

'In the Meantime'

Tips for transforming a frustrating career into a rewarding experience.



BY DOROTHY M. PRITCHETT

Dorothy M. Pritchett is the founder of Andrew Grace Associates, a national recruitment firm specializing in legal searches. Pritchett has served as director of paralegal placement for (o-Counsel and for Briggs Legal Staffing in Atlanta. Before that, she worked 11 years as a paralegal in the areas of litigation, real estate, general corporate, trusts and estates and bankruptcy at law firms in Virginia. She is a member of the Georgia Association of Paralegals and a graduate of the University of Maryland.

If you hate your job; if you find your workday is being spent watching the clock; if you wake up every morning praying for a blizzard, earthquake, flood or other act of God to close your office for the day; or if you just want to be appreciated for the work you do - you need to read this column.

If you are thinking or feeling any of these things, it's likely your current job isn't fulfilling professionally or personally. If you look at the road your paralegal career is currently on and think it's just "for now," then you need to get out, change directions or make some career changes.

For most of us, getting out of our current job or changing career paths is difficult and often unrealistic given the circumstances of the moment. Therefore, the third option - making some changes - is the best way to get out of a rut and make your job more appealing.

Paralegals in the law office and corporate environment recognize the ever-present possibility of being buried beneath work that is no longer enjoyable. How many of us have found, either through a change in supervising attorney or department reorganization, that we must turn over duties we love? When you enjoy sitting in on client deposition hearings or conducting

client intake interviews, it's difficult to suddenly find yourself relegated to only working on court filings and document management duties.

Transforming an unsatisfactory career into a meaningful one is the challenge. Iyanla Vanzant, author of "In the Meantime," suggests asking yourself the following questions to understand what isn't right about your

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current situation: What am I feeling? What is it that I want? What am I feeling about what I want?

By analyzing your answers to these questions and applying the tips provided below, you will be on your way to molding a meaningful career.

Focus on What You Want

Linda Bowman, corporate paralegal and officer in the Georgia Association of Paralegals, knew she wanted to be a paralegal, but she had to wait for more than 15 years to make it happen.

There were children to raise, a husband to educate, a family budget to

stretch and a business to manage. When her business grew larger, she had to decide whether she wanted to manage a staff or close the business.

Bowman decided she didn't want to be a manager.

Previously, Bowman spent eight years working for an environmental engineering firm. Her experience as the director of business development, where she conducted research, drafted reports and prepared various seminars on environmental issues, gave her a taste of what paralegal work would be like and influenced her decision to make a career change. By conducting in-depth interviews with attorneys and paralegals about the paralegal profession -its advantages, disadvantages, salaries, hours, work required, etc. -she determined the paralegal profession was right for her. On their advice, she enrolled in an American Bar Association-approved paralegal program and eventually graduated with top honors.

Like Bowman, you too may want to make some career changes. This requires some due diligence and the ability to make decisions about what you want. To focus on what you want, you must make a plan of action.

A simple way to start is by interviewing professionals in your area of interest, setting small goals such as enrolling in continuing legal education courses or attending law specialty workshops to reach your career goals.

Also, pay attention to your current skills, abilities and talents. Use them to further your career. With the homework done, you should have a solid

foundation built to help you make satisfying career decisions.

Understand Your Career Expectations

B.J. Abraham is a receptionist in a law firm and a professional storyteller. Abraham wanted a legal career that would allow her to enjoy her passion for storytelling.

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To come to this decision, she had to weigh out the answers to questions such as: What do I want professionally? Do I want recognition? Am I looking for professional growth? Do I want a certain lifestyle that only certain professions can provide?

There are no right or wrong answers. However, it's important to recognize once you make your choices, you can make changes as your experiences and goals change. You also can develop new expectations to achieve renewed job satisfaction.

Michelle Lewis, a corporate paralegal, has learned firsthand how to maximize her opportunities and reinvent her position.

When some attorneys at Lewis' Atlanta law office left, they asked her to come along with them as the facilities coordinator for their new firm.

The new position expanded her duties to supervising the copy center. She provided secretarial support and acted as the liaison with the firm's home office in Philadelphia.

It didn't take long for her to look beyond those duties. She approached other paralegals and volunteered to help with whatever they needed. She pulled cases from Lexis and did a variety of tasks. When one of the real estate paralegals left, Lewis approached her superiors to bring her on as a full time paralegal despite their rule of paralegals needing a certificate.

It didn't take long for the attorneys to recognize her value. Soon, they were giving assignments directly to her.

While she was still a paralegal assistant, she volunteered to assist one attorney with a specific project and he later gave her responsibility for managing the project. That project led to Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) and tax knowledge. Today, she combines her skills as a corporate paralegal handling ERISA and tax issues for the firm.

Lewis found opportunities can be found when you put aside your fear of the unknown and try something new. Welcome challenges when you see they will provide additional paralegal skills. Think creatively about how you can improve the work product in your practice group and share your ideas with people that can implement your ideas.

Take Responsibility for Your Present Situation

Judith Moe saw her role as a legal assistant changing in her firm when her supervising attorney's responsibilities changed.

Before the change, Moe worked on cases from beginning to end. She interviewed witnesses, organized and drafted documents, among other things.

When the partner she supported became co-counsel for other firms in large cases, she was forced to reorganize documents because she wasn't involved in the cases until midstream. This caused her to miss the challenges and contacts of working the case from start to completion. She greatly respected the work product and skill of the attorneys in the firm but recognized she needed a different situation to stay personally challenged.

So Moe began gathering information about several other firms and asked the partners at her firm what

Reading for Job Satisfaction

LEGAL ASSISTANT TOO provides paralegal specific information about trends, news and issues impacting the profession, as well as "Career Advice."

"Paralegal Career Guide," Second Edition, by Chere B. Estrin gives a comprehensive plan for redesigning your paralegal career and has motivating suggestions to get you started.

"Do What You Are," by Paul D. Tieger & Barbara Barron-Tieger. The Personality types are used to gain insight into discovering how you wish you could work. This guide helps to identify your innate strengths, the strengths you share with others and those that you use privately.

JobHuntersBible.com is an excellent site for gaining ideas for your job change. Richard Bolles, the author of the classic manual for job hunters and career changers, "What Color Is Your Parachute," developed the site.

they thought about each one. Once she had researched the firms, she asked some of the partners in her firm to call partners in selected firms to introduce her to them.

Moe had been at her firm for more than seven years. Although the partners were losing a terrific paralegal, they appreciated the quality of her work and extended invitations to help Moe find a rewarding career. Shortly after, she was offered a position with a much larger firm.

Polish Your Self-image

Dee Thompson, an experienced paralegal, discovered exercise, eating a healthy diet and spending time with friends helped to relieve the stress of her law firm, while simultaneously improving her self-image.

Two years ago, Thompson became serious about making a job change. She quit smoking and decided losing weight would help in her job search. She went to see a doctor that specialized in

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weight loss. Through a diet and exercise program, she lost 140 lbs. Her outlook and self-confidence soared.

She said improving her health and appearance were keys to getting the job she wanted. However, a change in physical appearance may not be the answer for everyone.

Thompson said her self-image also improved after she let go of some unconfirmed worries she had about her job performance.

She took action by becoming more assertive when dealing with a supervising attorney who used a condescending tone whenever he or she spoke with her. She felt this attorney was critical of her performance and ability.

Rather than personalizing her worries, she shared her concerns with a colleague. The co-worker told her the attorney spoke like that to everyone. This insight allowed her to not take the attorney's criticism personally, understand the attorney's behavior and gain the confidence to take action. Then

she weighed the pros and cons for various solutions to come up with one that boosted her self-image.

She now answers the attorney's questions calmly and assertively, instead of remaining silent and later worrying about her job performance.

Other ways you can improve your self-image in your particular professional environment include being persistent and volunteering for complex tasks that expand your abilities. Your self-image will improve with each successful project.

Recognize, Research Your Skills

Moe recognized early on she was able to juggle many different tasks that demonstrate her strong points: researching, investigating and writing.

At any given time she may be doing research at a medical school library, while being online determining the standard of care needed for a case and learning how to manipulate unfamiliar software.

To make the most of your skills, like Moe has, it's imperative you be proactive in transforming your assignments and communicate your understanding of those skills to your supervisors in your firm. Don't hesitate to "ring your own bell."

To research the skills needed to make you more marketable, use the Internet, newspapers, professional publications, recruiters and peer networks to analyze skills employers are seeking. Also, take notice of the practice areas in your law firm that are growing. Determine if you have skills that might transfer well to one or more of those expanding areas. For example, if labor and employment law is a growing department in your firm, you can prepare a memo explaining your interest in handling more of these cases. Back up this interest by pointing out related experience and successful outcomes on tasks where you were responsible.

Be patient as you experience this interlude in your career. Not everyone progresses at the same pace. Recognize fear is an expected component. As you explore options and understand more about yourself, you will feel confident, ready to respond to new challenges and positive about your choice. You will discover opportunities for professional growth and enjoyment, which translates into greater competency and ultimately into greater success.