

## **A Career Flashlight: How to Navigate a Legal Career**

By Randi Rosenblatt\*

As diligent and driven as any newly minted lawyer may be, the world of unknowns has always been enormous at the outset of a legal career. And now, at a time when the legal industry is changing and countless ways to utilize a law degree are unearthed weekly, new lawyers cannot truly know what to “expect.” It makes for exciting and nerve-racking times in which the increasing number of innovative opportunities in an industry that has been historically resistant to change creates a different landscape than existed just a decade earlier. The hope would be that if more of us share our successes and mistakes, we can help guide those who are climbing after us rather than letting them navigate in the dark.

So, for those newly minted lawyers who want a flashlight, here goes:

1. **The Path:** Biglaw and the government are two potential paths to take following law school graduation — two out of hundreds. There are small and mid-sized law firms that provide great opportunities to jump right into practice head first; there are roles that are part-law and part-business — such as regulatory and compliance; there are various non-legal roles, many of which easily lend themselves to a legal background — career counseling, recruiting, academia, and litigation consulting; there are legal technology and legal operations roles, which facilitate the addition of artificial intelligence to the legal practice; and there is always the option to go out and do something entirely unrelated to the law at all, yet for which your training will suit you well. That’s the beauty of being a lawyer — your options are truly endless.
2. **The Practice Area:** Unless you entered law school with a pre-existing interest or you developed an interest while there, you likely took a litigation route or a corporate route. No one mentioned data security, privacy, alcohol beverage, matrimonial . . . and the list goes on. If you are so inclined, explore beyond litigation and corporate work. There may be practice areas that suit you better, both personally and professionally. If you identify that area that truly feels like a fit, you are likely to see more success (and satisfaction).
3. **The Sacrifice:** There is always a sacrifice in your choice — which sacrifice you make is yours to choose so make that choice intelligently. Billing 2200 hours per year in Biglaw may result in a nice salary and stellar training, yet come at the cost of weekday evenings to exercise or spend time with family, weekends without continuous interruptions, work-free vacations, and, generally, a sustainable work-life

balance as you advance in your life and career. Working at a startup may grant a vibrant atmosphere with a “pave the way” vibe, yet come at the cost of stability and a comfortable income at the outset. A career in academia may provide for a comfortable schedule and the ability to engage with brilliant minds, yet you may forego evolving as a practitioner and developing client relationships. There are ways to have it “all” — just decide what “all” is for you (and this may change over time) and how to navigate your way there.

4. **The Expectation:** You are expected to be smart and to be a good lawyer — neither of those will get you to the next step in your career; they are merely requirements for getting and keeping your job. So, what does it take to advance? First, you must show why you are essential to the business — perhaps it is your niche expertise or your thorough understanding of the nuances of the law that make you invaluable. Second, you must be liked, personally. No matter how good you may be professionally, if you aren’t liked, how good you are has that much less meaning. Be the person you’d want to spend time with when stuck at the office ordering dinner week after week. Third, you must show your ability to get out from behind your desk. You must expand your network, demonstrate your ability to form meaningful relationships, and show your commitment to building your business. Fourth, you must be genuinely interested. Lack of interest can be sensed a mile away and it makes for an end date. See your future to include your job so that they work hand in hand.
5. **The Politics:** They exist everywhere — law firms, companies, non-profits — and you have to learn how to manage yourself through them. Know and befriend your allies and accept that not everyone is on your side. Foster and further develop the good relationships. And while avoidance may not be a possible solution for addressing the bad seeds, seek help and learn how to handle those tough relationships.
6. **The Ability to Transition:** You can always course correct. Your first professional career decision will likely be far from your last. Sometimes the best way for advancement is to consider a change, whether it be a change of employer, a change of practice within the same company, or a change of career entirely. Find the intersection of what you are good at and what you enjoy. Keep your ears open and stay apprised of new opportunities. Sometimes the best opportunities are unexpected or come at an inopportune time — they are all, at a minimum, worth consideration. Not only can they provide you with a career check, but they also help you keep batteries in your flashlight.
7. **The People:** Find mentors and sponsors. Create and evolve your personal Board of Directors who can serve as a resource for you as you navigate your career. And make those relationships mutual in any way you can. Be a giver more than a taker.

Careers are rarely linear. Often times, that’s what keeps them most interesting. Keep your eyes open, looking forward and learning from the past. While you may not know

what to expect, remain in the driver's seat of your career, with the flashlight pointing ahead to your next great opportunity.

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