

1-1-1991

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Recommended Citation

Koscielniak, Audrey (1991) "Alumni Learn How to Change Careers," *UB Law Forum*: Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 25.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum/vol5/iss2/25

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Alumni Learn How to Change Careers

By Audrey Koscielniak

Practitioners who are unhappy doing legal work need not feel they are forever condemned to toil in the wrong field. A law degree also can be a ticket to a satisfying career in business. Whether or not you can break out of the attorney mold largely depends on how you present yourself, according to an employment expert who was brought to the Law School by the Alumni Association.

"There's More to Law Than Law: A Career Planning Seminar for Lawyers Considering a Change" was the theme of the morning-long program held last fall at the Center for Tomorrow. Marcia J. Boynton, an attorney whose career path has included traditional law practice and in-house counsel positions, was the speaker. Currently director of corporate affairs for M-CARE, the University of Michigan's HMO, Boynton discussed the increasing number of attorneys who are seeking non-traditional career options — and how to proceed when making that change.

Speaking to a crowd of 120 alumni, ranging in experience from longtime established partners to new grads, Boynton said corporations are the most likely bet as employers. Their size, complexity and turnover provide increased opportunities for lawyers who want to pursue a business career — as opposed to working as in-house counsel.

To develop their attractiveness to a potential employer, Boynton said attorneys first need to identify what they have done to serve clients. Then they must formulate those skills into a marketable package to be included in

their resume.

Boynton believes that most lawyers do not know enough about corporations. Job changers need to learn about the corporate structure, operations, services, products, terminology and decision-making process. They should also realize that employers seek people with the following abilities:

- Personal accountability, or "being responsible for what you have taken responsibility for."
- Interpersonal skills, which in business means "the ability to deal and bargain."
- Ability to move information rapidly, to "make decisions."

Before the interview, a candidate needs to learn about the industry or subject area to be able to convince an employer of his or her skills, potential and commitment. "Decision-makers do not expect a new employee to know everything," said Boynton. "They believe a bright candidate can learn on the job. They do, however, expect to hire somebody who knows enough to do some critical components of the job."

Job seekers should use interviews, conferences, conversations with clients and contacts elsewhere to develop that expertise. "Then, when you get into the critical interview, you sound like you know the business," she said.

After reviewing and defining a list of job titles culled from newspaper ads, Boynton highlighted a few positions considered "adjuncts to law." These had the advantage of a residual connection to legal activity. As a result, "you can expect somebody to be more interested in



Marcia J. Boynton

you as a lawyer candidate,” said Boynton. The positions are also the “shortest step out” and an “easy cross-over,” allowing individuals to travel between legal and non-legal careers.

How do you get these jobs? Where do you find them? Boynton suggested that clients can be an excellent starting place. Business clients who have no plan for succession, and executives with whom you have developed a strong relationship may be interested in talking to you. “People love to have their own lawyer on staff,” said Boynton. Clients also can help you learn about an industry. Find out if there is a trade association meeting you can attend, or if there is a magazine that focuses on an industry that interests you.

Bar association sections may have members who are lawyers with business connections. Sunday job ads that have nothing to do with lawyers can help you learn about a business, Boynton noted, and should be added to your informational resources.

Read ads of no relevance in order to learn the “buzz phrases” which corporations have for departments, titles, and other expressions used. It can also broaden your horizons. The “adjuncts to law” list mentioned above is not meant to be restrictive. “You never hear about an MBA-glut,” said Boynton. She said that one reason may be that MBAs do not limit their career options to specific positions the way lawyers tend to do.

Suggested publications to use in a job search include the *National Business Weekly*, a compilation of *Wall Street Journal* want ads. Industry publications were also recommended. Reading a national publication may help in “clarifying your thinking about what you want. Then find that type of job in Buffalo,” or wherever you want to locate, she advised. Trade associations also frequently have their own newsletter or publication.

Correctly analyzing want ads can help candidates better identify positions. Ad size may reflect how much an employer is willing to spend on a new

hire. Where the ad is placed — whether it is run in a general publication, such as a newspaper, or in an industry publication — may tell you if a hiree is sought only from within an industry. “The required background is rarely rock bottom,” said Boynton. But if you lack the background listed and you apply, you had “better be ready to explain why [your application] makes sense.” The cover letter is your opportunity to explain your qualifications.

That an ad exists at all tells you that no internal candidate may exist or that it is “politically appropriate to run a search.”

A law degree is the best generalist education for business. Skills learned in law school — analysis, relational thinking, speaking — as well as content are useful in both attorney and non-attorney positions.

Boynton then went on to describe what want ads do not say. For example:

- Is it a line position (responsible for a product happening) or staff position (expert in nature)? Lawyers usually are hired for staff positions.

- To whom you report may also be unstated. Reporting lines tell you to whom you will be exposed and possibly limit promotability.

- Is it a new or existing position? If you are applying for a position which, for example, has always been filled by a social worker, there will be a tendency to hire a social worker. A newly created

position offers the opportunity to influence the scope of the job as a candidate and make you appear the best choice.

- How is the organization doing? Is the company expanding? If changing, will it mean more flexibility, “not bound by past practice and limiting thought”?

- Is there an existing corporate counsel? If yes, there may be pressure against lawyers working outside the law department by the law department. If no, you can present yourself as someone who can do the non-attorney job for which you are being hired, but can also help by working with counsel or doing some legal tasks. “Hit the pocketbook,” said Boynton.

Continuing her analysis of want ads, Boynton noted that while the reader may perceive the want ad as a “fixed, reliable presentation of the scope of a job activity,” it may be a hastily written product, motivated by external events. With that in mind, a “years of experience” requirement should not be read as a “statute of limitations,” but as a level of quality. Allow for academics to substitute for experience.

“Let the decision-maker be the one to say he or she doesn’t want to talk to you,” said Boynton. “Look for opportunities for people to like you.” If you are not the right candidate for a currently available job, you want the interviewer to “keep you in mind for other jobs.” Keep yourself visible before the person making the decision, she advised. Sending notes and clippings to a decision-maker is one way to make an employer remember you.

While law training prepares job seekers for many positions, it is up to the candidate to identify what those skills are, how they apply to the job being sought, and then convince the hirer of their value for the position available. These strengths, she said, include an ability to bring order to chaos, negotiate, document agreements, design compliance plans and structure outcomes.

Boynton began her Buffalo visit with a Friday afternoon presentation to 90 law

students. Emphasizing the importance of self-reflection, she asked members of the audience to identify their objectives in coming to law school. Some of the reasons, she said, may not be substantive enough to support a lifetime commitment to an increasingly competitive profession.

Boynton explained to law students who are unsure about practicing how useful a law degree can be. "It is the best generalist education for business," she said. Skills learned in law school — analysis, relational thinking, speaking — as well as content are useful in both attorney and non-attorney positions.

An individual's own nature, however, needs to complement the setting and type of employment pursued. "Are you a litigator or a mediator?" she asked the students.

Ultimately, the responsibility for making things happen in a career rests with the individual. It's "your job to get a job." Boynton said. The job seeker must learn about the hiring market and how to present oneself.

She encouraged attendees to develop career awareness. Individuals "must have some satisfactions" in employment and should monitor them throughout life, Boynton said. Balance these considerations against other needs, such as income, status, "to do good things," and family.

When the equation suggests a career change, an individual has three options: do it now, do it later, or do it concurrently — stay a lawyer, but develop something on the side.

As she later did for practicing attorneys, Boynton identified trends which are affecting the nature of a law career. For example, law practice specialization may improve efficiency and increase the number of billable hours, but also increases attorney boredom and "decreases options when you decide to leave." Mergers (of law firms or of corporations) and lateral hiring challenge attorney job security and rank on the law firm letterhead.

Advertising stimulates competition

and broadens the responsibility for new business from a few "rainmakers" at the firm to associates. "Salary wars" raise associates' income expectations. When this cost is combined with the increased overhead, profits decline, limiting the firm's ability to respond to your personal objectives. The demands for more associate billable hours is one way firms resolve their financial pressures. Changes in how billings are done (value-based billing vs. billable hours) and a lengthening partnership track are other options for firms.

Client expectations are also changing. To be retained, firms may need to compete by submitting proposals to prospective clients, just like other business vendors. This bidding process is a destabilizing influence on what once would have been a permanent client/firm relationship.

To retain clients, a "full-service" law firm now often provides more than a full range of legal advice. Other services, such as lobbying, consulting, accounting services and legislative analysis, are now adjuncts to traditional practice.

The deregulation of legal services is also reflected by the growth of pre-paid legal service plains, development of mass legal service companies, increased use of para-professionals, and hiring of attorneys on a temporary or part-time basis. The legal profession is now becoming the "legal services industry," said Boynton.

All told, it was clear that career options for law graduates are many and are limited only by an individual's creativity, aggressiveness and commitment to making a change. The increasing number of CEOs with law backgrounds, inquiries at the Career Development Office and program attendance clearly show that law graduates have and will continue to pursue careers beyond law practice. Boynton's program showed without a doubt there is "more to law than law." ■

Audrey Koscielniak is the coordinator of the Law School's Career Development Office.

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