making a successful transition from being employed to working for yourself depends on:

- Preparing to perfection
- Seizing opportunity when available
- Adaptability
- Determination
- Patience
- Persistence
- Perseverance
- Self-confidence
- Independence
- Growth recognition
- Creative position making

Insurance

Carol Gillette-Husk, the Coordinator of Risk Management Information Services at MMI, Bannockburn, Illinois, left behind a long trail of nursing-related experiences when she embarked on a second career in law.

A practical nurse since 1971, Gillette-Husk’s experience ranged from Head Nurse, to In-Service Director, to Assistant Director of Nursing, to Private-Duty Nurse. While working as a Private-Duty Nurse, she discovered that she needed a career change. “I was reading twenty magazines per month. I was even reading soup labels.”

After graduating from a legal assistant certificate program in 1985, this nurse-turned-paralegal was advised by a program instructor that she might land employment faster if she offered to work for free. Gillette-Husk embarked on an effort to provide volunteer paralegal work at St. Therese Medical Center, Waukegan, Illinois, at which time she was referred to counsel for the hospital. She wound up working full-time for pay, as a Medical Malpractice Defense Paralegal at Hinshaw, Culbertson, Moelmann, Hoban and Fuller in Chicago.

Four years after offering her services for free, she was hired at St. Therese Medical Center as Director of Risk Management.

In 1990, Gillette-Husk answered a classified ad for a corporate position, which turned out to be the position she has now. She is in charge of the Corporate Resource Center and develops computer software. Gillette-Husk is a firm believer in interview preparation, seizing opportunity when available, creativity and flexibility.

Thirteen years ago, Katie Mitchell read an article about paralegals. Feeling her husband out to be given more time to bond with their young children, she decided to enroll in the Legal Technology Program at William Rainey Harper College.

Her college endeavor led her from a position with a plaintiff's medical malpractice attorney-physician, to her current position as a Field Investigator for Economy Fire and Casualty, a Kemper Company in Freeport, Illinois.

Mitchell says her hours are flexible and her job is very people oriented. She is certain that people who require a rigid schedule should not consider this type of a position.

Public Sector

If you like the combination of psychology and law, Denise MacDonald's position as Victim Services Director of MADD Illinois in Chicago may be attractive.

MacDonald's undergraduate degree in psychology, her legal assistant training at Roosevelt University, and an unfortunate accident involving a member of her family and a drunk driver all led to her current position.

MacDonald educates victims about the court systems and the legal battle. Her paralegal training has been optimal in providing her the knowledge and the legal vocabulary necessary to communicate with victims and legal personnel.

Rosemary Mulligan is a perfect example of an individual whose part-time endeavor in a professional organization, in this case the Illinois Federation of Business and Professional Women, led her to the role she has today. A legislative advocate on women's and business issues, Mulligan recently prevailed in the republican primary for the Illinois State Representative for the 55th Representative District, defeating a fourteen-year incumbent.

It started as no more than a statement made one day during a political rally. What was a dream turned into a reality. Rosemary states, "A dream can evolve into something you want to do." In her case, a casual statement was the catalyst.

In addition to her political activity, Mulligan is a Municipal Law Paralegal with Miller, Forest & Downing, Ltd., Glenview, Illinois, which has more than prepared her for her political endeavors. Her association advocacy taught her how to raise the money to finance her campaign.

According to Mulligan, you must be in the right place at the right time, be open to people, listen well, acquire outside skills and be available for a new job and or new knowledge. There is no formal invitation to striking out on your own and taking a risk. She suggests volunteering while being paid to do something else.

Real Estate/Finance

As the Legal Manager for the Real Estate Investment Department of Travelers Realty Investment Company, Suzanne Dragoo is part of a fast-growing field of paralegals with real estate and commercial finance-related skills.

Travelers Realty Investment Company, Oak Brook, Illinois, recruited Dragoo from a Kansas City law firm, where she managed over twenty paralegals in the areas of corporate law, real estate, litigation, bankruptcy, probate and estate planning. Previously, she was a legal secretary and a paralegal.

Suzanne demonstrated her way to paralegal manager after giving her boss a thirty-page paper on how the law firm could benefit from a paralegal manager. Her boss was shocked but he promoted her good idea. When Dragoo arrived at Travelers, her department was in complete chaos. The lack of direction from the company led her to organize the department on her own.

The company has since cross-trained the paralegals and the mortgage servicing and financial accounting employees. Travelers believes strongly in developing internal talent. This multi-skill approach is something Dragoo advocates, especially in the area of real estate, where a paralegal can burn out quickly.

Other areas of advice Dragoo offers include:

- Joining groups and talking to others who do the type of work you want to do
- Developing people skills
- Learning how to cope with change
- Keeping a sense of humor
- Balancing your life between business, family, education and recreation

Dragoo's position involves managing nineteen members of the legal unit, supervising legal activities related to closing and servicing urban loans, equities, sales, joint ventures, foreclosures, deeds-in-lieu, bankruptcies, and other litigation. She is also involved with recruiting and training; coordinating legal activities with in-house counsel, local counsel and production office personnel; developing and coordinating legal procedures; in-house training; department budgeting and salary administration; and supervising insurance risk analysis for new loans and equity properties. Dragoo has completed an MBA in Executive Management, in addition to her Legal Assistant Certificate.

Catherine Lawler just kept asking for more. After finishing an assignment, she would ask for one at a higher level. She was eventually promoted from Paralegal to Office Manager. That was about as pleasant as pepper, since a manager of people she was not, so she gave the job back two months later and went back to legal assisting.

Now, Lawler is doing exactly what she wants. Her “single whammy” closely resembles what she did at the law firm, but in a different setting, asset management. At Cheshire Partners, Ltd., Chicago, she performs asset management services, including cash management, portfolio (stock and bond) management, financial reporting and analysis, tax information management, and real estate management. For RAM Financial, Ltd., Chicago, she performs administrative management functions, satisfies financial reporting requirements and is a liaison between its investments, shareholders and directors.

Lawler recommends doing extra work. The more work you do, the more you will get. Align yourself with someone who will let you do the work, act and dress professionally and always be networking. Simply, ask a lot of questions.

With the right amount of drive, determination, opportunity, and strategic management, paralegals can achieve the goals that will bring them career satisfaction. Remember when Dorothy sang, “Somewhere over the rainbow skies are blue and the dreams the you dare to dream really do come true.” According to Rosemary Mulligan, we really should learn to listen to our laughter, and take our dreams seriously as goals.

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