

Discovery, Reclamation, and Redemption: The Journey From the Practice of Law to the Construction Trailer

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Wearing a hard hat inside a gutted building on a humid summer morning a few years ago, I found myself facing a group of impatient drywall workers. They were waiting for me — an assistant project manager for a general contractor — to confirm the radius of an ellipse onto a floor for a wall layout. It seemed hard to imagine, but just two years earlier I was a real estate attorney in my late 30s sitting comfortably in my office drafting sophisticated acquisition, financing and leasing documents.

After practicing corporate and real estate law for more than 14 years, I left — perhaps the word “escaped” is more appropriate — the financial comfort and anxiety of law firm life to slog in the mud and muck of the construction trailer. My career change demanded a combination of planning, good fortune and double dog dare. Along the way, I learned lessons about myself, the charitable spirit of others and the value of chasing a passion.

The reasons I applied to law school are confused and probably better suited to psychology and the study of family dynamics. As the grandson of Russian immigrants and the son, nephew and cousin of lawyers, I entered law school, like many others, without proper consideration or a sense of purpose.

In hindsight, I missed or ignored many indications that I was not well suited for the practice of law. In an industry that virtually demands, and richly rewards, exceptional and ambitious talent, I should not have ignored omens including LSAT scores and law school grades that put me somewhere in the middle of the pack of my classmates and below-average interest by employers.

Failure to prosper in corporate and commercial real estate law after more than a decade should have been another signal. For many attorneys,

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the law satisfies an intellectual challenge and brings great financial and psychological rewards. For me, it was more mysterious than satisfying, producing more anxiety than fulfillment.

In my law practice, I was introduced to many different aspects of corporate and real estate transactions, and I gravitated towards construction. For several years, I could not stop asking questions about architectural design and the mechanics of construction. After facing a downsizing at a law firm and facing a ten week severance period, I was prepared to find a new legal position at a law firm or to try for a dramatic career change.

There was no reference material to guide my change, but I approached the possibility of a transition with a meticulous and methodical business plan. As a psychologist, my wife suggested that I seek advice from a career coach and proposed several names. After several consultations, I located a coach who understood me and conducted various personality tests to help in his assessments. He helped me decide to leave law and to navigate a course toward a contractor position.

Before applying for a construction job, the next part of my plan was to find an introduction to construction management to confirm that I had an aptitude and interest in the field. After reviewing various engineering programs with a contractor friend, I applied to the University of Maryland graduate school of engineering in the project management program. With an undergraduate business and economics degree and a law degree, I first had to convince school officials (and probably myself) that I could handle the civil engineering work load, including calculus, linear programming, and optimization. My last and highest level of math was freshman calculus taken more than 20 years before my enrollment at Maryland.

After lobbying the school officials, I enrolled as an audit student on a trial basis and registered for a course on the basics of project management. In a classroom for the first time since law school, I was at least a decade older than my classmates. Each student was asked to talk about their background and experience. All of my classmates had an undergraduate engineering degree and current employment at Bechtel, the Navy Civil Engineers Corps, or other related field. The class seemed to stop when I introduced myself as a practicing lawyer, and I needed to explain my situation twice to the instructor.

The first several classes felt ordinary, and my classmates were patient with my elementary questions. It was the announcement of our first exam that brought a rushing panic and sense that I just did not belong in the program. Once I focused on my studies and received good marks on my initial exam, I realized that I had found my niche.

After starting the Maryland program, and comfortable that I was on the proper path, I contacted personnel departments of general contractors and sent out my resume. Getting no reply or curt rejections, I quickly learned that the traditional tools of a job search were ineffective. Faced with a brick wall, I then decided to become more assertive and creative.

Using the Internet, I read trade magazines and searched websites for general contracting companies. When I found an interesting person, I would make a call and plead my case. In some cases, I was met with quiz-zical responses and a quick goodbye. In others, I was able to launch into discussion. Like most networking, some discussions were fruitless, while others resulted in two significant interviews, notably a memorable meet-ing with the president of my current company.

With the words “I think that you’re crazy, but I’m willing to give you a chance,” I was offered a position as a project engineer by Whiting-Turner Contracting. There have been many remarkable milestones, important days, and sleepless nights in my new career. Among the most daunting was the day I decided whether to accept the job offer or to continue to search for legal positions.

Facing the prospect of a nearly 45 percent cut in compensation and starting a new career at almost 40, both my wife and I were probably in a panic. At a time when our children were six and four years old and living in a community with sound public schools, we were able to create a bud-get that relied on our joint income and a hope that we would not face ma-jor financial commitments such as private school. We both probably be-lieved that I could return to law if the experiment failed.

In announcing my decision to family, friends, and legal colleagues, most initially heard me say that I was leaving the practice of law to act as in-house general counsel to a construction company. It took several addi-tional sentences to communicate that I was completely leaving the prac-tice of law and starting a new career in construction management. In sev-eral instances, there was a moment of silence followed by a request to re-peat myself.

Some friends were skeptical, but most embraced the idea of the change. Among lawyers, there was a hint of both admiration and disbelief in my ability to change. Many people openly questioned whether I was seeking temporary training in construction so that I could return to law in a new capacity.

My first days in construction felt like starting a new school in Paris, unfamiliar with the streets and speaking only broken French. My entry-level role was generally defined as managing the construction process,

learning the business of general contracting, reviewing drawings, hiring subcontractors, and working out of the construction trailer.

I had heard the term culture shock used many times but did not fully appreciate its meaning until I started in construction. Law firms generally have loosely defined lines of communication and titles. As an attorney, I was accustomed to wandering a law firm hall to find the answer to a question or sending a quick e-mail to express a concern. Law firm associates are rewarded for critical analysis and have fairly free mobility and license to work on a variety of matters for a variety of partners.

In the construction industry I was treated as an anomaly and with a certain amount of suspicion about my motives. Unlike a law firm, I soon learned that a construction company can be somewhat militaristic in its orientation and utterly blunt in communication. A construction company has clear titles with detailed job descriptions, and the lines of communication are carefully drawn. While critical thinking and entrepreneurship are often encouraged, failure to honor the company code and managing a construction project can jeopardize a career.

Early in my new career, I received a sharply worded e-mail from an owner regarding a construction project. Understanding the facts and law and reading the architectural drawings, I quickly drafted and sent a stinging response that was well-reasoned and methodically rebutted the accusations of the e-mail. While such a volley of correspondence was the norm in a law firm, sending the rebuttal without first obtaining the approval of senior management was a mistake resulting in some internal criticism. While I initially bristled at having to ask permission for a seemingly routine matter, I have come to understand the need for formal decision-making in a large company.

Like the legal field, the construction industry still honors and encourages the culture of apprenticeship. Without exaggeration, I was uniformly embraced by colleagues and subcontractors when I asked a question or had a problem. It probably took two years for the company and my co-workers to believe that I was genuinely interested in construction and that I intended to make a career in general contracting.

Continuing my courses at Maryland at night and receiving high marks, I later enrolled as a graduate student with the intent of receiving my master's degree. To qualify for the degree, I completed 10 courses at night and during the summer and completed two scholarly papers. Almost three years after starting the program, I marched in the processional to the graduation ceremony with my fellow, and much younger, classmates to receive my master's of engineering degree. Before walking across the

stage to receive my diploma, I found my family in the audience, with my wife, our two sons who were excited to miss elementary school, and my mom with a few tears.

Many lawyers become disillusioned with the practice of law and day-dream of a different career. While many remain in their existing practice, some move into related fields, sometimes working for existing clients in a similar capacity. There are even some attorneys who make stark career changes, such as opening a bakery or a clothing boutique.

With my experience, I believe in paying attention to passion, listening to instinct and intuition, and in following the advice of considered judgment. For most of my childhood, I expected that I would become a successful lawyer. Discovering that I was not well-suited for law was profoundly disappointing, but making a change in career and finding a passion was redemption.