

# Finding Your Passion in the Profession

By Amy Elizabeth Stewart



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I am one of those lawyers who actually admits that I like practicing law. Among close friends, I have even been known to say I love it. After spending the first 17 years of my career in a big-firm environment, I recently made the decision as a mid-career lawyer to launch my own firm. Now, not only do I love practicing law, I also love the business components of running a practice. I'm thankful for the circumstances—even those that were, at the time, less than pleasant—that propelled me into my new venture.

## The Circumstances

I am not a natural seeker of change. I struggle with the idea that abandoning a course of action, even one that is completely unproductive, is somehow admitting defeat. I want to overcome my challenges, not run from them. As a result, I tend to stay in undesirable situations too long, determined to improve them. I'm also a mom with two young children. Not exactly the best time to plunge headlong into a new business venture—or is it?

My decision to launch my own firm was compelled by a myriad of factors. Some stemmed from the discombobulated economy and what I perceived as opportunities not to be missed. Corporate executives and in-house counsel were complaining about high rates charged by law firms, inattentive lawyers, staffing inefficiencies, and a lack of flexibility in billing arrangements. These were issues I knew I could address.

I also faced some challenges specific to

my former firm and my insurance coverage litigation practice. My former firm represented virtually every insurance company in some capacity or another, and someone other than me controlled the business. This made it difficult for me to cultivate my own book of business, which meant I was not meeting expectations in the business development arena—my own or the firm's.

In one way or another, this is a prevalent challenge for young partners in large law firms. Given the perspective I now have, hindsight and all, this is probably a good place for me to inject some advice. Throughout my career, people told me that to be successful, I should work hard, do good work, and cultivate relationships with my clients. You may have heard or even given the same advice. I did, and I believed it. But I was wrong. At some point, I bought into the notion that I was at a big firm with institutional clients and that the work would always be there. Accepting the premise that it was impossible for someone at my level to control any business and that my work was enough to ensure my job security, I unintentionally became a service partner. I am convinced that, as a general proposition, this is a risky place to be—and one that is too often occupied by women lawyers.

One of my partners once asked me to speak to a young female associate following the departure of another associate for a much more lucrative position. The partner encouraged me to tell the young lawyer that not everyone needed to be a rainmaker to make partner. Some people are better suited for client development, while others (like me, the service partner) were needed back at the office to do the work. I was too mortified (and mad!) to speak. Even more incredulous was the fact that my colleague thought this information would encourage the young female associate to stay at the firm.

## The Coach

Discouraged and annoyed, I hired a business coach. Never underestimate the power of an ally and mentor. A good coach can make

an enormous difference. My coach was the mentor I always wanted but never had. She validated my ideas and encouraged me to pursue them. She pushed me over my fears, challenging me to confront them and defeat them. I will be forever grateful.

## The Goal

Early in my coaching, I determined that I needed to leave my firm to make specific, meaningful advances in my career. I embarked upon a business development plan with great fervor while beginning to explore the market. The decision-making process that ensued forced me (or, rather, presented the opportunity) to clarify my values and figure out what I really wanted to be doing in two to five years.

Envisioning my options, I realized I had reached a point in my career where I sought either to head an insurance coverage section in a firm or start one myself. I had the requisite expertise and was craving the chance to try out my own brand of leadership, which is markedly different from the culture in which I was then practicing. Upon making that determination, I stopped exploring “safe” opportunities with other national law firms tied heavily to the insurance industry. Although it scared me somewhat to abandon those opportunities for which I was potentially best qualified, I felt certain I was making the right decision.

Opportunities at other firms were limited due to a reduction in work at most big firms. I pitched my ideas to several excellent firms where I had close connections, but the market was tight. I wasn't sure how to go about finding opportunities at smaller firms. And I was determined not to compromise my qualitative standards. I felt it would be a mistake to settle for “just a job”—a mistake from which I might not recover at this stage in my career. I was also convinced that the lateral opportunities available to me as a non-equity partner with virtually no portable business were even more limited—perhaps non-existent. Now what?

## The Leap

One advantage to having a law license is that I knew I could always support myself, even if I had to learn a new area of the law, hang my shingle, or adapt my practice in some way. It was not until last summer that I began to appreciate that it was more than a fall-back plan. In July, I went to Nashville to visit my best friend from law school and follow up on some business leads and introductions. The physical separation from my usual day-to-day routine, coupled with some exceptional opportunities and the encouragement of several close friends, made that trip a turning point for me. Initially, I thought I needed to rule out a few areas of interest, but as I began pursuing my ideas, the distractions quickly faded, and starting my own firm emerged

as the clear front-runner. My excitement (bordering on outright giddiness) about my new venture was grounded in a calm confidence that was new for me, but I liked it. I made the transition with very little portable business but with relentless enthusiasm, incredibly supportive friends and family, and a million ideas.

## The Progress Report

Six months out, I am thrilled (and not to mention relieved) to report that my practice is growing. New business has come from unexpected sources, due in large part to persistent networking and marketing my practice, along with supportive clients and friends. My mantra has been “Go even when you don’t feel like it.” And, it seems to be working.

Now I make my own decisions about

how and when to spend time and money on marketing. If it ends up being a bad idea, it was my bad idea, and I learn from it. When I work until 2:00 a.m., I reap the benefits of my hard work in a completely different way. It is an exhilarating experience, and one for which I am thankful beyond measure.

In addition, I have learned something invaluable and important. Fear hinders our ability to identify what we want to accomplish and to take the steps necessary to achieve it. Your passion may be something completely different from launching your own firm. But, the same principles apply with equal force whatever your passion may be. Eschew fear; it is worth it!

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