

The Only Career Lesson I Have to Offer

Career Development





This summer our legal department welcomed six amazing students for their summer clerkships. They are at the cusp of their careers and are naturally intensely curious about how to create a satisfying career. They will enter a profession where bar passage rates are at all-time lows, yet law firms continue pushing starting salaries into the stratosphere.

So much has changed in the last 25 years. Law students today don't know what pocket parts are and can't imagine shepardizing cases with paper books. I applied for jobs by identifying firms through Martindale Hubble, a 20-pound hardcover encyclopedia of lawyers and law firms written in

six-point font, and sending resumes and cover letters through the US mail. The few of us who knew about the internet “surfed the web” using a dial-up modem.

Our fresh and eager summer clerks made me reflect on my own path. What choices did I make that led me to this point? What advice could I possibly give someone starting out today?

Take the blinders off

There is, I think, only one lesson worth passing on … and it’s a simple one. Let it happen. Stop planning so much.

I am not saying be flippant about your career and your choices. I am advocating for being open to diverse and unexpected experiences.

In law, there is a perceived “right” path: Do well in law school, get hired into a good firm, and rise through the ranks to a partnership and long-term stability. And that was more or less my expectation when I started down my own path.

I had a singular linear view of what makes for a good career when I graduated 27 years ago. It was both my expectation and my frame of reference. The partners for whom I worked joined their firms as summer clerks, became first-year associates, and kept working diligently up the pyramid, year after year, at one and only one firm. It is a bit different now, but in the 1990s (not that long ago), even being a “lateral” associate was a blemish on your career trajectory.

In a homogeneous industry, the expectation is for young professionals to act a certain way, accumulate certain experiences, and drive for a certain outcome. This perspective tends to celebrate narrow categories of skills and achievements. It rewards smart, capable people of similar backgrounds who have learned to do the job “the right way.” It can yield wealth and stability, but also can create blinders that focus on the distant horizon, to the detriment of the present.

The winding road also has value

Despite my strong intent to mirror the “right” career, I skittered off the linear path early on. I found myself changing jobs frequently, accumulating wildly different experiences and lessons. These were not carefully selected puzzle pieces to a well-planned cohesive whole, but steps on a different kind of journey. Each one seemed different, interesting, and developmental. Some of those stops I made were great, some failed my hopes and expectations, but each gave me something that helped me move forward.

My first job as a bona fide lawyer was in the brand-new San Francisco office of a large New York-based firm. I chose it over much larger and locally based SF firms because it seemed like getting in on the ground floor of something fresh and exciting. I thought being in an environment with a small staff, but big backbone, would mean I would be asked to take on challenges that I might have to wait years get in a bigger firm.

This turned out to be half true. I did get to do things my first year — like take depositions and argue in court — that my friends in mega offices did not. I also worked on whatever matter needed help in the moment, commercial litigation, leasing, employment, etc., which rattled me because I felt I wasn’t developing an expertise that would be important in becoming a partner. Also, I was totally naïve

about law firm economics. When I came back from Thanksgiving in 1994, my home voicemail (yes, no cell phones then) had a message that the firm was closing the unprofitable SF office. Just two years into my “career,” in a tough legal market, where the “good” firms snubbed lateral associates, I suddenly needed to find a job. My lifetime linear path was derailed in less time than it took to get my JD.

Still thinking that “real” lawyers go to trial, and that I would likely never sniff a trial in the type of large-scale commercial litigation I was doing, I took a brief stint as an assistant district attorney in Alameda County, CA, thinking it would give me real and valuable trial experience. It was certainly real. I tried cases, picked juries, made opening and closing statements, and interrogated witnesses on the stand. Was it valuable? Yes, but in an unfortunate way. I hated it. I was completely disillusioned by the process. I never got that jolt of adrenaline going into the courtroom that real trial lawyers feed on. I wasn’t bad at it, but I wasn’t good at it either. It was valuable because it taught me that I really didn’t want to be a litigator or trial lawyer, but it was also awful, because that’s all I had done, and it was the only thing I assumed an employer would hire me to do.

By the time I took my first in-house role, I probably would have tried anything quasi-respectable that did not involve working in a large firm. What I chose to do — to leave a truly great law firm and go to a three-person in-house legal department — was met with both consternation and derision. Colleagues thought I was being stupid and ungrateful to my firm. Family members thought I was chucking away prestige and stability. And I was stepping into a role for which I had no preparation or experience, negotiating a seemingly endless stream of contracts needed to make a multi-billion-dollar business run. I had never even negotiated an NDA at that point. The company could have hired lots of “hit the ground running” lawyers. It was all greenfield for me. My two-year crash course was unglamorous and far from lucrative, but it helped refocus my career. It put me on a path that eventually put me in my current role.

There are many paths to success

I am now in my 10th year as general counsel of NetApp, a publicly traded cloud data services and data management company that was founded the same year I graduated from law school. I love this job, this team, this industry.

This was not where I planned to end up back when I was just getting started. My career did not follow my preconceived, rigid, naïve expectations. Thank goodness for that! If I had not stepped out of my comfort zone and abandoned the “right” path, I never would have learned enough about myself and the work I find energizing and meaningful.

The world is full of ladders. Plenty of people jump on the nearest ladder, or the one that others tell them matters, and just start climbing. Our industry is full of smart and focused people who could climb lots of different ladders successfully, but are they climbing the right ones? They get so focused on getting ahead they don’t ask themselves the one question that matters: Do I even want this? Your career is many things but it is, first and foremost, yours. Put away the prejudices and preconceptions of others and focus on finding out what makes you happy and fulfilled

Matt Fawcett



GENERAL COUNSEL

NETAPP