CHANGING REALITIES, SHIFTING DREAMS:
Alternative Uses for Your Law Degree

By Gary Toohey
“[Y]ou got out of college and started working here.... At what point were you going to stop and go back to what made you happy?”

— George Clooney in the film “Up in the Air”

“Do you wonder what it would be like to stop being a lawyer? Do you fantasize about starting out fresh in a completely new field? Do you keep a mental list of all the careers that might have been if only you hadn’t gone to law school?”¹

If so, you’re in good company. While many lawyers are more than content with the workload and stress of a contemporary law practice, others clearly lose interest in maintaining that pace and begin to wonder if the grass is greener away from the partner track.

What spurs such thoughts? Maybe it is the nagging lure of a life-long dream that remains unfulfilled, or perhaps changing dynamics within the profession — including the impact of the economic downturn of recent years — play a role. Whatever the impetus, wanderlust is not uncommon within the legal profession.

“Whether we are in good economic times or bad, lawyers have always been curious about non-traditional legal careers. You would like to use your J.D., but you don’t necessarily want to be a litigator or a corporate lawyer.”²

Is doing something else with your J.D., your career and your life really a viable option?

That depends on any number of personal and professional factors. But one thing is certain: For those who are serious about considering a shift in careers, one’s legal degree can’t help but be a benefit — whether pursuing either a non-traditional position or even a non-legal career.

A non-traditional job deals with legal or quasi-legal issues on a regular basis. “For example, although a politician is not actually practicing law and does not need bar certification to work, a law degree helps him or her draft clear, effective legislation.”³

Other general examples include careers in business/finance, law firm administration, lobbying/public affairs, human resources and publishing/broadcasting, to name but a scant few [for a far more comprehensive list of possibilities, visit http://www.law2.byu.edu/site/career-services/professional-development-guidebook].

With a non-legal job, on the other hand, “the skills learned in law school are an asset to both the employee and employer, but knowledge of the law itself does not help or hinder the employee. For example, a high school English teacher may benefit from the skills developed in law school but will not be advantaged or disadvantaged directly because of his or her knowledge of the law.”⁴

But how do you know whether those visions of becoming a writer, law school professor or musician are a viable option or just wishful daydreaming?

“There are four common elements in every vision of success. They are:

• Being content about your life;
• Achieving measureable accomplishments that compare favorably to others with similar goals;
• Believing that you have a positive impact on people you care about most; [and]
• Leaving a legacy in order to help others experience future success.”⁵

The chances are that if you are not realizing these goals, you have at least flirted with the thought of doing something different with your career.

THE CHANGING LAW STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

“Today, many students begin law school planning never to practice law. Others, in the course of their law school studies, decide to combine law with another discipline, such as management or business.”⁶ For students who do not wish to be practicing attorneys, nontraditional career choices “may offer more job satisfaction in the long run….⁷

“The reality … is that, with so many law graduates being cranked out these days, there are a lot more attorneys who are trying to fit themselves into round holes, as square pegs,” said Jared Correla, director of the Massachusetts Law Office Management Assistance Program. Correla left his law firm position four years after graduating from law school, eventually becoming manager of CLE publications and online research for the Massachusetts Bar Association before assuming his current position.⁸

“I never wanted to be a lawyer for the long term,” Correla added. “I mostly wanted to go to law school because I wanted to handle any legal matters that I was engaged in
(including non-profit work, in which I remain involved) on my own, without having to pay someone to do it for me.

“I also felt that the transferable skills inherent in the acquisition of a juris doctor degree would allow me the flexibility to choose an alternative career path, which is what I was really aiming for – even though, when I started law school, I did not quite know what that alternative career path would be, whether it would be related to the law, or not.”

This movement toward a non-traditional path among J.D.s is not a new development, according to Tim Kubatzky, executive director of development for the University of Texas – Austin School of Law.

“The current economic situation has prompted more law school graduates to be creative in using their legal educations,” he said. “We have a significant percentage (some think maybe up to one-third) of alumni in non-traditional careers.”

The fact that you went to law school does not relegate you to a career as a lawyer. This is an obvious statement; but it is often forgotten by law students because their professors, fellow students, family, and friends assume they went to law school to become lawyers.

The fact is, many law graduates go on to successful careers that have nothing to do with the practice of law. They can do this because the underlying skills they developed in law school translate well to numerous other fields ranging from banking to real estate, to the entertainment industry.

Among those who agree is Mary Pat McInnis, assistant dean for career development at Saint Louis University School of Law. As with the rest of the staff in the school’s Office of Career Services, she pursued a non-traditional path – into academia – after earning her J.D. She sees a significant number of incoming law students who have no intention of ever practicing law in the traditional sense, preferring instead to pursue a joint degree program that leads to other types of employment.

“They may want to do HR in a company or a hospital, for example,” she said. “Or, if they have an educational background in taxes, they may want to do compliance work. They’re coming in with their eyes wide open and fully engaged, knowing that their J.D. can further advance their career.”

Contrary to what has been reported nationally, Dean McInnis said the economic downturn of recent years has had no effect on the number of law students choosing to pursue alternatives to practicing law. In fact, she has seen the number of law students interested in alternative careers rise steadily during her 15 years on the job.

In response, the school has instituted an annual non-traditional and alternative career fair so that students can explore all of their future employment options.

She added that the growing numbers of these types of students have also skewed studies showing that smaller percentages of law school graduates are being hired by law firms. Many graduates who aren’t hired by law firms are in that position by their own choosing, not as a result of economic issues or a dearth of entry-level positions within those firms.

“So much is emphasized with jobs that mandate or require licensure,” she said. “It doesn’t really paint a true picture of the same law student as would have been the case 30 years ago.”

Why Lawyers Change Careers

Why would someone – after having invested prodigious amounts of money, time and energy into earning a law degree and then gaining entry to a stable, economically-rewarding career practicing law – just walk away?

“The reasons are numerous: better working hours, less stress, or a different set of challenges.” Of course, establishing one’s priorities – money, time with family, the nature of the work environment, and countless more – are a crucial part of that decision-making process.

All of those reasons and more may be found in the examples below of Missouri lawyers who have, either by plan or by fate, found life beyond the billable hour.

Living the Sweet Life

For Springfield lawyer Shawn Askinosie – who spent nearly 20 years as a highly successful criminal defense lawyer – the path to a new career came in a striking moment of clarity:
I was good at it [practicing law]. I was famous (or notorious, depending on who you ask), I was making a lot of money, I loved my work, and I knew without a doubt that if I didn’t quit, it was going to kill me. As in, dead.

I had no hobbies … and didn’t really know how to be comfortable anywhere but a courtroom. I prayed a simple prayer nearly every day for five long years: “Dear God, please give me something else to do.”

Given my yearning to leave a job I knew was going to mean my early funeral, it’s not surprising that it was when I was driving home from someone else’s funeral that it struck me – dropped into my head out of the clear blue Missouri sky I was driving through – that I needed to be a chocolate maker.

At that point, all I knew about chocolate was that I loved eating it. But I brought my lawyer skills to bear on learning all I could about chocolate….

In the 10 years since that revelatory moment, the company that resulted from his passion for doing something else with his law degree – Askinosie Chocolate – has become a small batch chocolate manufacturer that has won national and international awards for its quality. The company has 15 full-time employees in its Springfield headquarters, with its chocolate sold throughout the United States and exported to stores around the world.

Playing the Courtroom Odds

Then there is St. Louisan Andrew Winship, whose dissatisfaction with his job led to the creation of a new and promising technology company. “It was January 2012 and Winship, an attorney, had lost a trial on which he’d spent a lot of time. ‘I had one of those I-could-be-doing-something-else moments,’ he recalled….”

With exquisite timing, a friend told him about Startup Weekend, a then-new entrepreneurial event designed to bring together business people, programmers, designers and inventors. There, Winship met his two future partners – a data analyst and a software developer. By the end of that weekend, the trio had developed a prototype of a program designed to help attorneys predict juridical behavior and calculate the odds of a favorable verdict by utilizing data from state and federal court databases.

The result is Juristat, a company that Winship now serves as president and chief executive officer. The company received a big boost when it was chosen for Capital Innovators, a technology accelerator program that gave them a $50,000 investment plus six weeks of intensive mentoring from business and technology experts. Other investors have since bet on the company’s future.

“Our whole culture revolves around the idea that the legal system should be predictable and transparent,” Winship says…. “We are predicting the future behavior of every actor in the legal system.”

Law and Marketing on the Silicon Prairie

Meanwhile, Kansas City attorney Chris Brown has turned the traditional law firm model on its ear and tackled an additional challenge: legal marketing.

Brown earned his J.D., magna cum laude, from the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, where he was editor of the law review and concentrated in the areas of business and entrepreneurial law. “While in law school I just assumed that I would be a lawyer,” he said. “I wasn’t really looking to do anything else.”

But after spending three and one-half years practicing business and intellectual property law at a Kansas City firm, he felt the need for a change. “I was looking to do something more exciting than just being a lawyer every day. I didn’t want to be at one firm for my entire career. There was no way I could stomach that.”

The answer, as it turned out, was sitting across the desk from him.

“As soon as I realized how much fun my clients were having, I wanted to do that, too,” he said. “When I started working with the start-up crowd, that’s when the idea [of legal marketing] came to me.”

In addition to assisting established law firms create strategic marketing plans and campaigns through website development, blogs and e-mail newsletters, b.Legal Marketing has also attracted a growing number of new, smaller firms interested in establishing a presence.

“We’ve had plenty of pretty good-sized firms reach out to us about doing their marketing,” he said. “At the same
time, we’ve had way more small firms who just want a website and don’t want to pay $30,000 or $40,000 for it. We’re often just as much of a start-up as our clients are.”

In addition to b.Legal Marketing, Brown runs Venture Legal, through which he offers legal counsel to startups. Services include business formation, choice of entity analysis, drafting contracts, intellectual property assistance, and general business law.

But Venture Legal isn’t your typical law firm. Brown notes that the firm is based on the business model, not the law firm model. It shuns the billable hour in favor of fixed fees, digital billing, and relies heavily on online file sharing and electronic signatures to keep paper to an absolute minimum.

“My clients are really receptive to what we’re doing,” he explained. “I don’t spend any time haggling over fees. With this firm, my clients know up front exactly what things are going to cost and there really are no disputes.”

As it this weren’t enough, Brown is also involved with Edge Up Sports, “where geeks are merging big data with fantasy football.”20 With his partners, this enterprise goes far beyond similar such services to include analysis of “Twitter feeds, audio and video, speaking patterns to ascertain the mental state of players and coaches, news feeds, ... [and] patterns” in order to “synthesize it and use that to give a better view of what is going on in the NFL relative to fantasy football.”

For Brown, new challenges such as these – and new opportunities – can’t come fast enough.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if I change course again someday,” he said. “I don’t want to be tied down to any one particular type of career.”

A LAW DEGREE OPENS DOORS

Regardless of whether they are a new graduate or a seasoned practitioner, lawyers who are interested in moving into a non-traditional legal career have one big factor working into their favor: their law degree.

“Many law students would claim that the primary skills developed at law school are how to cope with lack of sleep, how to perform under pressure, and how to cope with frustration.”21 Given the nature of their jobs, it is likely that many practicing lawyers would assert that these “skills” are also inherent in the contemporary practice of law.

“In reality, law school students develop a wide variety of highly transferable and marketable skills that are valuable to [other] employers.”22 “A law degree can open a whole host of new possibilities.”23

“Because the law touches every aspect of life, legal training is useful in virtually all careers. However, in nontraditional fields a law graduate has a distinct edge over other applicants.”24

“If you go to work for Ernst & Young, you won’t be practicing law, but they want you because you are a lawyer,” added Dean McInnis of Saint Louis University. “That lawyer is very good to have in the room, because they will have the ability to not only look at what the business interests are, but to also identify problems.

“It is your legal training, only some of which you learn in law school, which makes you into a desirable candidate,” agrees attorney Jessica Silverstein, principal in a career counseling service:

If you are thinking about not practicing law, it is important to identify the underlying skills you have acquired during law school. Think about all you have done in law school and consider how they have contributed to your ability to: think and write analytically; speak in public; write clearly and persuasively; synthesize ideas; compile facts and information; simplify complex ideas; negotiate; persuade; research; develop a strategy to reach a desired outcome; teach; work with others; [and] counsel.25

Other highly marketable skills attributed to those who hold a law degree include: handling stressful situations effectively; brainstorming; being innovative; engaging in teamwork; dealing with difficult people; having a good eye for details; being able to establish priorities; having a personable and outgoing personality; working well without supervision; the ability to learn technical jargon; editing and proofreading; making difficult decisions; delegating responsibilities; meeting deadlines; and the ability to manage projects.

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employers how these skills qualify you to work in their respective fields.”

“It is your legal training, only some of which you learn in law school, which makes you into a desirable candidate [for other career paths]. The skills gained in law school, the way lawyers learn to think, read and write will always be an asset.”

“The knowledge that my degree is useful, important, and respected, no matter how many lawyer jokes there are, enabled me to seek an alternative legal career,” said one lawyer who traded her law practice for a career counseling position.

**CAN I REALLY DO THAT?**

Ultimately, any decision by a practicing attorney to figuratively change ships in mid-stream – no matter how well-researched – involves a large leap of faith … faith in oneself and one’s skills.

“The uncertainty was and still is the biggest hurdle in leaving a highly structured career path like law.”

Kathleen Brady, the founder of a career planning company, describes the quandary lawyers face when considering a career change:

The good news is that the options both inside and outside of traditional law practice are unlimited. The bad news is that the alternatives both inside and outside of traditional law practice are unlimited. That reality paralyzes people. With unlimited options, attorneys do not know where to begin. They wonder:

1. Is there some way to combine my legal training with my other, equally important interests?
2. Are there jobs available at my level and salary expectations or will I have to settle for less?
3. How will I explain to peers and loved ones that I have [not] “wasted” my legal education?

These questions can be overwhelming because there are no immediate answers. Many get stymied and opt to stay stuck in an unhappy situation or simply avoid the questions altogether. Yet, career counselors know that people tend to end up happier after a transition; the hard part is living through the unavoidable discomfort and uncertainties.

New York attorney Leigh McMullan Abramson struggled with these very issues as she pondered whether to abandon her position with a law firm and pursue her long-held desire to be a writer:

I wanted to stop practicing law practically from the moment I reviewed my first document … During rough weeks of late nights and weekends, I’d swear that as soon as I had time, I would update my resume and start working my alumni networks. But when things slowed down, using...
my off time to sit on my couch eating fro-yo and watching *The Real Housewives* always seemed like a better idea than embarking on a job search. This cycle, [by the way], is the reason law firms are harder to get out of than the Gambino family.

I tried to think of ways I could use my law degree, having short-lived fantasies with various legal careers. Go in-house. Do public interest. Become a prosecutor…. These positions seemed better than a law firm (which, let’s be honest, nearly any job does when you’ve hit hour twenty of searching for a case that almost certainly doesn’t exist). But the bigger issue was that I really didn’t want to practice law in any setting.

“Finding the courage to forge one’s own path and construct a personal definition of success in the face of external obligations and pressures isn’t easy. In fact, it is downright scary…. Seeking an alternative career requires planning and strategizing based on information about [yourself] and the world of work, the match between [you] and the actions [you] take.”

You have to know you want it. You cannot go into … another profession without doing your research and without knowing why you want to make the change. You must be able to clearly articulate why you never want to or no longer want to practice law. You must also be able to explain to someone in the field you enter why you want to do to what they do…. [Y]ou need to think carefully about giving up everything you worked hard to achieve and seeking something new.

That advice is particularly applicable to law students, who should be cautious not to make this decision out of frustration with the trials and stress of law school. It is easier for a practicing attorney to later move to a nontraditional career than for a person who begins a nontraditional career directly after law school to go back to the practice of law.

Before selecting a nontraditional career, students should evaluate the time and monetary investments of a legal education and research to see whether or not the desired nontraditional opportunities are available and will meet their career goals.

For more detailed information on how to make the transition from a traditional law practice, see the accompanying article, “Getting From Here to There: A Lawyer’s Non-Traditional Legal or Non-Legal Job Search,” on page 14 of this issue.

**CONCLUSION**

Because defining success is a subjective exercise that is necessarily different from person to person, it is impossible to offer any sort of blanket statement as to when those who shift their careers away from the traditional practice of law have achieved that goal. The answer depends upon what is truly important to each individual.

In the end, it all boils down to ascertaining whether your new focus provides you with a satisfaction, self-worth, and happiness that had previously eluded you.

“The greatest benefit of defining your own, personal definition of success is that you realize the only things being sacrificed are things YOU have identified as lower priority items.

“Seems like a small price to pay to achieve career/life fulfillment.”

**ENDNOTES**


4 Id.


6 BYU LAW SUPRA n.3

7 Id.


11 Telephone Interview with Mary Pat McInnis, assistant dean of career development, Saint Louis University School of Law (Jan. 28, 2015).

www.law.stanford.edu/careers/students/career-options/non-law.


14 David Nicklaus, Juristat Goes from Startup Weekend to Startup Sensation, St. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH (Nov. 15, 2013, 12:16 AM), http://www.stltoday.com/business/columns/david-nicklaus/juristat-goes-from-startup-weekend-to-startup-sensation/article_e499501e-3e02-51f6-bd16-0344be725171.html


16 Telephone Interview with Chris Brown (February 4, 2015).

17 Id.


19 Id.


21 BYU LAW, supra n. 3.

22 Id.

23 Career Possibilities, supra n.12

24 BYU LAW, supra n. 3

25 Non-Lawyer Jobs for Lawyers, supra n.10.

26 Id.


28 Id.

29 Abramson, supra n.1.

30 Brady, supra n.5.

31 Abramson, supra n.1.

32 Brady, supra n. 5.

33 Sidhom, supra n.22.

34 BYU LAW, supra n.3

35 Brady, supra n.5.

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NOMINATIONS NOW BEING ACCEPTED FOR MISSOURI BAR PRO BONO PUBLICO AWARDS

The purpose of The Missouri Bar’s Pro Bono Publico Awards is to recognize and appreciate attorneys or law firms who demonstrate exemplary service to needy persons and to encourage all attorneys to imitate their example.

Four awards are presented annually, and anyone may nominate a candidate. The awards are presented to an attorney or law firm that practices in the following geographic regions: one award from the St. Louis metropolitan area; one award from the Kansas City metropolitan area; and two awards from outstate Missouri.

Nomination criteria include: a significant portion of the pro bono service must occur during the preceding year (October 1 to September 30); the service must be provided without compensation to the attorney except for reimbursement of actual expenses; a significant part of the service must be rendered directly to low-income persons (under 200 percent of federal poverty level) or to a public or tax-exempt nonprofit organization that directly services low income individuals; the recipient must not have previously received the award within the prior five years; and the recipient must be a member in good standing of The Missouri Bar.

Selection criteria include demonstrated exemplary service to low-income individuals who need legal assistance consistent with the profession’s traditions and ethical code, and practice in the geographic area for which the award is presented.

**Nominations must be received no later than May 1, 2015.**

To nominate an individual or law firm for the award, visit The Missouri Bar’s website at www.mobar.org to access an online nomination form, or send a nomination letter to:

The Missouri Bar
Attn: Pro Bono Publico Awards
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