How Lawyers Can Switch Careers and Find Happiness

**Summary:** How can an attorney with holes in his or her skill set overcome this obstacle to career change? Here's how lawyers can switch careers and find happiness.

Amber had come for career counseling after seven years of being a corporate transactional attorney. Working in the legal trenches had cured her of her initial excitement about practicing law. She had never been particularly interested in legal concepts, although she had originally liked the idea of being a lawyer.

“I’ve been thinking about it for years, but now I am really ready to do something big to change my life. What I’ve decided to do is leave the law and get into marketing. I am good with words, and I thought about going into marketing or advertising in college, but I just didn’t do it. Better late than never, right? The problem is, I am not getting interviews. When I apply for jobs they can’t seem to get past the idea that I’ve been a lawyer for seven years. Do I need to redo my resume? Maybe I need a different cover letter. What do you think?”

Now, Amber was ready to move to a totally new field and was willing to accept a significant pay cut to accomplish her goal. Her choice of marketing was a good match for her personality. She wanted no adversarial roles, liked artistic and creative projects, enjoyed advocacy and counseling, and yearned for an environment that used a teamwork model.

See the following article for more information:

- **Should I Stay or Go?**

  When she read about what people did in the field of marketing, she was enthusiastic about doing that kind of work. Regretful that she had not chosen marketing as her first career path, she was now eager to rectify her mistake. Amber energetically searched for a marketing job by answering every ad she could find.

  Her plan was to land as many interviews as possible and then make a case for herself in the most convincing way she could, drawing parallels between her skills in the law and the skills she would use in marketing. But she did not land any interviews. Her skill set had lawyer written all over it. How could she overcome the holes in her skill set?

  Attorneys and others face an uphill battle if they try to shift career direction in their mid-30s or later in life. The problem is not easily solved by penning a brilliant resume or cover letter. The real problem is a lack of perceived skills that are valued by the new field. Imagine someone who had worked in marketing claiming that he or she has great advocacy and client counseling skills and therefore should be given a chance to practice law. Even without considering the hurdle of the bar exam, it would be presumptuous for anyone to claim qualification to practice law on the strength of their desire and questionably comparable skills honed in a totally different arena.
Yet as many advocates of career change aptly point out, a lawyer’s toolbox of skills is actually quite translatable into the language of many other fields. Why then are many non-legal employers reluctant to allow lawyers to join their team? The answer has to do, in part, with the way lawyers are sometimes perceived by the non-legal work world.

Lawyers will generally get the benefit of perception when it comes to an assessment of intelligence, but they may be thought more likely to be arrogant, intimidating, aggressive, and argumentative. Lawyers are also thought to be so highly paid that a relative drop in compensation will be unacceptable. Lawyers may be typecast as self-sufficient yet take-charge, which causes some employers to wonder whether they will be willing or able to function as team players, or to take orders from other people.

Since the lawyer’s skill set has been developed in a legal context, some employers will have trouble understanding how legal skills can morph into the skills that are required for a different job. Prejudices and a lack of imagination can create high hurdles for the career-changer.

How can an attorney with holes in his or her skill set overcome this obstacle to career change? When I meet with clients who want to reshape their careers, we examine the following issues:

**The hidden skill set.** An attorney with a long-standing interest in another field has sometimes been engaging in skill-building activities that directly support a transition: for example, pro bono activities that build a track record upon which a new career can be based.

* The lawyer who loves to write may already be writing freelance articles for a trade journal or other magazine.
* The lawyer who is interested in business may be developing useful skills for a transition by managing his brother’s real estate holdings.

The question of how much weight will be given to these "extracurricular" activities will depend on skillful advocacy in the interview and the open-mindedness of the interviewer.

See the following articles for more information:
- **Try to Only Work in the Best Target Audiences for Your Skills**
- **You Need to Enjoy What You Are Doing**

The awesome interview and the "wow" interviewer can help. Occasionally, people transition into certain new fields without fully paying their dues, just by having a terrific interview. The terrific interview is one in which you effectively reassure the employer that your legal skills translate into the new position, that you have carefully considered this career move, that you are willing to make less money, and that you have chosen this particular workplace after researching the others.

The music has to be good between you and the interviewers. You have to show sincere interest in the job. You have to advocate for yourself and help the employer understand how your past will contribute to the future of this workplace. But even the best interview will not provide a ticket to a totally new field without a "wowable" interviewer. The person in charge of hiring has to be willing to let you join the club without the usual rituals and back payment of your dues. That interviewer is put in the position of having to vouch for you. He or she will need to believe you will do the job well without a prior track record "on all fours" as evidence.

See the following articles for more information:
- **The Five Musts of Interviewing**
- **The Best Way to Prepare for a Job Search and Interviews**
- **21 Major Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs**

Friends in the right places can be very helpful for the lawyer with holes in his or her skill set. If you know someone who is both influential and willing to support your candidacy for the job you want at a targeted workplace, your chances for transition dramatically improve. Let’s say your good friend from college, who knows how brilliant you are and how well you write, is in charge of hiring for *Newsweek*, and you have decided to become a journalist. You may actually land an interview and have a good chance for a job. You may have to convince others that you are capable, but assistance from a good friend in the right place can jump-start a new career direction.
Market demand makes a difference. As a general rule, if the market you are trying to join has a surplus of qualified people, your credentials will be scrutinized. If the market is hot but manpower is limited, gaps in your skill set are less problematic. For example, many attorneys found it was possible to jump from law straight to the business side of the dot-com world when Internet startups were booming. Attorneys were in demand to assist these new businesses, and some attorneys were able to cut deals that opened doors for them in management.

Another rule of thumb is: The more conservative the field you are trying to join, the more likely that you will need to acquire some new letters after your name, although market demand may affect how rapidly you might be able to acquire the training. For example, until recently, attorneys who wished to teach high school might have been able to teach at a private school, but not in the public school system. As the population of school-age children has grown, the need for teachers has increased, creating a greater market demand for qualified teachers at all levels, which has led to new programs to short-cut educational requirements for teachers.

Getting new credentials is sometimes necessary. There are some fields that do not permit anyone in without the proper credentials. For example, the only way to become a doctor is to go back to school. Other career paths may allow you in without formal schooling, but you will constantly be carded or checked for credibility. To guarantee acceptance into the new club you want to join, you may want to go back to school. This can be true even for a shift from one legal practice area into another.

Some non-legal jobs welcome lawyers without any need for justification or getting new credentials. Many of these careers are in industries that serve the legal profession. For example, to transition into sales an attorney might start by working for Westlaw, selling software to law firms. Or he might begin as a legal recruiter, which is all about sales. To move into journalism, an attorney might start by trying to become a writer-editor for a legal magazine. A move into career services, human resources (see HRCrossing.com), or college administration (see EducationCrossing.com) might be launched with a job as a law school placement director.

There are lots of careers that attorneys can do besides practicing law. See the following articles for more information:

- **12 Twelve Sexy Things You Can Do With a Law Degree**
- **60 Nontraditional Jobs You Can Do With a Law Degree and Should Strongly Consider Doing**
in marketing for her local bar association while continuing to work as a lawyer in a less demanding role at her firm. She successfully managed a series of marketing projects that built her confidence and reputation. After that, she got involved in a joint bar association and corporate-sponsored fund-raiser that permitted her to meet people in her target market. These connections helped her to network into a corporate position doing marketing, which has proven to be a better fit for Amber’s personality and lifestyle needs. Who knows where her career will evolve from here?

See the following article for more information:

- Love What You Do