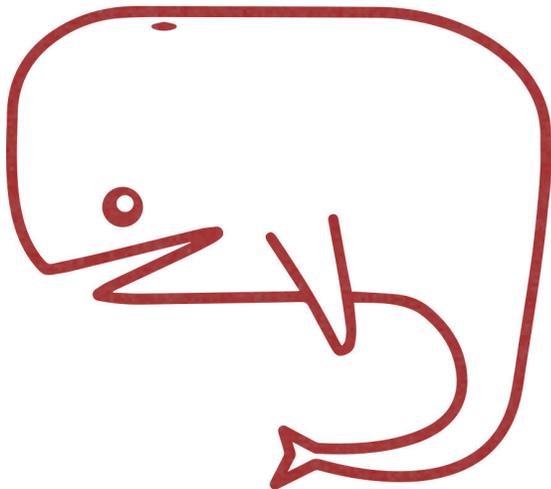


Career Change Defined by **STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS**

By Danielle Sapega



Attorneys do not always get to choose their career path in the traditional sense. It is often chosen for them by way of their first or second job out of school. Once you have practiced for a few years in a certain area of law, and additional time passes, it becomes progressively more difficult to transition to a new area of law. Such a transition is not impossible, but as I found, it can require a great deal of legwork, determination, networking, “thinking outside of the box,” moral support from friends and family, and luck.





My first job out of law school was in workers' compensation defense litigation. While I came to adore my boss and liked the firm, I knew even before starting there that I would not likely be crazy about this area of legal practice. So why did I take the job? Because it was there! In 2011, with the economy still unstable, graduating from law school with a job offer in hand—regardless of the particulars—made me one of the lucky ones. Even though I had been very interested in health law since my first year, I knew I was fortunate just to have found work where I could put my degree to use. So, I decided to keep an open mind, put my interest in health law on the shelf, and see if I would grow to like the workers' comp field. After all, I had never worked as a practicing attorney in any field.

However, after almost two years in workers' comp, it was clear to me that this was not the type of job I could do for the rest of my life. I still had a keen interest in health law, but I kept hearing that landing a health law job without experience was near impossible. Not only were associate positions few and far between, but almost every one required prior work experience in the field or in a related transactional field. The conundrum thus presented itself: how do you get that experience when even junior associate positions require experience? My workers' comp exposure really did nothing for me in this regard, and it also left me without much practical knowledge about civil litigation. So where was I supposed to go? Things seemed so bleak at first that I went through a mini career crisis. For a time, I actually contemplated leaving law altogether and getting a doctorate in psychology, pursuing an registered dietitian degree and becoming a nutritionist, or moving to Washington, D.C. and trying to work for a health policy-oriented entity.

Ultimately, however, after much soul-searching, brainstorming, networking and seemingly endless applications, I had the good fortune of receiving an offer to work for a firm that was willing to train me in medical malpractice defense litigation. I thought it was the change I needed, since it was at least indirectly related to the health law field. I felt that my career was finally about to start. These early hopes were short-lived, however. While I liked the field of med-mal more than

workers' comp, it proved to be only a rather distant cousin to the particular areas of health law that I was interested and another area of the profession that I could not see myself practicing in for the next 35-plus years. I realized that I had to either give up on my career goal or go all-out for the real thing, i.e., the almost fictional "white whale" of a genuine health law position.

While keeping my plans mum at the med-mal firm, I literally did everything I could think of that might move me toward my goal, and communicated with anyone who was kind enough to talk to me about my career. I started networking with health lawyers, politely begging for a few moments of their time to talk about their areas of expertise and the field in general. I also asked people with law degrees in the health care field for advice and guidance. I learned a lot about the field as well as my prospects for entering it, much of the latter not being very encouraging. There was still the problem of how to gain the necessary experience via a job position, when all of the available positions that would give me the needed experience, required experience. I still had no idea how to make this transition with my background. It seemed almost impossible.

Through my networking, however, I eventually caught a break. I met with an awesome woman who worked at a local health system in the regulatory department. She had both a nursing degree and a law degree and understood exactly what I was going through, having come from a medical malpractice defense practice herself. I went in looking only for advice, but miraculously came out with an offer to work for her as an intern of sorts, doing part time medical-legal regulatory work on an unpaid basis. Initially, the thought of quitting my full-time job was quite scary, especially to be an unpaid intern of sorts. I asked myself: "Is gaining this experience really worth it? What if I were to be viewed as 'untouchable' because I am unpaid? What would my fiancé-now-husband say about me leaving the realm of the employed?" I was extremely lucky that he was quite understanding and not only earned enough to get both of us by, but he told me not to worry about it, although I

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did anyway. I decided that if I were going to take the plunge, I could not go without any income source and set back our finances, so I approached my old boss at the workers' comp firm and asked if I could come back on a part-time basis. Very fortunately for me, my prior departure had been amicable and I was welcomed back in a part-time position that would allow me to simultaneously work for free with my newfound mentor and bring in some kind of meaningful income. Had this option not been available, I still would have taken the unpaid work. The opportunity was simply too good to pass up.

I thought about back-up sources of income before even approaching my workers' comp boss. I would first search around for per diem/temp work as a lawyer, but if necessary, I would be willing to fall back on my six years of experience as a waitress to make money if nothing else worked out. I knew that I was in no position to be picky, and serving would bring in more than an hourly job in retail. I was obviously thrilled when I did not have to even consider these options, since the part-time income from workers' comp was sufficient to contribute to various living expenses without putting a dent in our savings. So, off I went, into the unknown.

While gaining my experience in regulatory, in order to make myself a more appealing candidate and further chip away at the "experience" obstacle, I started a master of science program in health policy, although I only took one class at a time because it was all I could afford. I also started working as a volunteer member of a local institutional review board, and I became an active member in the American Health Lawyers Association. I continued networking like a fiend and met some amazing lawyers along the way who were inspirational and willing to go out of their way to help me. Many wonderful connections were made, but unfortunately, none yielded any solid job leads.

About a year and a half after deciding to hunt down the white whale, almost out of the blue and based on a mere internet job search, I absolutely nailed it. I somehow managed to land my dream job as in-house counsel for a health system. I will not lie, it was a case of right person, right variety of experience and right time, but the stars had finally aligned in my favor. It never would have, had I not gone down the rabbit hole and aggressively pursued my goal by seeking out every opportunity possible to gain experience. I am so glad that I did.

Notwithstanding the happy ending, during my year and a half in professional "limbo," I often felt frustrated, worried, depressed and outright fearful about my professional future. I had visions of getting stuck working in my odd internship/part-time position for years, with the possibility of full-time employment in health law shrinking by the day. One of the worst moments was during the course of a discussion about

my situation with one particular health lawyer who shall remain nameless. He not only told me that the health law field was "shrinking," but that I needed to be careful because if I were to remain in my then-current situation for too long (he hinted at two years or more), I might become "toxic" to potential employers. This only served to magnify my already mounting worries and fears.

This brings me to the most important thing of all: I could not have done this without the support of my family, friends and the many supportive professional contacts I made along the way. On days of self-doubt when I questioned what I was doing, or when I was at my limit and wanted to throw in the towel, it helped immensely to have someone tell me to not give up, to keep at it, and that something would undoubtedly come my way eventually, even if inside I still felt like nothing ever would. I cannot emphasize enough how important my "support network" was to me.

So, to anyone out there feeling stuck or hopeless stop. While my meandering career path may be somewhat unique, the theme and outcome of my story is not. I talked to many people with law degrees who had the same dissatisfaction with their original career trajectory and took steps to change it. They worked for free, networked like mad, performed boring drudgework, and started in positions well below their skill level just to break into a field. I can conclusively say that there is no correct way to accomplish this major life change and every person's story is different. The first step I took was to make sure health law was actually something that I was interested in, and I accomplished this by seeking out informational interviews with attorneys working in different areas within the health law field. In addition to substantive questions, I made sure to ask about three key things: their career path, what advice they had for me, if any, and whether they had any contacts who might be willing to talk to me. What

started out as a few health lawyer contacts mushroomed into a massive networking tree. I made sure to follow up on occasion, if I felt comfortable doing so, to update my contacts on anything new that had transpired or to run a new idea past them. Becoming active in an organization, such as a local bar association or a group like the American Health Lawyers Association, can also act as a source of contacts or volunteer opportunities. The more people I talked to, the more ideas I got about how to continue and improve upon the process.

It is possible to redirect and reshape one's career path: I am living proof. It may be a daunting undertaking, but it will hopefully be so worth it in the end. ■

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