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Four tips for a lawyer changing practice areas

By Mark Melago

Very few experienced lawyers will tell you that what they do today is exactly what they did when the ink on their JD was still drying. Consumer needs and expectations shift, technology evolves, market conditions fluctuate – and the legal industry as a whole changes along with those factors. For just about every lawyer who's been practicing for a while, change has been inevitable and necessary for career longevity. It's the same for you.

But just telling you to keep up with the times isn't really helpful. If you work at a small law firm or a solo practice, your to-do list is next to endless. You have to attend to immediate client needs, run a small business, market yourself to ensure future new work and, hopefully, retain some time and energy for at least something of a personal life. If you've been thinking of expanding your practice areas or transitioning to a new area of law, it can be hard to know where to start.

In this post, we provide some things to bear in mind as you ponder entering a new area of practice. These considerations should help you take the next step in a smart, carefully considered way.

Which of your current practice areas translate well?

If you practice criminal defense, taking on family law cases would be quite a transition. Are there any practice areas you currently have that lend themselves well to practice areas you don't offer, but could? For example, if you work with established small businesses, you've accumulated skills and background knowledge that would be very compatible with working for entrepreneurs and start-ups. Sometimes it's necessary to jump in with both feet and get familiar with a totally new practice area, but chances are good you could explore a new area of work that bears some similarities to what you already do.

What's changing in the community around you?

Across the country, the population in many rural areas is aging as younger people move to more urban areas. If you're a solo attorney in a small farming community, then elder care and wills, estates, and trusts would be good practice areas to get into. In contrast, let's say you practice in an area of a big city that once was kind of down-market, but is now prospering thanks to an influx of young people and artist types. In that sort of environment, it's easy to see how being able to help small businesses and the creative class would come in handy in the next decade. The point is: Don't make decisions on new practice areas in a vacuum. What's

happening in your proverbial backyard should influence your thought process.

What's making headlines?

Political change is almost always slow, so it isn't often a new law passes or regulations go into effect with little notice. What political issues are being debated at the state or local level that might mean more legal work in the future, and what can you do now to get into a good position? For example, some states (and even some cities) are considering mandatory paid family leave and sick time. That might mean those communities will see an increase in small business owners seeking legal guidance on how to design, implement and maintain programs that comply with these new rules. What are your city and state discussing that might mean significant political, cultural, or economic change, and how might that change translate into work available for the taking?

What do you have a knack for?

The kind of work you like to do shouldn't be the only consideration, but it absolutely ought to be a factor you weigh against all others. A gregarious and social person might well thrive in a practice area where client interaction and community engagement are paramount, but might struggle in a slower-paced, research-intensive field. No one gets to do only what they want all the time, of course, but the point here is a practice area that isn't a fit for your personality won't do you any favors, even if it seems like it might yield a lot of work in the future.

As a final thought, don't be intimidated by the prospect of letting the market know you're open to new types of work. There's a lot to be done, but it's worth it, and a reliable marketing vendor can work with you to make it a much lighter lift. With the guidance of a marketing organization that works only with law firms, it's much easier to start off on the right foot. FindLaw can help you grow your business so you can have a life. ■

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