

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE PROMISE OF PUBLIC SERVICE WORK

*I felt like [my public interest job] was a life raft thrown to me in the ocean while I was drowning. I walked in the door and was handed cases worth millions—which was frightening at first because I had made no decisions at the firm. Here, I'm the one that makes the important decisions on my cases, and I have almost since I came. I feel much more confident of my abilities as a lawyer now.*

*I was attracted to government work by the personal rewards which come from using one's legal talents for the public good, rather than for personal gain.*

*I like the feeling that I am protecting the environment.*

Lawyers who escape to public interest often exude such excitement. For these attorneys, work has become more than a job; it fulfills their previously ignored or unexplored need to contribute to the greater good. They re-discover a balance between career and personal life. They feel as if their work does more than provide them with a paycheck.

While in the private sector, many attorneys struggle to fulfill their public service aspirations through extracurricular activities. Lawyers who move to the public interest world feel they are finally able to blend their personal values with their professional lives. They talk of finding a new purpose in their work, of being in a position to make a difference: to the public, to their clients, or to a cause. These newly minted public interest attorneys take pride in using their law degrees in the way they envisioned they would when they entered law school.

## **Working on Issues that Matter to You**

*Winning a Social Security income case meant doubling someone's income, not from one to two million dollars, like it might in the firm, but from fifty to one hundred percent of the poverty line.*

*Now I get to wear the white hat most of the time.*

In stark contrast to many attorneys in private firms, public interest lawyers take on cases because they believe in the client or the cause, instead of just for money or tactical reasons. If concern arises about an organization's position on a case, attorneys have the freedom to address those concerns internally.

*I've never had to advocate a position here that I don't believe in or get myself worked up to argue a case like at the firm.*

Public interest lawyers also enjoy the feeling of being “where the action is,” at the cutting edge of the day's big issues. Their work centers on the very topics that fill headlines: mounting major civil rights challenges, lobbying on behalf of low-income families when welfare laws change, fighting for better schools, prosecuting corrupt politicians.

## **Work that Is Rewarding and Challenging**

*I have the opportunity to use my creativity and innovation to accomplish something worthwhile. I can apply myself to get results that are rewarding.*

Public interest lawyers may hear the criticism that they are “too smart” for the work they do, that the government/legal services attorneys are those who “couldn't cut it” in private practice. Nothing could be further from the truth. Public interest attorneys often break new ground by creating new causes of action or novel ways to use standard claims, by breathing life into statutes with fresh interpretations, and by envisioning original ways to attack problems.

*Public interest provides a lot of latitude for creative thinking. We are always thinking about what we can do for others. We have the opportunity to think about big issues and try to do something about them. It's a broad field of play compared to law firms.*

Public interest jobs expand beyond traditional lawyering to community organizing, fundraising, and press relations. Often, public interest attorneys find they have to win not only in a court of law but also in the court of public opinion. For people who like the spotlight, opportunities abound to engage in public speaking, press conferences, television and op-ed page debates.

*I am a ham, and I get to be a public celebrity in my job.*

### **No More Billable Hours**

*I like the fact that I can devote time to cases of principle without worrying about billable hours. I love the fact that I do not have to generate new business or woo clients.*

In the public interest world, there are far fewer time-keeping requirements. Many escapees enjoy the freedom from monitoring in excruciating detail how they spend their

time. They also appreciate the luxury of allocating time based on a case's needs and merits rather than on a billable goal or limit. Without the pressure to bill hours, a more relaxed work atmosphere can take hold.

### **More Responsibility**

*In my present job, the decisions are made from the bottom up. I make the decisions on my cases, and then they may be reviewed. The cases aren't micro-managed like they were at the firm.*

Escapees often revel in the newfound independence that comes with working in public interest organizations and government offices. Unlike private firms, public interest organizations do not have the resources to over-staff projects. They rely upon the attorney handling the case to make the necessary decisions. This level of responsibility can be daunting, especially to attorneys who have been trained to run everything past several layers of senior colleagues, but, in time, they come to cherish the sense of control. Even when a team works on a case, decisions are usually made democratically, not dictated by a superior.

### **Time for a Family and Personal Life**

*I don't have to stay around the office just because other lawyers are staying, or feel bad if I have to leave for personal reasons in the middle of the day. Everyone has a family.*

Although they work hard, attorneys in public interest often find they have more reasonable hours, generally working 9-6:30 with occasional nights and weekends. While some attorneys work comparable hours to their counterparts in private practice, they feel less drained because they are spending those hours on work they enjoy. As one new

public interest litigator describes it, “Even when my hours are horrendous during trials, I put in the time because I want to do it.” Equally important, they find that, outside of court filings and appearances, they can set their own deadlines. This greater control over their workloads enables public interest lawyers to preserve time for a life outside work.

*I have chosen a career in the public sector principally because of lifestyle considerations. I did not want to mortgage my productive years in exchange for possible financial riches. I do not subscribe to the notion that the harder you work, the better person you are. I am not wedded to the law, although we do have a comfortable relationship. I have always felt that putting in eight or nine hours a day on knotty legal problems should be sufficient. Working for the government generally allows me to do that. It leaves me sufficient time to accommodate my other interests.*

Less pressure also exists in public interest settings to conform to the pace set by others. Attorneys do not stay late at the office simply because a partner hands them a task at the last minute, or worse yet, to keep up the appearance of working harder than everyone else. Whims of clients, partners, or senior associates no longer dictate their workloads.

*I have been able to take extended maternity leaves (unpaid) and to work part time, while maintaining an interesting caseload and the respect and support of my colleagues.*

Because public interest employers tend to view family and personal life as critical to employee well-being, they generally do not penalize or disparage lawyers for working part-time, leaving early occasionally, or taking a day off to care for a sick child. Some employers allow attorneys to work four-day weeks or set up alternative and flex-time schedules. Other attorneys arrange to work at home part of the time. Particularly for

women attorneys who have primary childcare responsibilities, relatively predictable hours and a lack of significant travel may be critical. One attorney reports that she gave up what was billed as a “part-time” position with a private firm to work full-time for the federal government because she could be more certain that she would have time to spend with her children.

### **Collegial Work Environment**

The sense that they are working toward common and worthy goals, along with the shared need to do more with less, creates a natural camaraderie among public interest lawyers. In addition, because the brass ring of partnership does not loom over attorneys, competition is diminished. With the stress of billable hours requirements removed and with control over their own schedules, lawyers have more time to build good working relationships. The more casual environment of many public interest offices also fosters collegiality.

Public interest lawyers frequently work as part of a team: either as co-counsel on cases or, more informally, as sources of advice and support. Working together on cases or just bouncing ideas off one another, public interest attorneys develop strong bonds. Because many public interest organizations disfavor hierarchy, these bonds extend to supervisors, who often become valued mentors and friends.

*I feel like I have a coat of armor in the support of my supervisors.*

### **More Time in Court**

Private firm attorneys often complain that years can elapse before they see the inside of a courtroom. In contrast, lawyers in public interest litigation positions gain tremendous hands-on experience rapidly. Even fairly junior attorneys handle their own

caseloads quickly in the public interest world. Often, they have sole responsibility for a case, from start to finish. Even while working as co-counsel with more experienced lawyers, young public interest lawyers appear in the courtroom, starting with simpler matters such as motions, but soon assuming responsibility for more significant court appearances.

Young public interest lawyers usually enjoy more direct relationships with their clients than their colleagues in the private sector, where partners make much of the contact with clients. Tedious civil discovery absorbs much less time, while time in the courtroom is greater.

*I hated moot court, but I love trial work. It's done wonders for my personality—I used to be reserved. It's an equal playing field. By the end of trials, older male attorneys no longer underestimate me. It is great to see shock on their faces when they realize they've been outmaneuvered.*

### **Tempered By Reality: The Perils of Public Interest Work**

The many pluses of public interest work should be encouraging to any firm attorney who has despaired that he or she will never find happiness, or even job satisfaction, in the law. But, like any career, public interest work is fraught with its own particular problems and challenges. An educated choice to escape private firm practice should include accepting the downsides that come with any new job. Only by weighing a public interest position's pros and cons will you be able to make a lasting and fulfilling career decision.

### **Governmental Red Tape**

*Dealing with a giant bureaucracy drives me crazy.*

Lawyers working for the government can be heard to complain about the “huge bureaucracy” encountered in their work. One attorney reports that “rules have to be followed even if they don’t make sense in a particular situation, and the paperwork is frustrating.” Another laments that the “six layers of review to get approval” in the federal government discourages innovation.

*Bureaucracy is inefficient, unproductive, and can stifle creativity, although with chutzpah you can get away with a great deal in spite of the system.*

Most lawyers find ways to work around the system, however. Attorneys who are flexible and able to negotiate can move through the red tape. An attorney may take the initiative to propose a streamlined approval process, or work to gain a supervisor’s trust and respect so that he or she will be comfortable loosening the bureaucratic reins. The recent trend of efficiency improvements at all levels of government has encouraged employees to experiment with their own ideas for serving the public more effectively.

### **The Role of Politics**

*I sometimes resent the way issues are decided politically rather than as a matter of law.*

Political and funding pressures sometimes force compromises and prevent lawyers in government from pursuing the ideal course of action. In addition, elections can have wide-ranging effects even on public interest lawyers who do not hold elected positions themselves. One state government lawyer notes that the civil service in his state does not protect high-level jobs. When a new Attorney General won election, many of his colleagues did not survive the transition. Even if a change in leadership does not threaten



a particular job, the attorney may find that her new bosses have priorities and political philosophies that differ from what she expected when she came on board.

Considerable variation exists among government jobs, however, in how much politics influences them. Working on Capitol Hill or as a political appointee's personal aide, one's work life is tremendously affected, if not consumed, by politics. Attorneys in these overtly political jobs know they may find themselves with less power, or out of a job, after the next election. By contrast, as a line attorney in a prosecutor's office or in an agency's counsel's office, one's day-to-day work life—as well as job security—may be surprisingly free of politics. Whether political considerations are a defining force or just an occasional intrusion in their jobs, most government attorneys seem to accept that, as one lawyer put it, “they come with the territory.”

## **Burnout**

*The need is so much greater than what we can provide.*

Some attorneys tire of their particular practice areas, become frustrated with litigation, or get fed up with difficult clients. Others grow disillusioned and bitter because they lack resources to help particularly needy clients. Still others become disappointed when they find that the victories they thought they had won have been eliminated or undermined by a new law or court ruling.

Pressure to crank out routine cases instead of focusing on more difficult, time-consuming, and important cases often frustrates legal services attorneys, prosecutors, and public defenders. Budget cutbacks at many government agencies, legal services offices, and non-profit organizations have only added to the strain. For these attorneys, renewal often lies in a change to a new practice setting, perhaps one with a different pace or different set of challenges.

## Not Enough Money

*Of course, the “down” side of a government job is the pay, although there have been improvements in the past few years. My husband’s job has become our primary means of support, giving me the luxury of trading income for more interesting work and more flexible hours.*

Lawyers in the public sector will never match the salaries they could have made as partners in large law firms. Most public interest lawyers accept a less extravagant lifestyle as the price tag for work they enjoy. But for some, the pressure to earn more money grows unbearable as children enter college, housing payments increase, or unexpected family circumstances, such as illness, arise. These pressures ultimately may mean leaving a well-loved public interest job to go back to a firm.

*After I left the firm and while I was a legal services attorney, my husband and I decided to have a family. We worked out how we could both stay in our jobs, which we loved, and share raising our child. My husband, a teacher, could work part-time, and my job was quite flexible about scheduling. When I had been at legal services about two years, we had a daughter, born with a disability. She’s a wonderful little girl. We wouldn’t change a hair on her head. But, it meant I had to leave legal services because we needed more money. We decided that I had a greater ability than my husband did to change jobs and support the whole family, so that he could stay at home and work with our daughter. About four years ago I left legal services for a job with a medium-size law firm that prides itself on its reputation for doing pro bono work.*

Rejoining the private practice world may not be as easy as entering the first time. Law firms, particularly large corporate firms, sometimes look askance at attorneys who

*The Great Firm Escape: Harvard Law School's Guide to Breaking Out of Private Practice and Into Public Service*

have strayed from the traditional career path. Some will question your commitment to private practice and whether you will leave again for public interest law. As a result, you may need to look at smaller, more entrepreneurial firms who recognize and appreciate the skills you have gained from your public interest experience.

### **Lack of Supervision and Training**

*No one knows the quality of your work—there's no editing or review, and little supervision.*

Some lawyers lament the lack of training in their public interest jobs, as well as the lack of supervision over their work. Overwhelmed and understaffed government and public interest offices sometimes cannot afford the time or money to train their attorneys. Supervising attorneys are often too busy with their own caseloads to monitor new staff members closely. As one public interest attorney put it, “No one criticizes your work, but no one provides guidance either.” For some, the lack of training and resources can hamper their transition into a new work place. However, most new public interest attorneys find that a system of informal supervision and mentoring helps them to learn the ropes. Before you accept a public interest job, pay close attention to the training, supervision, and resources that the office has, and determine the minimum you need to function successfully.

### **Spartan Lawyering**

*I went from a law firm where my pencils were sharpened for me to a DA's office that didn't have enough postage stamps to mail subpoenas regularly.*

Gone are the all-night word processing pools, private secretaries, extensive libraries, support staff, and litigation resources. Public interest attorneys must do their

own copying and word processing, and may have to plead for access to university law libraries because of insufficient resources. Many public interest work places cannot afford access to on-line research tools.

*It feels like David and Goliath. Our side is always outspent and always under the gun from large law firm opposition. We don't have the same resources as a large firm representing rich clients.*

Gone as well are the perks, free dinners, cab fares home at two a.m., expensive holiday parties, office retreats, and annual gifts. In contrast, public interest attorneys get little or nothing in the way of meal allowances, and holiday parties often mean potluck. In addition, attorneys used to plush, quiet private offices may find themselves in crowded quarters with hand-me-down furnishings. Public interest attorneys must learn to live without creature comforts.

### **Getting “Promoted Out” into Administrative Jobs**

*I used to do litigation. Since becoming General Counsel, I do virtually no litigation. While I miss it, I try to compensate by being argumentative with my co-workers, my family, and my few remaining friends.*

In private practice, moving up generally means more than a higher salary and a corner office, it means more autonomy over your caseload and more interesting, challenging work. In some government and public interest organizations, however, the opposite can happen. As attorneys gain seniority in the office and demonstrate their talents, they climb into administrative or managerial jobs that take them away from the “front lines” of public service lawyering. Such jobs carry status, prestige, and even relatively high salaries, but they also carry costs— more time needed for administrative

tasks, case management, and funding issues, and less time to represent clients. This move into administration grants attorneys greater supervision over staff and a better niche in the hierarchy, but some attorneys miss the fast pace and camaraderie of representing clients and arguing cases in court.

Before you take a public interest job, consider the opportunities for promotion, and how such a promotion would fit with your own interests and temperament. Bear in mind that lawyers choose to move into administration; many highly experienced public interest attorneys elect to stay in the trenches instead of moving up. Other public interest lawyers opt, in time, to move to different organizations altogether in order to find positions that combine the kind of lawyering they like to do with the advancement they seek.

### **The Big Picture: The Overall Satisfaction Achieved**

Despite less pay and less luxurious work conditions, escapees value the overall sense of satisfaction that switching to public interest work has brought to their lives. They find that the opportunities to take on significant responsibility and to work on issues they care about, as well as a more predictable work schedule, contrast starkly with the long hours filled with mundane tasks they experienced at their firms. Having moved to public interest law in search of more meaningful work and a chance at preserving time for a personal life, they delight in discovering that their expectations have not only been met, but surpassed:

*I share the secret of those of us who love our public sector jobs: we are proud to hold these jobs and, on many (if not all) days, these are jobs that we would pay to have.*

*I look forward to going to work each morning, and I am very proud of what I have been able to accomplish. Who could ask for more?*

*After a couple of years at two law firms, I became totally disillusioned with my career and frustrated with my inability to help others. Since switching gears, I am a satisfied and fulfilled attorney who enjoys advocating for those who cannot help themselves. I truly love my job and can envision working here forever—a statement that few attorneys in the private sector can make.*

## 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.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **TIMING YOUR TRANSITION**

When should you leave your law firm job for public interest work, and how long will the transition take? As you plan this major career change, these questions will be among the first to come up. The answers rest largely on how your individual aspirations and circumstances intersect with job market conditions.

Hard and fast rules for timing your break from the firm do not exist. For example, the belief that you must remain as an associate at least two to three years to make yourself marketable is just a myth. It should not influence when you decide to leave. Leaving private practice before completing this imaginary two to three year requirement is also unlikely to damage your rapport with the people who know you at the firm. Many attorneys who have left before finishing even one year maintain good relationships with their law firms.

The truth is that attorneys successfully embark on public interest careers from every stage of law firm life: from three months after starting at a law firm to post-retirement after a stint as managing partner. Most associates who ultimately gravitate towards public interest work develop an irrepressible urge to leave private practice after one to four years. Some dissatisfied firm attorneys want to get out immediately; they resign first and look later. Others unexpectedly become aware of public interest opportunities and leap at them, exiting private practice long before they had planned. Still others search six months or more to find the right public interest job while continuing to

work full-time. Unless your firm asks you to leave, you control the timing of your transition.

*The time never seemed to go fast enough. I felt stressed and competitive, trying to keep up with everyone else, and I felt out of place with the country club set. After about a year and a half, I started looking actively for a public sector alternative. While at the firm, I volunteered for a local bar association committee on Advocacy for the Elderly, writing grant proposals to set up an independent project. When that project obtained funding, I was hired as its Director. I left the firm seven months after I began my job search.*

### **Assessing the Urgency of Leaving**

Some lawyers seeking to escape law firms simply feel unable to withstand one more day at the office. Others want to try something more rewarding but do not feel any immediate pressure to depart. Most fall somewhere in-between. Departure timetables vary based on individual experiences with firm work and working conditions.

*I decided I wanted to leave my first day there. It took me six and a half years to do it. I knew I wasn't a long-termmer, but I stayed because it was easier to look around from the firm. I finally made the jump, and it was the best thing I've ever done.*

The speed with which you want to depart will affect how you structure your job search. You need to evaluate how long you can survive firm life while looking for the right transition into public interest practice. Will you be able to remain at your current job for weeks, months, or years?

*After being at the firm for a year and feeling burned out, I thought two weeks' vacation would help to make me feel better, refreshed. When it didn't, and I felt just as bad on my return, I knew something more was wrong. I decided that I wanted to leave at that point but found myself immersed in too much work to focus on my job search. After another year of escalating unhappiness, I realized that I had to make leaving a priority.*

To determine how pressing it is for you to leave, take a hard look at what emotional toll, if any, private practice exacts from you. You may like private practice and be looking simply to find a career that provides even more professional satisfaction. Many associates, however, feel dissatisfied with aspects of law firm employment, but dismiss their misery as a part of the job.

*Don't suppress your dissatisfied feelings. I'm sure I would have had a mid-life crisis if I kept going at the firm.*

As a rule, unhappiness signals that something is wrong. Unhappiness can also be a powerful motivator: discontent often serves as a catalyst for positive change.

*I made the decision to leave early because I felt I was going batty. I was becoming very stressed, getting migraine headaches, feeling physically ill a lot of the time. I wasn't feeling like me. It was like someone had taken out my circuit boards. I went to a career counselor, who said based on my test results she wouldn't be surprised if I was feeling alienated. I knew I was feeling angry.*

If possible, leave while you are still on good terms with your firm, before you become so unhappy that your work product or working relationships suffer. Remember that your former employer's opinions of you and your work will not evaporate because you have left the private bar. They are likely to continue to play a part in your career.

In addition to such emotional and psychological considerations, life circumstances play an important role in the timing of many attorneys' moves to the public sector.

Younger lawyers often make the leap while still single or childless, when they feel their lifestyles can best undergo the transition. Other lawyers find that only after they have paid off most of their student loans or have saved enough for a down payment on a house, do they feel comfortable making the switch to public interest. Any time, however, can be the right time if it matches your individual needs?

*If I was going to do public interest work at all, this was the time in my life to do it. I planned to leave private practice from the beginning because I always wanted to do poverty law. I figured I'd spend two years at the firm, and that's when I left. I was married without children and the law school had a loan forgiveness program*



*that would cover me. Everything was in place for me to take the plunge. I started looking in the fall and left in January of that year.*

## **The Role of Job Requirements**

The level of experience demanded by the public interest job you are after will also bear on the timing of your departure. You may, for example, find yourself most interested in employers such as the Department of Justice, U.S. Attorney's Offices, or impact litigation organizations that strongly prefer to hire attorneys with a minimum of two to three years legal experience. Keep in mind, though, that private practice is only one way to meet that requirement. Public interest jobs, which you may find more enjoyable than law firm work, can also provide superior training and credentials. Excellent lawyering experience can be gained in practice settings such as District Attorneys' and Attorney Generals' Offices, Legal Services offices, and in a variety of non-profit organizations, many of which may not require extensive prior experience. By considering alternative, more readily available public interest settings that provide relevant experience, you can leave your firm earlier than you may have thought and better position yourself for your ultimate public interest objective.

If you do not feel any personal sense of urgency to leave private practice, or if you have federal prosecution, high-level government work, or impact litigation as your goal, staying at your firm to build the requisite years of experience remains a viable option. Be sure, however, that you are actually developing skills and expertise from your work at the firm that will enhance your marketability when you make the transition. Working for a number of years in a big firm litigation department, for example, will not

impress a public interest employer if your experience consists mainly of discovery practice with little courtroom work. Also, keep in mind that the longer you stay, the more prospective public sector and non-profit employers may question your commitment to their endeavors. If you stay at your firm for a few years or longer, setting aside time for pro bono work becomes essential to demonstrating an on-going commitment to public interest work as well as to making contacts that will assist you in your future job search.

### **Anticipating Your Transition's Timeline**

No one can predict how long it will take you to land an offer that will launch your public interest career. Unlike law firms, which usually know well in advance how many new associates or laterals they will be able to hire for the next fiscal year, public interest employers hire within the constraints of tight budgets whose parameters often remain uncertain until the last minute. Most public interest organizations and government agencies thus have no formal hiring cycle, but hire as vacancies arise and funds allow.

*I applied for an opening at [a federal agency in D.C.] in March, as soon as it was posted. I didn't hear from them until the agency called in mid-September and asked me to come in that day for an interview. They had to fill the position immediately or they would lose the funding. They made me an offer the day of the interview.*

*There's a moral to this story—it can take a long time. Be patient. You can apply and then sit there for months not hearing anything and think that nothing's going to happen. Then, all of a sudden, you get a call, and the final stages of the*

*hiring process can happen more quickly and informally than you would ever have thought possible in the federal government. You need to be prepared mentally for how long the initial phases can take.*

In the public interest market, you must seize the chance to do a particular kind of work, or it may not present itself again any time soon. Timing is particularly critical for those public interest practice settings that do have regular hiring calendars, such as certain District Attorneys' offices (especially for newer attorneys), government agencies and Capitol Hill after elections or when budget freezes have been lifted, temporary work such as political campaigns, and rarely-open jobs with prestigious public interest non-profits.

*I wanted to leave my firm practice to become more involved in outside political activities. I was active in the Democratic Party and energized by my political work. The opportunity to run for City Council came my way. I took the chance and left the firm without any promise from them that I would be able to come back. I went eight months without income during the campaign. We had a newborn baby at the time. I was elected. Looking back, it took substantial commitment, determination, and guts to do.*

Attorneys practicing in firms who have longer-term, but not immediate, plans to leave occasionally find that opportunity comes knocking before they seek it out. Such opportunities most often arise when your practice area within the firm relates to the

public interest field you hope to move into, or if you are handling pro bono cases and local public interest attorneys come to know and think highly of your work. Letting trusted people in on your dreams for the future can also result in unexpected opportunity.

*A friend of mine saw a notice of an opening at the government agency that I appeared before on a regular basis. She asked me, 'Isn't this what you want to do?' I applied for the job, even though it was earlier than I had planned to leave the firm. My husband and I talked it over. We agreed that if I wanted the job in two years, when I had planned to leave the firm, it probably wouldn't be available to me. When the agency offered me the position, I decided to take it.*

Sketch out a timetable for your job search, and target an optimal departure date. Making your plans more concrete will keep you oriented toward your public interest goals, even if you ultimately need to adjust your original schedule. With patience and persistence, even unlikely career changes can become realities.

*I left my first job at a traditional law firm within four months, knowing immediately that it was not for me. Four years later, I resigned from my second, more progressive, law firm job, feeling I could no longer tolerate the adversarial nature of the legal process, the time pressures, and meaninglessness of my work. I was answering to too many masters, both clients and partners. I decided to answer to myself. I left without having another job lined up and without knowing exactly what I would look for once I started my job search.*

*I set aside time to reassess my career goals. I talked to everyone I could think of who might help. I decided that I wanted a non-traditional legal job, doing program administration and policy work in urban development. I landed a job after nine months of networking, when someone I had impressed during an informational interview decided to create a job for me.*

### **How Much Time a Typical Search Takes**

Count on searching a minimum of six to nine months from formally starting the self-assessment process to accepting the right opportunity. Of course, you may prove to be the happy exception and receive a terrific offer in a shorter time. The likelihood for a more rapid transition grows if you have done pro bono or other volunteer work while at the firm, or even in law school, that connects to your public interest goals, and if you have maintained or can renew your public interest contacts.

Expect your transition to take longer than six to nine months if you plan to:

- Limit your search to a small geographic area
- Apply only to a few organizations or government agencies, or to a very specialized area of public interest work
- Change to a substantive practice area in which you have minimal experience and/or contacts
- Enter non-traditional legal, or non-legal, public interest work without a background in that type of work
- Strike out on your own as a public interest entrepreneur
- Campaign for public office

The more flexible you are, without straying too far from your ultimate public interest job or becoming unfocused, the more likely you are to make a quick, successful transition.

### **Leaving Before You Have Another Job**

*I gave notice before getting a definite offer for another job. I knew that if I didn't draw a line in the sand for myself and make the move by then, the firm would be an easy place to stay. Because of the way cases were scheduled, I knew that if I didn't leave by July I'd probably wind up staying until at least December, which would be too late to get an early foothold in the political campaign work I wanted to pursue.*

Conventional wisdom says that if you have the choice, keep your job until you find another one. Although most of the lawyers leaving private practice follow that advice, some leave their firms before having another job. They do so for a variety of reasons—feeling too miserable to stay at the firm any longer, believing that they will never actually leave otherwise, wanting to devote more time to their job search than they are able to manage while at the firm, moving long-distance, or wanting to take a personal detour before going back to lawyering.

*I knew from the beginning that I would want to leave the firm, but had made no definite plans. After almost five years I was still there and miserable. A colleague and good friend decided he had had it, gave notice and planned a long trip before starting his job search. He inspired me. I gave notice and joined him. We traveled*

*cross-country for three months and had a fabulous time. When we got back, I started talking to everyone I could think of about my goal to get into non-profit program development.*

Before leaving your firm without another offer, carefully weigh the risks and benefits. In addition to the obvious financial and benefits considerations, the downsides can include temporary loss of professional identity and collegial contact, as well as suddenly unstructured days. You will also probably have to explain to potential employers why you left your job and what you are doing now.

*If you leave your job before you have another, it may raise questions in prospective employers' minds, but if they're answered, it won't have a negative impact. It may be more problematic if you've jumped around a lot, having spent a couple of years at a variety of firms.*

Leaving without an offer becomes less risky if you are so unhappy that staying at the firm puts your emotional well-being in jeopardy. It also makes sense if your unhappiness at the firm affects your work so severely that you risk being fired or damaging your professional reputation or relationships. An early departure may also allow you to devote extra time to comprehensive career exploration, replenishing your energy and drive, reconnecting with family and friends, and rediscovering other interests that have fallen by the wayside.

*I kept my intentions to leave secret from the partners when I first started looking for a legal services job. Then three months later I had a childcare crisis and decided to give notice without having another job yet. I guess that was a free-fall kind of thing to do. It turned out it was good not to be pulled in two directions at once, trying to get the law firm work done and job hunting too, which can be a time-consuming thing.*

Gaining a lot of unstructured time can be liberating. However, it may also prove challenging to use this windfall in a disciplined way, without the external organization of a work environment. Plan how you will conduct your search before leaving the firm. When you are ready to start, approach your search as if it were a full-time job. Schedule a specific period of time to work at it each day. If you need to build up your public interest credentials, consider scheduling in some pro bono work in your chosen area. Staying actively engaged with people you find supportive becomes especially critical to boosting your morale and resolution if you choose to job hunt while unemployed.

### **Intermediate Moves**

Undertaking volunteer legal work for a public interest organization or even a government agency provides attorneys who leave private practice with an excellent transitional option. An unpaid position enables an attorney to keep skills and knowledge current while attempting to land the right job. An agency or public interest organization will also, in many cases, look first to its volunteers when a staff position becomes



available. Volunteering in your area of interest adds relevant public interest experience to your resume and builds a base of contacts in the field.

Do not be afraid to ask your firm for help in finding a public interest volunteer placement. Many partners are well connected in the public interest community and will be happy to put in a good word for you.

Judicial clerkships and fellowships other options that has become more widely available to experienced attorneys. They can provide a graceful exit from private practice and a launching ground for a public interest career. Going to graduate school for a degree related to your area of interest can also serve this purpose. For a more in-depth discussion of these options, as well as the strategic use of volunteer work, see *Chapter 7, Making Yourself Marketable*.

You might also explore other alternatives for time away from the firm, such as taking a leave of absence.

*I couldn't find a public interest job soon enough in Northern California, so I took a law firm offer when I graduated. During my three years there I became more and more frustrated with the uninteresting work and the way associates were treated. I arranged a year's leave of absence and went to teach English in a developing country. On my return, I extended my leave to look for a public interest job, which I found within two months through a contact I had made while doing pro bono work at the firm.*

### **Keeping Your Search Confidential...**

*I found it challenging to keep my search a secret but did so because I did not want to marginalize myself at the firm. I did not know how long the search would take, and I felt that I had worked long and hard enough to warrant leaving within my own time frame.*

### **Or Not...**

*I wanted to remain on good terms with the firm. My cases were scheduled well in advance, with relatively predictable crunch periods. I spoke with the partner to whom I reported about scheduling needs. I told her that I was planning to resign to work on a political campaign but that I could be flexible, within certain limits, about exactly when I'd leave. Together we came up with a date that worked for both of us.*

Once you resolve to conduct a public interest job search while still working at your firm, you must decide when to let the firm know about your plans to leave. Most lawyers do not divulge their departure plans to their firms until they must: either when they have already accepted a job offer, or when they need references from firm colleagues.

*I shut my door whenever I was doing anything related to my job search. I asked prospective employers and networking contacts who might call me at the firm to use my private voice mail for messages if I wasn't there to speak with them personally. I arranged informational interviews over lunch and used excuses like*

*going to doctors' appointments. Once I accepted the offer from the District Attorney's Office, I told the firm.*

Lawyers are trained in foreseeing and weighing the consequences of courses of action. Determining whether to let your firm in on your plans is an opportunity to apply that training to your own circumstances. Some of the negative consequences of making your intentions public include:

- Being asked to leave before you feel ready
- Finding yourself out of the loop socially or in terms of desirable work assignments
- Receiving reactions from firm lawyers that can create doubts and raise your anxiety level; colleagues may comment in ways that lead you to feel you are making the “mistake of your life” or “jumping off a cliff”
- Encountering pressure to stay, which may deter you from your goals

*The firm discovered I was planning to leave. When they found out, they started throwing me bones. They paid me compliments about my work and gave me more interesting cases and more responsibility. I put my search on hold and stayed.*

On the other hand, disclosure has its advantages:

- Enhancing the likelihood of leaving the firm on good terms
- Alleviating anxiety that arises from keeping a job search confidential
- Cutting down on the deceptions necessary to carry out a job search in secret

- Controlling how the news is broken, and eliminating the possibility of your firm finding out about your plans from someone else first
- Getting reactions of understanding and support from colleagues
- Dramatically opening up your networking possibilities by engaging the help of colleagues at the firm who may be able to assist your search with information and contacts

*Initially, I didn't tell the law firm I was looking to leave for a public sector job. I came in early to write cover letters and closed my door for job search-related phone calls. My secretary and I had a great relationship, and she helped cover for me. Even so, I found sneaking around stressful. After my second interview with the government agency in which I was interested, they wanted a recommendation from my current supervisor. At that point, I told the firm I was looking. They were okay about it and tried to work out a way for me to stay, but I made it clear that I wanted to pursue government work.*

If you decide to keep your search confidential, there are steps you can take to enhance the likelihood that it stays that way:

- Keep in mind that the more people you tell, the less likely it is that your job search will remain a secret. Share your plans only with those people you trust, and be prepared nonetheless for unintentional leakage.

- Inform anyone you tell of your search that you have not yet told the firm of your plans and that you would like him or her to hold your disclosure in confidence.
- Tell potential employers that you prefer your firm not be contacted initially, and ask if an offer can be made contingent on acceptable firm references, if they are necessary.
- Choose references at the firm who you trust will keep your plans to themselves.
- Use public interest attorneys outside of the firm who know your pro bono work as references.

### **The Last Link**

Having thought through the complex issues of timing, urgency, and confidentiality, the next issue to sort out involves the financial sacrifices frequently associated with leaving private sector work for public interest practice. Because this aspect of moving into public interest looms so large for many attorneys, we have devoted the entire next chapter to the various financial considerations you will need to take into account as you prepare for that move.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

*Public service certainly involves financial sacrifice. This should be kept in perspective; while I may earn less money than most of my classmates, government pays more than adequately. Yes, you can live very nicely on a lot less than Wall Street pays.*

Leaving the private sector for public interest work will almost certainly mean taking a pay cut, sometimes a substantial one. Knowing your financial needs, as well as your potential income, can facilitate this transition. The more prepared you are for a change in salary, the better. Ideally, that means saving and investing a portion of your firm salary, paying down debt, and avoiding expensive spending habits. It also means making sure your family understands the change in spending. Ultimately, those attorneys who have made the switch feel overwhelmingly positive about trading a larger salary for more satisfying work.

*Decide what you realistically can afford to do. It is important to be okay with your decision psychologically and not envious of others or regretful of your choice. If you do have to downscale your lifestyle to fit a public interest salary, you will need to be secure in the fact that you have made the appropriate choice based on your priorities. I have found that I am able to be positive, optimistic, and realistic about my financial situation.*

To keep a positive outlook about a lower-paying job, consider your reasons for moving to that type of job in the first place. When calculating how your future wages will shrink your budget, factor in the ways that your new job might improve your lifestyle. A financial sacrifice is

often outweighed by substantial non-monetary benefits, such as job fulfillment or time for a personal life.

*Our finances are more of an issue now than when I first left private practice in that my wife and I have since become parents and mortgagors. But I remind myself that, while I am grossly underpaid compared to lawyers in private practice, I am overpaid compared to ninety-nine percent of the rest of humanity. I remind myself as well of the incalculable value of feeling that what I do with most of my waking hours contributes to the greater good of others, and of having some waking hours left to spend with my wife and kids. And I remind myself that, in a society that values money above all else, learning what really matters to you is perhaps the best way to maximize your wealth.*

## **Breaking Away**

*I kept expenses low while I was at a firm. I wanted to avoid golden handcuffs and being trapped in a job due to monetary commitments.*

*I took a fifteen to twenty percent pay cut when I left private practice, which was not too bad. Although I do spend less money on clothes and on going out, I only spent more before because it was part of the “firm culture,” which I do not miss.*

Many lawyers find that their growing dependence on lucrative firm salaries makes them feel boxed in. The culture of firm life seems to demand a large expense account. Associates wear expensive suits, and their long hours make taking cabs, eating out, securing full-time childcare, and hiring a cleaning or laundry service a necessity. In addition, lawyers who feel unsatisfied

with their work tend to spend a substantial portion of their income on consumer goods or luxury vacations to compensate for working long hours in jobs they dislike. Rather than finding work that might pay less but offer more satisfaction, they become dependent on high salaries.

*Just one month into firm life, I found myself flipping through a mail order catalog for mindless relief from my work and stumbled across an exquisite pine-columned bookcase. I had already fallen into a trap common among my fellow firm-ites that went something like: “make up for your unhappiness by spending the tons of money they are paying you to do all this tedious work.” To this day, the gorgeous bookcase that graces my daughter’s room serves as my tribute to corporate law and the level of dissatisfaction to which I had sunk.*

*The money held me back from making the decision to leave. I was so miserable doing what I was doing. My family life was screwed up; I had no time to see my wife or kids or to read a book. I decided the money wasn’t so important. Then I turned around and saw that the lifestyle we had built up required the income I was making. We had to start weaning off the lifestyle to which we had become accustomed. We realized we really didn’t need to have the two ski vacations a year, all three kids in private schools, and a big house in an exclusive neighborhood.*

If you change your habits before you leave your firm job, you will not only find the transition easier but also may generate significant savings to rely upon later. Some law firm attorneys have a fixed amount deducted from their paychecks and deposited into an investment account. Others calculate how much they normally spend on luxury items and put that money



aside in savings or investment accounts. On a small scale, one attorney with whom we spoke quit smoking, continued to theoretically buy a pack of cigarettes a day, and invested the money he saved. If you can find a way to cut costs and put aside any money saved, you will create a financial cushion for accepting a lower paid job, and may even form the beginnings of a means to finance future expenses, such as a house or children's education.

*Knowing I was going to take a pay cut helped me to save for it. I never fell into the two law firm vices—taking taxis and eating out—that consume huge amounts of take-home pay.*

Several escapees suggest that you make the transition as early in your career as possible, noting that once you establish lifestyle patterns, they tend to become entrenched. The more you become used to a law firm salary, the more difficult the adjustment to a lower paid public interest job will prove. Other lawyers find that staying at a private firm for several years while diligently saving and investing money has been a practical way to subsidize future work in public interest.

### **Assessing Your Needs and Downscaling**

*Even the best philosophical outlook does not pay the mortgage.*

No matter how well you save while at a firm, you will probably still have to reduce your expenses to live on a smaller salary. One former partner in a Seattle firm, now an environmental impact litigator, began downscaling long before finding a public interest job. He sold his expensive home to reduce his cost of living. Living “tighter but simpler” is not a problem for this

attorney. “I have acquired a taste for less expensive recreation, such as backpacking and bicycling, rather than more expensive sports, such as skiing and golf.”

*I took a fifty percent pay cut, and I am convinced that planning a detailed family budget was the key behind the adjustment to a significantly downscaled lifestyle.*

The first step in planning to live with a smaller salary is to evaluate how much you currently spend. Create a “fixed cost” budget for all planned expenses. After calculating fixed costs, add about ten percent more for unexpected expenses or emergencies. Consider the factors listed below when drawing up a rough estimate of your current expenses:

- Rent or mortgage
- Utilities (oil, gas, electric, phone)
- Student loan payments
- Car payments and repairs
- Local transportation (subway, bus, etc.)
- Medical insurance and costs
- Food (dining in)
- Other insurance (homeowner’s, life, or car)
- Childcare/schooling
- Clothing/dry cleaning
- Miscellaneous/entertainment
- Credit card interest

Project a range of possible public interest salaries: for example, what would you make if you became a legal services attorney, an Assistant U.S. Attorney, or a litigator for the ACLU?

For each job, calculate how much your current expenditures exceed your projected income in order to determine how dramatically you must cut back now.

After you have determined how much you may need to cut, decide which items you are willing to adjust or eliminate. Can you move to a cheaper apartment, take public transportation, eat in more often, or find a less expensive childcare situation?

*I moved to a one bedroom apartment from a two bedroom. I had cheaper lunches and not as much dry cleaning. The transition in terms of my lifestyle was not as bad as I thought it would be.*

Some of the most effective areas to cut back are in basic living expenses, such as housing. Moving to the suburbs, for instance, may save you more money over the long term than taking less extravagant vacations or eating in more often. If you have a significant amount of debt, consider consolidating your loans or refinancing your property. Try to pay off credit card debt right away, rather than allowing exorbitant finance charges to accrue, and avoid racking up debt on multiple credit cards.

It is just as important for you to determine what you cannot give up. Think through how a smaller salary will affect you and your family. If you have a spouse, partner, and/or children, discuss with them the potential ramifications of a substantial cut in pay. You need to factor into your decision the needs and expectations of those whom the change will affect. How other members of your family contribute to your income and expenses is an integral part of your budget. A dialogue with your family about developing a long-term budget and financial plan may eliminate unreasonable expectations and allow for a strategy that includes all members of the household. Together, you may be able address your needs and priorities creatively.

*I feel lucky to have been supported in my 'downward' mobility by my husband and family who believe, like I do, that nothing is more important than job satisfaction.*

## **Educational Debt**

*Many graduates these days are burdened with a debt load that would crush a small municipality.*

Many lawyers allow law school and undergraduate debt to limit their career options and lifestyle choices. Contrary to their hope that a law degree would ensure more freedom in their lives, many lawyers find that the pressure to pay off their loans forces them to stay in private practice.

If law school loans led you to work at a firm, consider accelerating your loan payments in order to pay them off early. Diminishing debt ahead of schedule will allow you to jump into public interest work more easily.

Most loan repayment plans are stretched over a ten year period, which means that a lot of what you pay is interest on your loans. The earlier you pay down your principal, the less interest you will incur, so pay a little extra principal on student loans each month if you can. In addition, you may be able to consolidate your law school and undergraduate loans in order to streamline your payments, though some loan consolidation services carry higher interest rates than the original lenders.

Most government and student loan services charge low interest payments. Still, there is some variation in interest rates among these services. With a little research at your school's

financial aid office or at a library, you may find an organization that will buy your loans from your original creditors and allow you to pay off your debts at more reasonable rates. Also, look into the different loan payment options available from your creditors.

### **Law School Loan Assistance Programs**

*I went from making \$160,000 at the law firm to \$45,000 at the District Attorney's office. It was a painful cut in pay. My law school's loan forgiveness program made it possible, along with a very supportive husband.*

Many lawyers simply don't know about their loan payment alternatives, which offer significant financial relief for lawyers in lower-paid jobs. A growing number of law schools offer plans geared toward giving graduates the flexibility to pursue low-paying legal careers. For example, some law schools offer special loan repayment programs for alumni/ae who enter public interest law and whose salaries fall below a certain income level.

Through loan repayment programs, you can apply a fixed percentage of your earnings toward your total annual loan repayment obligations. Your law school then covers the balance owed, either through grants or through interest-free loans. You can receive assistance in paying loans for the full length of loan repayment, stretching financial assistance over a ten to fifteen year period. These programs usually allow you the flexibility of signing up when your income level changes. Because qualification depends on income and/or the fact that you are doing public interest work, you may be able to join a program even if you graduated years ago.

A substantial reduction in monthly loan obligations can be the single most important factor in making your job transition possible. Some law schools do not cover certain types of debt, such as the amount your school assumed your parents would pay toward your tuition. Since

each law school's loan repayment assistance program differs, you need to learn the specifics of your own law school's program. These programs have enabled many lawyers to pursue work that they otherwise would be unable to sustain financially.

### **Augmenting Your Future Income**

To expand your savings into an even bigger cushion, invest your money instead of keeping it in your savings account. You might want to seek the advice of a financial analyst and invest your current savings in stocks, bonds, mutual funds, or less traditional investments. Any investment venture, however, is only worth the trouble if it yields a greater net profit than the amount of interest you owe on outstanding loans. This fundamental financial principle is one many inexperienced budgeters overlook. An investment that yields a five percent profit is a net loss for someone who holds a loan with an interest rate greater than five percent. Credit card debt is the worst offender. Your dispensable income would be better used to pay off the loans first. In short, consider all your options before committing disposable income to a long-term investment.

Many lawyers who have made the move to public interest work increase their salaries by investing their time. Lawyers who moonlight often boost earnings substantially. Some public interest attorneys serve as adjunct faculty at law school clinics, write freelance articles, and teach LSAT prep and paralegal courses, to name a few options. Others have initiated entrepreneurial schemes.

*I realized early on that I would not make a lot of money working for the Attorney General's office. Accordingly, I embarked on a conscious program to augment my income with outside investments. I borrowed and saved and initially tried some exotic strategies in the stock market. The results were less than spectacular—actually less than*

*mediocre. I then invested in several franchise deals. On one, I came out even after two years; on another, I lost \$5,000; on the third, I made \$40,000. I concluded that the volatility did not serve my long-term goal.*

*I next went into real estate as a limited partner with a friend who served as the general partner. This proved to be a wise decision. Over the years, we have formed a number of partnerships and gradually built up our inventory of apartments. The income generated by these partnerships now contributes a sum which equals about twenty-five percent of my total income. Coupled with my wife's earnings (she's a CPA with her own business), we do just fine. We can even afford to buy blueberries out of season and sit in the orchestra seats at the opera.*

## **Negotiating Salary and Benefits Packages**

*I made the mistake of not negotiating salary aggressively enough at first. It didn't occur to me that city government could be negotiable.*

Once you decide to make the commitment to a public sector job and have secured an offer, you are in a position to negotiate your salary. Most jobs have salary ranges, both to attract competitive applicants and to compensate for prior work experience. Familiarity with the reasonable salary range for someone with your background and experience puts you in a good position to obtain the salary you deserve. Remember that everything is negotiable, including your place on the federal government's GS scale. Find out what criteria the employer used to arrive at the salary offered, and use these criteria as a starting point for your negotiations. You may also want to do some research into what salaries are offered for comparable positions in comparable organizations. You may be able to enlist the assistance of your law school's career

services office in attempting to do this research; they may know some of the salary trends or may be able to put you in touch with other alumni/ae doing similar work. In addition, it is important to gain a clear understanding of what your salary increases will be in the future. If you intend to stay with the organization for several years, you should find out what lawyers make at the high end of the office pay scale. Having this information will help you to make financial decisions along the way.

Keep in mind your budget and the minimum income that you need to be happy. You may decide to accept a low offer and look for outside sources to subsidize your salary, or you may want to hold out for the position that will pay you what you need.

### **Assessing the Office's Financial and Political Stability**

By accepting a position with a public interest employer, you are making an investment in that office. You should avoid being so preoccupied with the security of the job you are considering that you pass up a wonderful job opportunity. On the other hand, you want to feel confident that the organization is sufficiently stable, both economically and politically, to meet your personal needs for financial security. Be sure that you know enough about the organization to answer the following questions:

- How financially stable is the organization currently?
- What is its financial track record?
- Where does the funding come from?
- Are these sources reliable?
- If this is a government agency, has it been targeted for budget cutbacks?

### **Evaluating the Benefits**



It is important to look beyond the salary offer itself to the benefits offered by an employer. Remember that a good benefits packages—health insurance, vacation, sick time, and a generous retirement plan—can be worth a cash equivalent of up to twenty percent of your salary. Government positions often offer great benefits packages. Additionally, some public interest organizations recognize that in order to keep top quality attorneys and staff for a long period of time, they must offer good savings and retirement plans and extensive health benefits. Consider the value of the benefits package when negotiating a salary. You may want to ask about the following:

- Medical benefit plan
- Does it cover your current and anticipated medical needs fully?
- What does it cover in terms of hospital stays, emergency services, mental health treatment, pregnancy-related services, opthamologic services and dental services?
- Does it cover prescription drugs and preventive care at little to no additional cost?
- What is the deductible?
- Do you have the flexibility to choose your own doctors?
- What are the “co-payments”—the amount you pay out-of-pocket when you go to a doctor?
- Is there an out-of-pocket maximum?
- Vacation leave
- Sick leave
- Maternity or paternity leave
- What paid leave is available?
- What is the unpaid leave policy?

- How many staff members have taken advantage of maternity and paternity leave policies?
- Disability coverage
- Sabbaticals
- Part-time schedule/flex time
- Retirement/pension plan
- What, if any, is the employer's contribution?
- What provisions, if any, are there for employee contributions?

Keep in mind, however, that you should save questions about benefits until you already have a job offer in hand.

### **Taking the Plunge**

*Besides trial experience at a District Attorney's office, here's the most important thing I learned: forget the budgets, forget the calculators. My wife and I got by on her moderate salary in the business world and on my Assistant District Attorney salary. It's an invaluable lesson. I've left the DA's office (although I still prosecute), and my wife and I have a baby girl now. My wife asked if we could afford her working only three or four days a week. If I had gotten out a calculator and figured out a budget, the answer would have been no. But immediately I said, "Yes."*

Some of the issues you need to consider when contemplating a move to a lower-paying job are summarized below:

- What is the minimum salary that you feel you need to earn in your next position?

Does the job for which you are looking offer a salary of this size?

- Does the benefits package offered help offset the potential pay cut?
- What are your financial priorities? What are the obligations which you cannot adjust?
- Do you have a spouse or other family members who can help subsidize a potential drop in income?
- Can you reduce your debt load through consolidation or a loan repayment assistance program for educational debt?
- What other sources of funding, such as second jobs, investments, or inheritance are available to help subsidize your salary?
- How will this transition affect others? What are the consequences?
- Will your personal financial sacrifices be offset by a job that you find more fulfilling?

While each escapee develops a different strategy to overcome a salary reduction, attorneys who have made successful transitions have common strategies: they educated themselves about all the options available to them, they carefully analyzed their own circumstances, and then they chose alternatives that best fit their personal financial situations.

Financial considerations often loom larger when your work otherwise is unfulfilling, just as they can magically recede once you find work that engages you more meaningfully. Given the complexity and uniqueness of each person's situation, perhaps the best advice for a rewarding legal career is to gain the perspective and control over your finances that will give you the freedom to choose the work you want.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### MAKING YOURSELF MARKETABLE

What are public interest employers looking for and how can you, from your position at a private law firm, demonstrate that you have the ability and experience they seek? Acquiring the appropriate public interest credentials while working for a private firm can be a challenge. Although your firm experience is certainly valuable, a public interest employer may not be convinced that it makes you the best lawyer for the job. Proving that you are the right candidate for a public interest opening usually entails both showcasing the skills you already have in just the right way, and taking additional steps to gain relevant experience and show your commitment.

#### What Public Interest Employers Look For

*The public interest organizations to which I applied were looking for someone with experience, not someone right out of law school. Applicants who had taken three environmental law courses in law school didn't impress them. Familiarity with policy-making, back room politics, working with the media—those are the kinds of skills employers wanted, and they're not the kind you learn as a traditional lawyer.*

Most public interest employers seek lawyers who have previous public service experience, ideally in the employers' areas of expertise. Thus, the more exposure you

gain to the specific type of public interest practice that interests you, the better. Given their lack of resources and often inadequate staffing, public interest offices generally look for self-starting attorneys who can assume a tremendous amount of responsibility quickly. They seek people who will not require extensive tutoring in research, writing, or other fundamentals.

Public interest employers are keenly interested in your skills, but they are also interested in your commitment to their work—whether you will fit in with the rest of the staff, whether you have enough passion for the cause to sustain you through long hours, low pay and tough battles, whether you will stay with the office long enough to make their training investment in you pay off. If you have little experience outside of the private sector, employers may question the strength of your commitment to public interest practice, wondering if you plan to use their office only as a stepping stone or a way to escape from your current job.

To overcome such skepticism and present yourself as the strongest applicant you can be, take a three-part approach. First, emphasize the public service experience you do have. Second, identify the skills you have gained in the private sector that are valuable to the public interest field you are attempting to enter. Finally, if the combination of your public interest and private practice experience comes up short for the job you seek, go out and get more. Build a track record that demonstrates public interest commitment—one that has substantive overlap with the areas that you will target for your job search.

## **Communicating Your Public Interest Experience**

Catalogue your public service-related experience all the way back to college. Any past public interest experience, whether legal in nature or not, will help persuade a potential public interest employer that you are committed to this type of work. Even volunteer work, such as fundraising for a public interest cause, community organizing, or local political campaigns, can demonstrate your ongoing public service commitment.

Making a list can clarify what your current public interest credentials are and help you decide where they need improvement. Grab a legal pad and answer the following questions:

*While at your law firm:*

- What pro bono work have you undertaken?
- What, specifically, did you do on each case?
- How did this experience touch on areas of the law in which you are seeking work?
- Have you been active in any public interest groups or organizations?
- What leadership positions have you held?
- Have you been active on any bar committees?
- Have you volunteered in community organizations or participated in local politics outside of work?

*While in law school:*

- Did you work for any public interest offices for the summer or during the semester?
- What clinical courses did you take?

- Did you belong to any public interest-related student organizations?
- Did any of these involve advocacy for clients or causes?
- Did you write any public interest-related articles for journals or papers for classes?
- Did you take any courses or seminars in the area(s) of public interest law that you are now pursuing?
- Was your professor someone well known in the field whose recommendation would carry particular weight?

*Before law school:*

- Did you spend time working in public interest before law school?
- Do you have any other graduate degrees that are relevant to your search?

*While in college or other graduate studies:*

- Did you write any papers or a thesis or take classes with a particular focus on public interest issues?
- Did your major touch upon public interest areas?
- Did you belong to any public interest-related student organizations?
- Did you perform any community service work or volunteer work?
- Did you work for any public interest organizations for the summer or during the semester?

## **Assessing Transferable Skills**

*There's a common belief that because you have spent so much time doing one thing, you can't do anything else. The truth is that you have lots of transferable skills; my friends and I all started at firms and have wound up doing a broad range of things. Don't pigeonhole yourself.*

In addition to public interest endeavors, consider what strengths can be taken from your work at the firm, especially if you have been there for several years. Skills that you take for granted may turn out to be crucial assets in the area of law you plan to pursue. One real estate lawyer who had no previous experience with environmental groups found that he was nonetheless a desirable candidate because of the knowledge of land-use law and environmental regulations he had acquired at the firm.

*Soak up as much as you can from your firm. Don't fall into the trap of hating the firm and not getting anything out of it. Make yourself marketable; don't sit around getting sullen.*

Litigation skills gained at a firm often make you a more competitive applicant. One lawyer noted that his firm litigation experience helped him get a job that involved court battles against large corporations. Another escapee advises:

*It's hard, coming out of a law firm, to know what skills you have because of how critical the supervision is and because of lack of real world experience. Many*



*skills are transferable. Make a list of the things you do well—analyzing, researching, public speaking, advocating, for example. Most lawyers have at least these skills.*

Make a list of all the skills you have developed in the private sector that could prove useful in your next endeavor:

- What substantive areas has your firm work involved?
- What type of expertise have you developed?
- Has any of your firm work been on issues that could be relevant to the type of public interest work you seek, such as labor, environmental, or disability law?
- What practice skills, such as investigation, research, drafting, litigating, negotiating, lobbying, mediating, or writing briefs, have you developed?
- How much in-court experience have you had?
- How much client contact have you had?

Determine how to present your experience in its best light. Consider where you want to go next, then think about the most advantageous way to demonstrate skills applicable to that type of work.

### **Gaining Relevant Public Interest Experience While Still At A Firm**

*I took a position with a large Los Angeles firm after graduation from law school with the intention that I would gain valuable experience for a few years, and then*

*apply to environmental groups. When I began to apply to environmental groups, however, I found that my experience in a law firm did not translate well to this type of practice. I learned the hard way about the importance of steadfast loyalty to your goals. Demonstrated commitment is one of the most important qualifications you can offer a prospective public interest employer.*

To get the public interest job you want, you need to think strategically about how to add public interest experience to your resume. Working on public service while at the firm will both add to your credentials and give you invaluable exposure to different types of practice. For example, if you are currently in a corporate department but want to move into an area that involves litigation, working on a pro bono case can help you develop or demonstrate litigation skills.

Becoming involved in public interest work will also increase your networking opportunities. The public interest community in any given geographic area tends to be close-knit, and employers often fill new job openings through informal contacts and referrals. Many of the lawyers we interviewed moved from their firms to public interest employment through contacts they made while doing pro bono cases.

Below are some of the creative strategies other attorneys have used to gain access to their targeted areas of public interest law and demonstrate an ongoing public service commitment while still at a law firm.

### ***Do Pro Bono Work***

Doing pro bono work while at a firm allows you to dedicate time to issues that interest you and adds variety to your caseload. However, in order to focus on issues that are directly related to your areas of interest, you may need to find your own pro bono matters instead of accepting cases your firm has chosen.

*Your firm may try to channel you into doing pro bono work that is beneficial to them but not necessarily beneficial to your long-term career interests. I took a lot of individual cases because my firm participated in a legal services program that had walk-in clients. In retrospect, I should have balanced my caseload with impact-oriented cases that would have put me in contact with other public interest lawyers in my area of interest. As it was, the firm got the credit for the work that I did, but I remained faceless.*

Many local bar associations sponsor programs or referral networks that match lawyers with pro bono cases. You also could try to convince your firm to allow you to participate in a local rotation program with the district attorney, attorney general, or a legal services center. Rotation programs typically send firm associates to public service organizations for a few days every month or several months at a time.

*Keep doing pro bono work while at the firm, if you can, in the public interest area in which you want to work. Find a way of showing an ongoing commitment.*

Find out what your firm's policy is toward independent pro bono work, and then evaluate the steps you need to take in order to make pro bono matters part of your caseload. Use whatever support system your firm provides for pro bono work; if that support system is inadequate, ask the firm to enhance it. Support for pro bono work can range from providing paralegal and secretarial pools to covering court fees and giving credit for billable hours. Always clear new pro bono matters with your firm to safeguard against potential conflicts with existing firm clients.

Your firm also might allow you to take time off to pursue pro bono cases. Following the Los Angeles riots, two associates from a local firm spent three months in the mayor's office managing legal issues surrounding relief and rebuilding efforts. Another escapee took a six-month leave of absence from his firm to delve into pro bono work full time. A law school graduate negotiated with her new firm to receive half of her salary and full benefits for six months while she worked for a children's rights program. At the end of that time, she returned to the firm and worked full-time at half salary for the remaining six months of that first year. Depending on how long you have been with the firm, you may be able to negotiate your own arrangement for pro bono work, although you may have to consider taking an unpaid leave.

### ***Volunteer***

*If you have a passion for a specific area, get involved in committees, or do volunteer work in that area.*

There are thousands of law-related non-profit organizations around the country who need the help of experienced volunteers. If you would like to move into family law, for example, helping battered women obtain temporary restraining orders through a local shelter will bring you closer to the issues that interest you. Finding a place to volunteer should prove fairly easy. You can contact any legal services and non-profit employers in your area directly. Local bar organizations, such as the Washington Council of Lawyers or the Boston Bar Association, often publish referral manuals which list most of the public service providers in the area and the type of volunteers they need.

Even volunteering outside of the realm of law can help you make contacts and demonstrate your commitment to public interest. Not only will you make yourself known within the network of local public interest organizations, you will show a passion for issues that can help tie your legal background to your public interest aspirations. Volunteering at a local food bank, adult literacy center, student mentoring program, or other non-profit service or advocacy organization can introduce you to a new field, or supplement the public interest work you have already done.

### ***Get Involved in an Organization***

*Join professional associations in your area of interest—for me, these included Women in Housing and Finance, the National Association of Housing and Redevelopment Officials, and the American Planning Association.*

If your time for public interest legal work is limited, join a law-related not-for-profit organization that interests you. Becoming part of an organization will put you in closer contact with job sources and help demonstrate your commitment to that area of public interest. Organizations such as the NAACP, Sierra Club, NOW, and National Lawyer's Guild have large memberships in most cities and take an active role within the community. These groups consist largely of professionals who meet at night or on weekends. Pick an organization that advocates for issues in which you believe, and find out how you can get involved.

Try to get to know people within legal organizations that you have joined. Belonging to an organization will not provide you with connections or experience if you limit yourself to paying dues and thumbing through the monthly newsletter. Many chapters of national organizations have a core of active members and several law-related committees, ranging from a pro bono group to a legislative action or fundraising committee.

Fundraising for an organization can provide a fast way for you to make a name for yourself in your community, and gain credibility with and access to potential employers. Your law firm position can work to your advantage in fundraising efforts—both in terms of getting the firm to participate in events, such as buying a table at a charity dinner, and in tapping individual firm members to donate.

Another way to establish yourself within an organization is to attend its meetings and any special programs it offers. See if your local bar organization runs panels and events that cater to public interest-minded members. Panels can be both informative and

inspiring, and they bring still more potential contacts into reach, giving you a chance to introduce yourself and add to your network.

If you already have interest or expertise in a particular issue, you could also organize a panel or subcommittee of your own. Not only will you further your education in that area, you will also advertise your skills and interests to the rest of the public interest community.

### ***Publish***

*I wrote my first law review article—it's on rules of criminal procedure—specifically to get out of a law firm and into a prosecuting office.*

By writing articles on an area of interest for any publication, from a law review journal to the op-ed page of a newspaper, you can identify yourself as an expert to a larger audience. You can enclose them with a cover letter and resume when applying for jobs, especially when the subject matter of the article is relevant to a particular position. Not only will employers respect your competence in the matters about which you have written, but they will also recognize your talents as a writer.

If you have extensive legal knowledge of and commitment to an issue, submit your work to a legal or bar journal. However, since few people actually read through the articles in these journals, you may not earn recognition in the local legal community. Pay attention to your audience: who do you want to read your piece, and where will they most likely see it? An opinion piece in the local *Lawyers Weekly*, a book review of a law-

related nonfiction work, a letter to the editor, or a column in a newspaper or periodical will distinguish you in your area's public interest community.

### ***Improve or Learn a Language***

*Cultivating language skills, especially Spanish for legal services work, gives you a leg up on other candidates.*

Lawyers who are fluent in more than one language often have a competitive edge in public interest practice areas that involve international work or serve a population for whom English is a second language. Your ability to read documents in that language or to converse with clients in their native tongues may prove critical to some public interest employers. Depending on the type of public service work that interests you, it may be worthwhile to improve your skills or learn a new language, either through classes or a short-term immersion program.

In California and the Sunbelt states, Spanish may seem the obvious choice for a second language. However, in deciding what language to learn, be sure to ask yourself the following questions: What community or communities do you wish to serve? What is the ethnic make-up of your target geographic area? Which languages do you know already? How much personal challenge are you looking for?

### ***Read Up on Your Areas of Interest***

*Be current on your reading. In interviews, interest in the field counts for a lot.*



Knowing the issues in a particular area of public sector work puts you in a better position to assess your next career move and to impress interviewers with your knowledge. Reading journals, key cases, and other publications in your field of interest will help you stay up-to-date on current issues and developments in that area. You may also find it helpful to take Continuing Legal Education classes in order to gain familiarity with particular practice areas.

The key is to build knowledge of practical concerns in the field without being overly academic. This self-education will provide you with the confidence and background to do well in an interview by showing an overall understanding of the issues your ideal job involves.

### **Transitional Moves**

A growing number of attorneys have taken one year positions, such as judicial clerkships or fellowships, or they have pursued graduate degrees as a means of moving away from firm work, giving themselves time to focus on their next steps while gaining marketable experience.

### ***Judicial Clerkships***

Judges on both the federal and state level have begun to select lawyers who have been in practice for several years to be their judicial clerks. A clerkship can provide new skills, build upon existing skills, and give you a less stressful and less time-absorbing

base from which to launch your job search. For many lawyers, clerkships have provided graceful exits from law firms.

*I worked in a private law firm as a litigation associate, writing discovery responses, reviewing and gathering documents, and doing legal research. Finding myself uninterested in the subject matter, I moved within my firm from litigation to real estate. Still unhappy because of a pressured work environment, I sought out and found a judicial clerkship.*

*My one-year clerkship allowed me to work for an unbelievable role model, to research and write draft opinions for my judge, to swear in witnesses, and to serve as a custodian of the evidence as a courtroom clerk. I enjoyed the focus on research and writing. I liked having the law as my client, rather than feeling that I was an integral part of the economy. Because I made the transition fairly early in my career, I had few financial obligations and found I could cope well with a drop in income.*

*After my clerkship, I used networking contacts to land a job as an Assistant U.S. Attorney. My responsibilities now include researching and writing briefs for a federal Circuit Court, conducting oral arguments, deciding which cases to appeal, and reviewing all briefs written by other attorneys in my office. I particularly enjoy the significant decision-making responsibility that my job carries, find the subject matter interesting, and consider it gratifying to work for the government as a prosecutor “to do what is right.”*

To find a judicial clerkship, your best strategy is to write to newly appointed or elected judges. These judges are most likely to have openings in the near future. You can also enter the regular judicial hiring cycle, but be aware that this cycle runs well over a year in advance of the clerkship's start date. Check with your law school career services office, as well, for any late-breaking clerkship openings.

Networking can also lead to clerking. One attorney found his clerkship while conducting informational interviews. After talking with a federal district court judge before whom he had practiced, he was offered a clerkship, which he accepted. He stayed in that position for nearly two years. When a position opened up at a federal agency where he was interested in working, he negotiated an earlier end date with the judge, and the agency agreed to hold the job open for him until that date.

If you are a recent law school graduate, a clerkship may offer you a means to get time away from the firm while still keeping your job. Because law firms value the direct litigation exposure that a clerkship provides, they will often extend leaves of absence for a judicial clerkship to junior litigation associates who came directly to the firm without clerking first. This arrangement can provide the safety net of a job to which you can return at the end of your clerkship, if you have not yet found the right public interest job.

### ***Fellowships***

Public service fellowships also can help you move from a law firm to the public sector. While many such fellowships have been specifically designed for entry-level

attorneys, others, like the White House Fellows Program and funding for entrepreneurial initiatives such as the National Association of Public Interest Law and Echoing Green Foundation fellowships, encourage applications from attorneys who have been out of school for a number of years. A current and detailed description of available public service fellowships can be found in the fellowship directory of the most recent edition of Harvard Law School's *Public Interest Job Search Guide*.

### ***Pursuing a Graduate Degree***

Some attorneys find that returning to school for a short period of time, such as for a one-year master's program, provides a much-needed springboard for changing career directions. Frequently chosen degrees include public policy, or an L.L.M with a specific area of focus such as environmental law, public health, or education. Several schools, such as Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the Harvard School of Public Health, offer special mid-career programs.

### **Weaving It All Into A Story**

Making yourself marketable involves acquiring needed experience and packaging your background in a compelling way. After reassessing your public interest roots, evaluating what transferable skills you have acquired in private practice, and taking steps to fill gaps in your public interest experience, you need to weave your background and aspirations into a cohesive story. The key in crafting this story is to emphasize consistent themes in your history that relate to the area of practice you want to enter and to convey

them in informational interviews, cover letters, and job interviews. Your story should highlight relevant experiences and make the job to which you are applying seem like an obvious next step to an employer. Pulling your story together in this way will help you to feel more directed in your search, and at the same time help you to communicate your objectives clearly to prospective employers.