



WHO SAID RETIREMENT'S A WALK ON THE BEACH?

Building Your Next Chapter and Calling it Your Own

By Michael M. Coleman

My last day of full-time employment (FTE) after 45 years in the legal community was Sept. 30, 2011. My departure was preceded by articles in *The Legal Intelligencer* and *Philadelphia Business Journal* announcing my new positions. Before starting, I climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro to celebrate my 70th birthday.

FAQ #1:

What's life like after retirement (the big "R")? The answers are good, OK, not so good. R is like life itself with highs and lows, good and bad. For many lawyers, R will not be a "walk on the beach," literally or figuratively. It's challenging to leave the structured known for the unstructured unknown. It was for me.

In the beginning, I avoided use of the R word and chided others when asked. I equated R with being dead, which I was not. After more than three years in transition, I've finally

become less sensitive about the question.

LESSON #1:

There's no playbook for the transition from FTE. No one size fits all. Each of us has different DNA, personalities, etc. Each of us must chart our own course. The more you know about what you need to feel good in this new stage, the easier your transition will be. Be as honest and

as introspective as you can. A successful transition process takes hard work and patience. If you don't want to go through it alone, get help from an experienced family member, friend or transition counselor. It will make your process easier.

I knew my transition would be challenging. I've had two careers. The first was practicing law. In 1985, I left my Pepper Hamilton partnership for a legal recruiting career. I founded Coleman Legal Search Consultants (today, Coleman/Nourian), where for 26 years, I helped lawyers transition from one legal job to another. When I left, I knew I was leaving much more

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than a job. Prior to leaving Pepper, I knew I needed something to build and call my own. Starting my firm was my career game changer, an event that defined me and gave me my business chops, identity, self-esteem and community respect.

Given how much fulfillment and personal growth I experienced from legal recruiting, I wondered whether I'd find similar satisfaction after FTE or become irrelevant. Because I had a new wife (in addition to turning 70), I knew I was making the right decision to leave FTE when I did. Nevertheless, I still had concerns about whether it could work.

LESSON #2:

To get started, take what you know about yourself and, together with your strongest-known interests and priorities, compile your menu of activities.

The parts of me that were most relevant to getting started were the following: As a morning person, I need planned morning activity. I like structure and focus. Each night I like to know my plans for the next morning. In my early transition, I wanted to be over-scheduled. I also wanted some income stream. Ideally, I wanted to work four mornings a week, leaving afternoons and Fridays open. With that knowledge,

I was ready.

An attractive opportunity developed before I left FTE. A prominent lawyer I knew started a legal boutique and asked me to join as a strategic advisor. I accepted his offer to work on a part-time basis.

I also added a second part-time activity. I approached my alma mater, Penn Law, to join its Career Planning Office to counsel alumni, utilizing my legal recruiting experience. Penn welcomed me.

I was enthused with my choices, as each represented something new. The end result – one worked, one didn't. After two months, I left Penn. I concluded it wasn't working (through no fault of Penn). Because the situation wasn't going to improve for six months (which represented too much unproductive time), I decided to move on.

LESSON #3:

Zealously guard your time. Don't waste it, especially since most individuals, after FTE, are in the final third of their lives. As the philosopher Seneca wisely said, wasting time has the effect of shortening your life. If a new activity isn't working, drop it and try something else. A trial-and-error approach

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means just that – some choices work and others won't. The benefit is that you learn more about yourself from each effort.

After leaving Penn, I used my newly freed-up time to pursue my interests in theater, film, arts education and mentoring, interests which accelerated after I founded Philadelphia Volunteers for the Arts (PVLA) in 1978. Through my work with the Philadelphia Theatre Company, I met the head theater teacher at CAPA (the city's premier performing arts high school). That meeting led to the creation of my position as advisor to CAPA's after-school theater ensemble.

Through my association with the University of the Arts (UArts), I audited a contemporary drama course. I also became actively involved in Philadelphia Young Playwrights, an education program that helps develop storytelling skills in area schools. I also reached out to the Philadelphia Film Society (PFS) to facilitate new connections between PFS and local schools. These activities have continued throughout my transition process.

Other activities I pursued either didn't work or I chose not to continue them. Nevertheless, each provided something of value and contributed to my process.

LESSON #4:

With FTE ending and a new chapter beginning, think more openly, flexibly and broadly about which new opportunities to explore and which people to get to know. Your new chapter represents unlimited opportunities to help others, give back

and feel good. By applying that approach, I achieved a positive impact for students at CAPA.

When I first went to CAPA, my "advisory" role was more that of an observer. Over time, I stepped up my participation but was still skeptical about whether it was the best use of my time.

As is want to happen, something unexpected then occurred. CAPA, like other Philadelphia schools, was severely affected by the school budget crisis. I developed a strong desire to help but wasn't sure what would be impactful. After considerable effort and applying my community connections, I initiated several actions with positive results. The first was to connect CAPA with its neighbor, UArts, an institution also dedicated to the arts. As a result, a collaborative partnership has begun with CAPA students benefitting in numerous ways. I also brought theater professionals to CAPA to give workshops to supplement classroom learning and, finally, introduced lawyers to the CAPA Foundation (newly created as a result of the school crisis) to provide legal counsel and business connections.

LESSON #5:

Once you're no longer practicing law, allow yourself to remove the filters you utilized to advance your legal career. You worked hard to build a reputation and your financial resources. You made choices and sacrifices to reach your professional goals. Hopefully, you accomplished what you

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If you love golf or tennis and want the sport to consume your primary activity, your transition work is largely done.

LESSON #7:

targeted and feel professionally satisfied. Life after FTE can free you to be a different kind of person and enjoy a different kind of life. Perhaps, even a better one.

Advancing my career dominated my FTE life. Although I devoted time to my arts interests, that time was secondary to my career priority. Leaving FTE allowed me to shift priorities, build new relationships and more freely share my views, without risk to my career. A liberating feeling, indeed!

LESSON #6:

After you leave FTE for a new life stage, recognize that the differences between old and new require you to adjust expectations, make different choices and get accustomed to living without the characteristics of your prior life.

Shortly after leaving FTE, I went to a big firm reception. I always looked forward to such events because they represented excellent business opportunities. I approached this event like previous events. In hindsight, I should have considered my changed circumstances. I was no longer a player. I was just Michael Coleman, R. The event was a good but painful learning experience.

FAQ #2:

How do I figure out how to occupy my time? The answer again starts with knowing yourself. If you love golf or tennis and want the sport to consume your primary activity, your transition work is largely done. Many others, including myself, don't share such interests. I like sports and leisure activities for exercise and vacations, but not for a life focus.

Choosing how to spend your time should be the fun part. Here are some categories to get started: identify your interests; people to reconnect with; teaching (including courses and places to teach); courses to take; organizations to join, work at or support; books to read; lessons to take; places to visit; projects to undertake; collections to begin; ways to give back as a mentor or volunteer; updating your bucket list. If financial considerations require paid work, then finding a job becomes a priority.

After selecting your "first round" categories, go back and narrow your list into a smaller, workable group. Once done, take your chosen generic categories and convert each into something specific within that category. That is, select the specific organization you want to join, the place you want to visit, etc.

A final consideration relates to the role you want to play. Some want to lead because leading makes them feel better about their involvement and achievements, provides recognition and makes them less dependent on others. Others don't want the responsibilities of leadership. While the choice you seek undoubtedly will change over time, choosing the right role for personal fulfillment is always important to keep in mind.

Once you've selected your lineup of specific activities to start your transition phase, congratulate yourself and start to enjoy them. However, don't expect your choices, once made, to remain intact. Be prepared to make changes over time because of changed circumstances. Some choices will have a natural end date. Others will start well but diminish in interest. Others may never live up to expectations or no longer fit your priorities. And that's OK.

I was fortunate. After I left Penn at the beginning of my transition, I settled into a routine for three years of planned time, four mornings a week. I left to devote more time to my personal interests. With mornings now free, I'm again trying to create a new structure and focus for myself.

This notion of periodic shuffling, while characteristic of this new life chapter, is unlike the practice of law where the outline and structure stay largely the same, even though the daily routine is varied. Many people, and particularly lawyers, dislike frequent change, including a need to make periodic choices to modify a schedule that took so much time to put together. It's easier to acclimate if you equate the adjustments to tweaks, not seismic shifts.

FINAL LESSON:

Occasionally, re-examine what's important for your personal fulfillment and happiness. If you're uncertain about the answer, think about your past accomplishments and identify those factors that made you feel good. While those factors may be different than what they are today, they also may be the same. Whatever they are, seek opportunities and roles with those current factors in mind. Having identified them, you'll find choosing the right activities and roles easier the next time around.

I'm currently trying to make a major adjustment to my menu. I'm applying the above principles. In my re-examination, I identified the common elements in my proudest life accomplishments. In each situation, I had taken a leadership position. I'm again looking to add one significant project that I can lead. Wish me luck as I wish you when your R time comes.

FINAL, FINAL LESSON:

R is an ongoing learning process. It never stops. But at least there's no homework. ■

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