

Recession Could Force Rethinking of Goals

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By Deborah Howard

The recession of the 90s has been disastrous for many and a blessing in disguise for many others. Too many law school graduates take their first jobs without giving much thought to what kind of law they want to practice, or if they want to practice law. They take the path of least resistance, joining the most prestigious employer or taking the highest paying position they can find. What they fail to consider, however, is what toll this choice may have on their lifestyle.

Some lawyers in their first jobs suffer from inertia. They find themselves dissatisfied but they are unable to take concrete action to change their situation. They may be unhappy with the long hours, with the firm or practice area in which they ended up, or even with the practice of law. While they promise themselves that they will move on to something more fulfilling, they cannot until they take the time to consider what other types of positions would be less draining and more personally satisfying.

Other young lawyers follow other people's dreams; their parents', their classmates', society's, anyone's but their own. Then they find themselves unhappy with their "choice." Worse, they often are unaware that their decision was based on outside influences and thus out of touch with their own goals and dreams.

Another group falls prey to the "golden handcuffs" syndrome. They take a position with one of the large law firms and build a lifestyle around the huge salary, finding themselves unable to consider other options that do not pay as well.

Self-Evaluation

For attorneys who have fallen victim to inertia, followed other people's dreams or been shackled with golden handcuffs, the recession may be a blessing in disguise. When faced with the actuality or possibility of being laid off, these attorneys are finally forced to rise to the challenge of obtaining a position in which they will find self-satisfaction.

By taking the perspective of seeing their job search as a challenge rather than a grueling necessity, attorneys have much to gain. Those who face their job search not as a search for a job with a paycheck, but rather as a position in which they will match their skills and interests and achieve the quality of life they are seeking, have a better chance of obtaining job satisfaction.

Young lawyers faced with the need to make a change should perform a true self-inventory, which consists of determining one's strengths and weaknesses and one's likes and dislikes. This involves making a list of projects on which they have worked, whether in a law job or a non-legal position, and activities in which they have participated. The next step is to determine which projects and activities were done well, and why, and which ones were not done well, and why. The final step is determining which of the projects and activities that were done well were enjoyable.

Finding strengths and skills that are enjoyable to exercise is important. Too often people have a strength that they feel compelled to promote, even at the expense of their happiness. I can use myself to give a personal example. I am an attorney fluent in Japanese. For years, I felt that this was a strength I could not let go to waste. I tried to combine my law background and my Japanese language skills. I worked for a law firm that had numerous Japanese clients and I even started my own consulting business catering to law firms and corporations that did business with the Japanese. In the end, I found I did not enjoy these experiences. I realized that although I loved Japanese culture and speaking Japanese, I did not necessarily want to use my Japanese language skills in a business environment. Every time I spoke about doing work combining my law background and my Japanese language skills, I used words like "should" or "ought to" rather than "want to". After much soul searching I decided that although my Japanese language skills were a great asset, I would not let that asset control my choice of profession. After working for a few years as a legal recruiter, I joined The New York Law School as the Director of Career Services and have enjoyed utilizing my law training to work as an administrator in a law-related setting.

Listen to Yourself

The key is to watch out for the use of words such as "should" or "ought to" and a feeling of fatigue when discussing doing certain kinds of work. Attorneys should listen to themselves when describing possible work scenarios to discover if they become animated, energetic and excited. If so, they may have arrived at the right path to follow.

The attorney can then use their newfound focus and direction to view networking not as a necessary evil to obtain a new position, but rather as a tool of empowerment. Networking can be seen as a method by which important information is obtained to help them find their perfect match. In this way, the attorney facing the harsh realities of the job market can feel in control of their own destiny rather than like a victim of the recession.