

Lightning Quick: Top 5 Tips for a Career Transition

Career Development



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James Garfield was our 20th President of the United States – thrust into the role after attending a convention in which he was not even seeking the Presidency. I recently read the book Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine, and Murder of a President by Candice Millard about Garfield and watched the Netflix mini-series Death by Lightning based upon it. I was inspired by his ability to transition from log cabin beginnings to Civil War hero to reluctant politician.

Corporate counsel will face transition in their career as well. It happens to all of us with constant change in companies, leaders, interests, and sometimes just luck (good or bad). The uncertainty of change often fills us with dread, but it also presents tremendous opportunity. Here are the top 5 tips for a career transition based upon famous Garfield quotes.

1. Do not be afraid to pivot to something completely new.

> **"Great ideas travel slowly, but they travel surely." – *James Garfield***

I was having lunch with my colleagues many years ago when my cell phone rang. It was GSK's General Counsel. He asked me to stop my litigation and investigation work immediately, fly to London, and work to revamp GSK's sanctions and export control framework. I knew nothing about sanctions (except those permitted by Rule 11 of Civil Procedure) and had never even thought about advising on economic sanctions and export control. I immediately accepted the role.

That year and experience was the most formative of my career to date. It tested whether my legal judgment would travel and excel outside of where I was comfortable. It taught me how to build a compliance program from the ground up. It showed my company that I was willing to take chances to develop. I made connections and colleagues who support me to this day.

The point is that excellent legal judgment can travel anywhere. If you are ready for a move, you should not confine yourself to what is comfortable or where all your experience lies. Let your judgment travel to new practice areas and see where it can take you.

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2. Consider going back to a law firm – even if just as a bridge to what is next.

> ***"The truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable." – James Garfield***

The truth is that you have options to advise clients beyond being an in-house lawyer. While many of us dedicate ourselves to the in-house life, there is always the option to go back to a law firm. Indeed, you can thrive at a law firm because you are unique in having a lens by your in-house experience that the vast majority of law firm lawyers do not have.

I was fortunate enough to do a secondment at a large pharmaceutical company before going back to my law firm many years ago. It made me a fundamentally better partner to my clients. I wrote client emails differently. I focused my advice to be more practical and useful to the clients inside their four walls. If you go back to a law firm, it could increase later interest in you as an internal in-house candidate. It shows confidence in the all-important commodity you have to them – your legal advice and judgment.



3. Supercharge your candidacy with Artificial Intelligence (AI).

> ***"The mind is a garden, and what we plant there will determine the harvest." – James Garfield***

This may be my most important tip. Your ability to demonstrate that you have changed the way you work to leverage AI will separate you from other candidates. Does your resume demonstrate AI experience and know how? At an interview, can you give specific examples of return on investment that AI has provided for your work and efficiencies? Can you demonstrate fluency in prompting, agents, and the rapid development of use of AI in legal advice?

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These are critical questions to answer when going into any career transition. Every legal department

is on a journey on how the department will fundamentally change with AI. You should demonstrate that you can add leadership voice to that change.

4. Leverage networking into opportunity.

> ***"It is not what we take up, but what we give up, that makes us rich." – James Garfield***

With a career transition, you are not starting with a clean slate. You have a wealth of experience and connections to tap into. That you are reading this article as part of this ACC community is a great example of the power you already have.

I would reset how you think about networking into your next opportunity. There are job boards, social events, and conferences – those are all valuable. Instead, I would focus on what you contribute to the networking community before you get something out of it like your next job. You should lead a conference or an important topic discussion. You should write articles. You should do pro bono as part of the network group.

These things demonstrate leadership and energy building a bank of credibility to draw upon later when moving to the next stop in the career journey. The goal is not to turn every interaction into a job request. It is to maintain relationships, exchange useful ideas, and let people understand what you hope to do next.

5. Go forth with confidence that you can do anything – because you can.

> ***"It is not the situation that makes the man [and woman], but the man [or woman] who makes the situation." – James Garfield***

A career transition can be rattling, but it does not change the lawyer that you are or what you can do. You have undoubtedly heard the quote about how “when a door closes, another one opens.” But did you know the actual full quote is as follows:

"When one door closes another door opens; but we so often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us."

This quote, attributed to Alexander Graham Bell who tried to help find the bullet in President Garfield when he was shot with an early version of a metal detector, is often cited without reference to the last part which I find just as important. Do not focus on closed doors, but open doors. Look at related paths – compliance, privacy, legal operations, contracts management, risk, and government affairs are great examples of possible open doors. I encourage you to walk through them with confidence, and you will find your next career journey lightning quick.

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