

Pursuing a Values-Driven Job Search for Alternative Legal Careers

by Marantha Beatty-Brown

Most people recognize that they perform better when truly engaged by a task. Savvy employers thus look for a combination of competency and passion in prospective employees. Employers understand that a sincere desire to do a job will generally translate into a more focused and effective employee. This simple truth becomes especially important for law graduates who are pursuing non-traditional careers in fields that are very competitive. Given the challenges of a competitive market and the fact that a non-traditional field may seem less related to previous experience, the successful applicant will be the one who convinces the interviewer that he or she not only can do the job but also wants to do the job.

When a lawyer is moving from a traditional legal practice into an “alternative” career, interviewers will certainly ask why the lawyer no longer wants to practice. What can quickly sink an applicant’s chances of getting an offer is an unexplained assertion that he or she seeks a change of pace or a more supportive working environment. Such statements can lead to assumptions that the applicant is lazy or would need constant guidance.

Instead of framing the issue in the negative and talking about what they don’t want to do, job hunters should consider their true motivations for seeking a non-traditional career. An interviewer wants to know how an applicant will benefit the employer, not why she or he is fleeing her or his current position.

Matching a Career with Personal Values

Lawyers seeking a new career path should first do the necessary self-assessment. But an alternative career seeker also needs to ask why he or she wants to leave (or avoid) the traditional practice of law. It is then crucial to ensure that prospective employers hear the positive, yet honest, reasons a change is desired. It could be that the applicant didn’t know enough about his own interests when entering law school, or that she didn’t adequately understand what it meant to be a lawyer. Perhaps the job seeker is not the advocate type, but is more of a collaborator, counselor, or coordinator.

In order to discover these traits and motivations, job seekers should think about their legal jobs, hobbies, and past academic or volunteer experiences:

- What activities have been exciting and motivating?

- What activities lead to procrastination and stress?
- What are the best and worst aspects of current and past jobs?

Once candidates have answered these questions and understand their career-related values and personality traits, they can focus their job searches on careers that will better align personal motivations with job responsibilities and goals. It is smart to talk with persons who hold similar positions and find out what skills they use to accomplish their job goals. This information can then be used to compare aspects of a prospective position with personal values and abilities. Candidates should also consider which values are most important to them and how well those key values align with a potential job. It may be necessary to compromise on less important values in order to meet the most vital goals, depending on financial and security needs and the job market in the applicant’s area. In addition to helping a job seeker pursue the right position, a solid understanding of personal values can lead to an honest discussion with an interviewer about why the applicant would be good at the job. Having a passion for an employer’s goals is a strong selling point when an employer is awash in a sea of good candidates.

After this self-discovery process, a job hunter will be better equipped to articulate how his or her personal skills and values will support the employer’s goals. And, in the long run, a position that was sought because it was suited to one’s personality and values will make for a much happier and more productive employee than would a job taken because it was in the right place at the right time.

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