

# Achieving Career Satisfaction: Make the Investment, but Choose Your Investments Carefully

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By Stephen E. Seckler

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For more than 10 years, Danielle worked in the in-house legal department of a prominent high-tech company. When the downsizing first occurred, she survived a wave of layoffs; but the second time, she was not so lucky. Danielle began networking and even responded to some ads she saw; but after three months, she still had not received any offers. She did, however, identify a number of companies that were willing to hire her on a project basis. Danielle took a closer look at the track record of these companies. She then approached the two with the best performance histories and agreed to come on board in a temporary part-time capacity. After six months, the first company asked her to stay with the firm on a permanent part-time basis. Two months later, the second company followed suit. With the two part-time incomes, Danielle is earning a very nice full-time salary (one that exceeds her former full-time salary).

Jim was a litigation associate at a major Boston law firm. Soon after he started as a first-year associate, he realized that he did not like the adversarial nature of litigation or the length of time that it took for a case to move through the system. Nine months into his tenure, Jim noticed that his workload was beginning to ease up. At the same time, he was hearing stories that the associates in the corporate department were burning the midnight oil. Jim approached his

supervisor and asked if he could take on some projects in the corporate department while continuing to manage his litigation caseload. Within two months, he was working full time in the corporate department. A year later, he made a lateral move to another firm that had better corporate work.

Danielle and Jim's stories are not unique, but they are also not the norm. For many attorneys, career planning is a much more reactive process. The fallacious belief is that hard work will lead to better opportunity (either within an organization or in another organization). While this may still be true for some, the workplace has changed; and now more than ever, attorneys must take responsibility for their own career development.

Both anecdotes illustrate how taking a proactive approach can help build a career. In each case, the attorneys had to settle for less in the short run in order to achieve a long-term objective. In Jim's case, he was willing to add to an already significant workload in order to gain the experience he lacked. In Danielle's case, she was able to make the shift from looking for a permanent full-time job to working for two separate employers on a part-time basis.

There are other examples of creative ways that attorneys have gotten job offers and increased their work satisfaction. There is the Canadian lawyer who worked for a firm on a volunteer basis for one month just to get his foot in the door. (He was fortunate to have the resources to be able to do this, but in truth, it might have taken him much longer had he only been willing to settle for a paying legal job.) There is the example of the New York associate who had his sights set on a particular Massachusetts state agency. He made a deal with his New York firm to work three days a week for his pro rata salary. He then came to Massachusetts two days a week and volunteered his time for the agency.

After a long and difficult year, he finally received an offer of full-time employment with the agency in Massachusetts.

Making an investment in yourself can come in many forms. Sometimes the end product is enhanced career satisfaction from within (e.g., by achieving partnership or by switching to another practice area). Sometimes the end product is a more fulfilling job elsewhere. Whatever the investment that you make, the investment should be driven by your ultimate goal, whether it is making partner, establishing your own practice, going in-house, or getting a quasi-legal job in industry or in the nonprofit sector. While there may be many choices that can help move you toward your goal, the important thing is to have a goal. Here are some dos and don'ts to help you along the way.

- Don't be afraid to ask for the work you really want. Don't be afraid to remind the partners of your interest (they are very busy and may forget).
- Do take on pro bono work that gives you the experience you lack. Pro bono work can be on behalf of individuals or institutions.
- Don't leave your job just because you hate it. Sticking it out for a couple of years may position you for the job you really want.
- Don't stick with a job that is leading nowhere. If you need the income, try to negotiate reduced hours so that you can pursue your interests more effectively.
- Do spend time attending Bar Association meetings, and make a point of introducing yourself to people. Do get involved in volunteer activities with the bar to increase your professional contacts.
- Do attend CLE programs to enhance your skills.
- Do get involved in law firm committees.
- In general, do take the time to network.

- Don't neglect your work.
- Don't interview at other firms just to gain leverage at your existing firm (this can really backfire).

Finding career satisfaction is a lifelong process that you should revisit periodically (even after achieving your "ultimate goal"). The point is not to do everything that has been suggested. If you are already working long hours, you may not have the time. Rather, the point is to always be thinking about doing an excellent job and getting involved in some other activity (or activities) that are moving you toward your next career step.