

CAREER PATHS FOR WOMEN LAWYERS - PLANNING FOR A LIFE THAT WORKS

Sally* started attending the career workshop because she was feeling a lack of stimulation and satisfaction in her life. She attributed her feelings to boredom with the cases that were assigned to her in the firm. She felt that she should either take on more responsibility with the firm and strive toward partnership, or find a position that offered more diverse work. As she worked toward change, she realized that much of her dissatisfaction involved the amount of time she spent at work, and her desire to spend more quality time with her children. She felt that she wasn't available for the children during the hours of the day that they needed her and that instead of raising them, she was managing them.

These concerns caused Sally to reexamine whether she wanted to make a change. In working to identify her personal values more closely, she realized that she was not interested in making an identity change from a professional woman to a stay-at-home Mom, or even in cutting back to part time. She also realized that her current job was a good fit for her and that these other issues were coloring her ability to analyze it accurately.

She decided to change the configuration of her life, rather than change jobs. After much emotional reflection and "crunching of the numbers," she figured out a way to continue being productive at work and still join her children in more of their prime-time activities. The solution involved some unconventional hours and ways of keeping in contact with clients. She took the risk of asking for what she thought would work for her. Because she was able to speak to all the parties involved with confidence, she could state her needs clearly. She did not apologize for what she wanted, nor did she complain about her

work situation. She soon was able to negotiate a plan that allowed her to spend fewer hours at the office during the traditional work day. Although she was initially worried about her productivity declining – it actually increased. She attributed this to the fact that she no longer used work time or energy to worry about her children. She was able to focus on work knowing that she would have time during each day to really "be" with the children. Although she expected that she might be viewed as lacking commitment to the profession and be forced to make compromises in her career, this did not materialize. Here is Sally's own explanation of what she experienced:

Once I was working from a confident problem-solving position, instead of just complaining about work and feeling trapped by it, I felt more able to take the risk to communicate what I really thought could work. It was like I needed permission to design it for my best interest. I know that sounds ridiculous coming from someone that people see as a self-assured professional, but I thought I had to play by someone else's rules in order to stay in favor at work. It took quite a bit of internal work to make a pretty small external change, but it has made a huge difference in the way I function in life right now.

Sally's experience is not unusual. Searching for a satisfying career path takes effort, time, and energy. Since each person has a unique set of life experiences and expectations, there are no fixed schedules, timelines, or directions for the process. There are, however, some approaches that can help you to clarify your thoughts as you proceed.

The first question to answer when considering a career transition is "Why change?". Try to figure out what you're really looking for before making the effort to change your work life. Most of us are engaged in the search for happiness or peace. Some people seek constant change as a part of this quest, while others seek security in the form of stability.

* Name and exact circumstances have been changed.

Sometimes a career change is exactly what is needed for more stimulation or deeper satisfaction. However, sometimes career change only adds to life's stresses and does little to alleviate the dissatisfaction you are experiencing. The question to consider is: What really needs to change in order for you to have the experience of life that you desire?

Next, identify the values that are most important to you. A successful or worthwhile transition can only begin when you are conscious of what you want to head towards. Since values are largely a learned phenomenon, adults can have trouble determining if their own values are driving them – or those of parents, teachers, friends, or colleagues. It takes a lot of discernment to determine what is truly important to you – and what is important often changes at various stages of life. It may require a great deal of strength – and even some courage – to take actions that express a value *you* hold, especially if it is contrary to the expectations of important people in your life.

A third question to ask yourself involves your ability to plan and to envision the future. Although this comes easily for some people, others have difficulty stepping out of the whirlwind of the moment. If it is hard for you to look ahead and plan for the future, you may want to seek some professional assistance to help you create a five-year plan. Planning can help diffuse the sense of being overwhelmed that can come with wanting it all. You can “have it all” – you just might not want it all at once!

These concepts – and others – will be developed and explored at the May 17, 2002 seminar, *Career Paths for Women Lawyers: Planning for a Life That Works*. If you are interested in finding a more satisfying career path, I hope you will join us.

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