

CHAPTER TWO CONSTRUCTING A VISION

So you know you are ready for a change. You even know the general direction in which you want to move: public interest. But what kind of public interest job? Legal services? Criminal prosecution or defense? Civil rights? Environmental advocacy? The public interest umbrella encompasses a tremendous variety of causes and work settings. How do you focus your desire for a more fulfilling career—your undefined hope to “do good”—into a search for an actual position in one or two specific areas? Figuring out just what type of public interest law you want to practice can be one of the toughest steps in your escape from a firm. What type of work will let you put your energy and talent to use, fulfill your professional expectations, make you eager to get to your job each morning? If you know you want to move, but are not certain where, this chapter will help you to identify a direction for your search.

Asking the Big Questions

Think first about what you like to do—not just what you’re good at, what you think you should do, or what’s the path of least resistance.

Lawyers who love their work have found jobs where they can tackle issues about which they feel passionate. Their jobs reflect their values and interests, and allow them to develop their skills. Your goal should be to find or create work in which you feel highly invested and to which you feel well suited. Start by taking an inventory of your dreams,

interests, values, ambitions, and abilities.

When I transitioned, it was a time of great soul searching for me. I questioned things from the bottom up. Since I had always been a student before, it was the first time I had to ask myself, “What do I want to do?” It was a really difficult period in my life.

In many job interviews, employers ask, “What do you want to be doing in ten years?” Your answer to date has probably reflected what you thought the organization wanted to hear. Now step back and ask yourself the same question.

To find work that suits you, you need to consider:

- what you love to do
- what really matters to you in your work
- in what kind of work environment you will flourish

You alone can decide what will make you happy. To make a successful career transition, figure out what *you* find important and satisfying. Sort out your priorities, needs, motivations, and interests. Which might you be willing to compromise, and which not? Be careful to distinguish what you truly care about and enjoy from what you do well or believe is marketable; they may not be identical. Allowing yourself to be swayed by the latter without considering the former may result in your making an expedient but ultimately unsatisfying career decision.

To get started, try thinking about the following questions:

- Why do I work?

- What do I value the most about working?
- What is my current job's purpose?
- How important is that purpose to me?
- What parts of my current job do I find satisfying/unsatisfying?
- What present and past work, volunteer, or clinical experiences have I enjoyed the most? Why?
- What substantive areas of law have I enjoyed most in work and during law school?
- What courses did I enjoy most in law school?
- What electives did I take?
- On what topics did I choose to write papers?
- What do I not like to do? What frustrates me?
- What is my work style? What kind of work environment do I prefer?
- What are my interests outside of work?
- What extracurricular activities did I engage in during law school and college?
- What do I read in my leisure time (or would I read if I had the time)?
- What are my hobbies?
- Can I integrate these interests with a type of legal practice?
- How much money do I need in order to have the lifestyle I want?
- How much time do I need to be with my family?
- What are my geographic preferences or constraints?

- What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- Of what accomplishments am I most proud?
- What are my skills? Which do I enjoy using most? Least?

Take heart if you cannot answer these questions definitively. Self-assessment is an ongoing process; your responses will change as you change, with time and experience.

Decide what you want to do. Look back to college: everyone had a dream. Think ahead five years—what will your days look like? Figure out what it is you are willing to take some risks for.

Whose Career is This Anyway?

As you sort through these questions and begin to think about what direction to take your career, make your values and passions your touchstone. Avoid being swayed by other people's expectations for you. Putting aside such expectations can be especially difficult for lawyers, many of whom have gone to law school in part as a "safe" professional choice, one that pleases parents and keeps options open. Law students grow accustomed to judging their achievements in terms of traditional measures of success, such as high grades, salary, and praise. This trend continues in law firms, where the emphasis falls on gaining the approval of senior associates and partners. Until you can focus on what *you* want and what *you* consider important, your efforts at finding meaningful work will be futile.

To sort out what you want for yourself, consider first whose opinions, real or presumed, have played a role in your career decisions. Identify how others have

influenced you, and any external or internal criticism that may be limiting your ability to pursue your dreams. Consider whether or not others' opinions play a constructive role, and how much weight you want to give each of them. Your awareness of the influences that have shaped your choices to this point can help you decide more clearly what direction to take now.

What Led You to Law School?

To further chart a new career path, think through your academic and work history for clues. What brought you to law school in the first place? Recalling how you envisioned lawyering when you started school can help you understand what you left behind.

Go back to when you were deciding to go to law school and ask yourself, 'Is this the way I had conceived of my life as a lawyer?'

Somewhere, perhaps in a dusty manila folder among past tax returns, lies the personal essay that you tortured yourself over in order to get into law school. Go find it. Admission essays, however naively worded, often express the core sentiments of what you wanted to accomplish with your law degree.

In re-reading your essay, focus on what has been lost between then and now. Ask yourself what you found important and why. If you hoped to use your law degree to make a difference, whether to a particular group of people or on specific issues, consider whether those groups or issues continue to energize you. If so, at the very least you will

have identified a starting point for your career exploration.

If you find that cause less compelling now, think about what inspires you to take action today. Though the specific focus of your interests may have changed, recapturing some of the passion that drove your decision to go to law school can help you to figure out what will provide fulfillment now.

What Led You To and Keeps You at a Law Firm?

I always contemplated doing more than just working in a law firm.

Perhaps you went to law school with a public interest career in mind but, once there, found it easier to go into private practice. The forces that commonly draw students to firms—debt, the expectations of family and peers, the lure of prestige and money, and the relative ease of getting an offer with a law firm—may have made you put aside your initial aspirations.

Or perhaps you went to law school uncertain about a specific future career direction, hopeful that you would end up with a marketable degree while keeping your options open. Once in law school, you may have found that getting an offer from a law firm required comparatively little effort or planning. You may have ended up taking a job that turned out to be disappointing, instead of embarking upon an inspiring career.

If you landed in a law firm despite your original intentions, do not be too hard on yourself. Many of your classmates did as well. But to avoid the pitfalls of taking another job you really do not want, take a hard look at the specific reasons you chose the firm you are at now.

Consider, too, why you have remained at your firm despite your unhappiness. Are some of the factors that led you to accept your law firm job—for example, the high salary or the prestige—proving to be obstacles to moving on to more meaningful work? Which, if any, do you continue to find compelling, and why? Which have proven to be false, illusory, or no longer important to you? Has your experience changed how you think and feel about the relative importance of these factors? Learning from the experience of taking and continuing to work at the wrong job can take you a long way toward figuring out what would be the right job.

How Do You Define Success?

I went to a big law firm in New York City because that's supposed to be the pinnacle of success. The best job, the best training, the best exposure to what it is to be a lawyer. I wanted to see law practice up close in all its splendor, glory and horror. Who else was going to pay me \$100,000 for no experience and a piece of parchment?

Law students and lawyers often define success in terms of prestige, power, and money. Many of them have striven for the most prestigious college and then the most prestigious law school they could get into and afford. Students and their family and friends commonly consider mid to large size law firms the most competitive and prestigious employers; a firm job thus may seem the obvious choice for a graduating student.

Lawyers working in large firms often emanate auras of power. Being seen as

powerful translates into being seen as successful. Money, too, frequently becomes synonymous with success, with partnership representing the apex in earning potential. However, it takes many years to make partner and to garner that kind of authority. Both can come at a high personal cost. Rather than thinking of power in terms of your paycheck, firm size, or client wealth, you may decide it is the ability to effect social change, or to help individual clients protect their rights and dignity.

It's worth all the money in the world to see the smiles on victims' faces when we win a case. I hold onto the joy of helping people.

As you contemplate leaving the private sector, you may redefine what you consider prestigious. For instance, it may be quite rewarding to be quoted in the newspaper on a high-profile case you are litigating, appear before the state Supreme Court, advise a Senator about pending legislation, head up a brand new public interest organization, or be invited to testify before a congressional committee. If, in the end, you long for more traditionally-defined prestige, you may need to pursue the larger, higher-profile public interest organizations or government agencies, such as the American Civil Liberties Union or the United States Department of Justice, rather than employers who are in the spotlight less. Ultimately, you need to take a long, hard look at how you personally define success, in terms of your career and your life.

What Work Setting Suits You?

Think about your goals and priorities, job satisfaction, people you want to work

with, the kind of work you want to do, job security, and compensation. Balance your priorities—which ones are more and less important.

Determine and then rank those work-setting characteristics that matter most to you, with an eye to what you dislike about your current situation. If aspects of your current work environment make you unhappy, you do not want to relive them in a new location. If excess hierarchy annoys you, for example, you may find that some large government agencies are just as hierarchical as corporate firms. Similarly, if you find the stress of court-imposed deadlines in corporate litigation unbearable, taking a job as an Assistant District Attorney or Public Defender where the pace is as fast as or faster than in a firm might not prove your best choice. Recognizing what does not fit professionally for you will help determine what *does* fit.

A Few Other Questions to Think about:

- Do you prefer client contact or more research-oriented work?
- How much and what kind of supervision and feedback do you want?
- How much do you value autonomy?
- How much responsibility do you want?
- Do you like to work alone, or are you more of a team player?
- Do you want to litigate, or do other aspects of practice appeal to you more?
- Do you like the variety of a multi-faceted practice, or do you prefer a more specialized practice or subject matter?
- Do you thrive when you are juggling many tasks, or

when you are focusing on one thing at a time?

- Do you work best at a fast pace, or in a more deliberate mode?
- How important is collegiality at work?
- Is workplace diversity significant to you?
- Do you find a competitive atmosphere unsettling, or do you thrive in it?
- How important are office space and administrative support to you?
- Do you prefer a formal or more casual work environment?

Once you have evaluated your workplace preferences in contrast to your current job, imagine an optimal work situation for yourself. Consider what characteristics would make that environment a great one for you. When you evaluate different practice settings and specific employers, you can do so in light of the priorities you have established.

Finding Your Balance

Unfortunately, the demands of law firm practice too often leave little or no time for the rest of life. You may find your life has become compartmentalized into two areas: a job that you barely endure, and outside activities you enjoy but have no time for. Many firm lawyers cite the virtual absence of personal lives and lack of control over their own schedules as primary sources of their misery.

Before you leap onto another career path, evaluate what you value outside of work and whether your work affords you enough time for these personal areas. Make a list of your outside pursuits and rank their importance to you. How much time do you need for each of them? For instance:

- Do you have a spouse, significant other, children, or other family members

with whom you want to spend more time?

- Do you want to start a family?
- If you are unattached, do you have time to devote to your social life?
- How often do you see your friends?
- How much sleep do you get?
- Do you love to exercise but find it difficult to fit into your schedule?
- What hobbies have you neglected that you want to pick up again?
- What do you do to relax?
- When was the last time you took a vacation?

Depending on your needs, some public interest practices will still not afford you all the free time you want. Evaluate the differences between settings. If you go into an office with a large litigation docket, for example, you will be subject to the vagaries of court schedules. Therefore, if you need to have control over the hours you work and a great deal of predictability, you may want to rethink becoming a litigator for a public interest organization or government agency. Some government agency counsel's offices, for example, offer more regular hours.

It is all too easy for life to become lopsided and even lost to the demands of work. You will be much more likely to maintain a healthy balance between work, home, and play if you make time for a personal life a critical characteristic of the job you are seeking. You may also find that as your job provides you with more satisfaction, your life outside work improves as well.

Seeing What's Out There

Do not try to envision your perfect job in a vacuum. By looking at all that goes on in the public interest world, you will start to get some ideas about what does and does not appeal to you. Scanning job announcements and assessing your pure “gut” reaction to the descriptions can be an effective litmus test for the types of jobs you would enjoy. Based on his own transition, one attorney advises others to “start reading want ads in the paper if you really don’t know what to do. Circle the ones that interest you, and see if there’s a consistent theme.”

Be careful not to let the employment qualifications in the ads intimidate you or limit your spontaneous response to a type of public interest job you would otherwise find intriguing. Remember that employers often hire attorneys whose backgrounds do not fit their ads’ specifications exactly. Most important, keep in mind that at this point you are simply scanning ads as an exercise to identify interesting new directions to explore. Browse through *Chapter 7, Scope of the Market*, to get acquainted with the areas of public interest advocacy. List and rank the ones that spark your interest the most. Plan to explore these areas further, by researching them and conducting informational interviews. See *Chapter 8* for tips on informational interviewing.

Career Counseling and Other Means of Support

A professional career counselor may help you to discover your needs and interests, to evaluate options based on those criteria, and to plan accordingly. Meeting with a counselor can provide the jolt to get you going and the external structure to keep you moving with your career exploration and job search. Most law schools offer counseling services, and a growing number of law schools have attorneys who specialize

in public interest advising. In addition, a number of different guides, some specifically written for lawyers, provide creative, helpful approaches to career exploration and planning. (See *Appendix* for a listing of resources).

Find friends, family members, and others you trust who will brainstorm with you in a nonjudgmental manner about what really matters to you and the new directions you want to explore. Start talking about your desire to leave private practice. They may stimulate you to think of additional ideas and possibilities, and can serve as an important counterbalance to the sense of isolation dissatisfied associates often experience. Be careful, though, to maintain your focus on what *you* value.

If you feel distressed, at a loss about how to regain your direction in life, or find that your concerns interfere with your ability to function, consider seeking psychological counseling. Counseling can offer relief from the anxiety of initiating a career transition and constructive ways to manage the stress you may be experiencing. Many state bar associations and most state associations of psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers maintain referral services for licensed psychotherapists.

Lay a Lasting Foundation for Your Transition

If you jump right into a job search without sorting out what you want in a job and why, you risk duplicating your current unhappiness. Switching to public interest work may not be the cure you seek if your new public interest job engenders the same frustrations as your old firm. The time you take to evaluate these issues serves as a critical investment in your future career satisfaction. Completing the steps described in this chapter, and summarized below, will enable you to maximize that investment.

- Shift your focus from other peoples' expectations to what you want for yourself.
- Assess what drives you now — your dreams, interests, values, skills and goals.
- Try to recall your original motivations for attending law school and your reasons for taking a law firm job.
- Rethink how you define success.
- Take an open-minded look at all the public interest options to generate ideas about work that you feel enthusiastic pursuing.
- Research those areas of public interest work you have identified and talk with lawyers who practice in those fields.
- Get the support you need. Start talking to friends and develop a network of people you like and trust who can help you reflect, brainstorm, maintain (or rediscover) a sense of humor, and ultimately create a new vision for your career.

Just try it. Even if you have never been the type to make formal *pro* and *con* lists, you may find that taking a pen to legal pad and playing with some of the questions in this chapter is a good way to start on what may seem the daunting task of recasting your career. Take a look at what your heart, not your intellect, tells you that you value. By doing so, you can redefine success and embark on a career that will be truly fulfilling.