

Find a Career, Not a Job

Instead of focusing on **where** to work and **what** to earn, turn inward to identify your true talents; you **are** the master of your own fate.

BY STEVEN F. MOLO

A friend of mine asked me to meet his daughter who was about to start her second year of law school. Ostensibly, the meeting was for me to offer some guidance on what path she might follow in the law. However, it quickly became apparent that the real reason for the meeting was for her to try to get a leg up on the recruiting process at my firm and overcome her good, but not spectacular, grades that fell outside the range we normally looked for at her school.

"I know it is extremely competitive out there, but if someone will just give me a job, I know I can prove myself," she said. "These summer associate jobs are crucial," she continued.

As I tried to gently explain that her credentials to date simply were not going to cut it at our firm, she responded,

"Well then, can you help me find a job somewhere else?"

"Rather than focusing on finding a job," I said, "why not focus on finding a career?"

She looked at me with that mixture of puzzlement and scorn that I frequently encounter across the dinner table when I offer a "life lesson" to one of my teenage daughters. Based on her expression, I expected her to retort with something like, "I didn't realize my father had sent me to see the Dalai Lama." But she was much too polite for that. She took a sip from her skim latte, and earnestly responded,

"I don't understand; what do you mean?"

I explained that in my view, too many young lawyers focus on where they work and what they make rather than on who they are.

"By shifting the focus to the internal instead of the external," I offered, "a person is more likely to develop the skills that can take her through a productive, fulfilling life as a lawyer and allow her to identify and exploit her true talents. And as the ancient Greeks have taught us, true happiness is found through the full employment of one's talents."

Her face relaxed a bit, and she nodded as if to say, "Continue, Lama." And so I carried forth for the next 20 minutes on how I believe that much of the alienation and angst younger lawyers describe experiencing is self-inflicted, and how someone can build a rewarding life in the law if he or she approaches the practice thoughtfully.

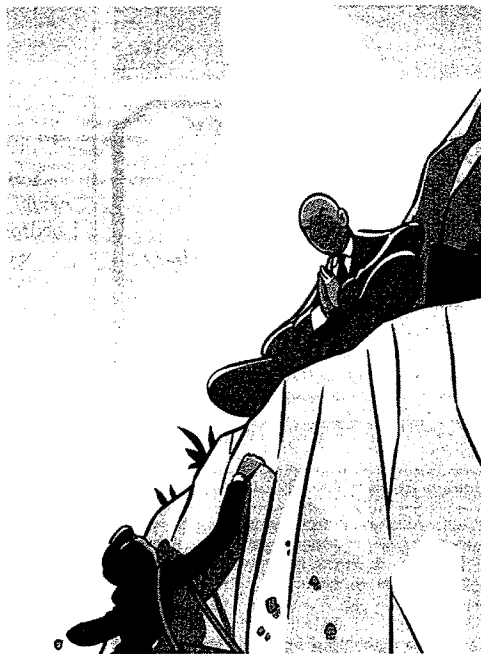
The starting point for all of this is ac-

cepting—indeed, embracing—the notion that in the end, we are the masters of our own fate. It is not the external forces—like firm hiring requirements for law students—that determine professional success and happiness. It is how we respond to those external forces.

In the case of my friend's daughter, after we spoke awhile, she revealed that what she really was interested in was becoming a federal prosecutor and she believed that having the credential of a large prestigious law firm on her résumé would help her get there. Not an irrational thought. So notwithstanding a mediocre first-year GPA, she was determined to go through the full-blown campus interview process hoping that her engaging personality and dazzling intellect would overcome her transcript. An irrational thought.

I suggested that rather than waste her time compiling rejection letters that only would make her feel bad, she spend her second year working hard to improve her grades (while many ranked above her were distracted with interviewing) and that she write a litigation-related article for a journal somewhere, even outside her school. The thought was at the end of her second year she would have an improved GPA, an article demonstrating an interest, solid writing ability, and a story to tell law firms willing to take a chance on a third-year who didn't go through their summer program. The strategy worked and she has spent the last two years as an associate at a prestigious New York firm, taking advantage of every opportunity—through case experience, training programs, and watching others work—to develop the litigation skills that will provide the foundation for a move to a prosecutor's office.

What this young person learned in the process was not just how to get a job. She learned how to exploit her talents and develop her skills to the point of being attrac-



tive to an employer for whom she wanted to work. And now she is taking advantage of the opportunities provided by that employer to allow her to further develop into a lawyer who will be attractive to the person who can give her what she now considers her dream job.

Most importantly, along the way she is learning her craft. Too few young lawyers take the time to really build the skill sets to become great lawyers. Yes, the demands of firm life barely leave time for a little ultimate frisbee on the weekend. But do you want to control your fate or not? Man-up, or woman-up, as the case may be.

Take the time to build yourself into the lawyer you want to be. Don't think that because you now work for someone who has the position or stature to which you aspire, you will automatically get there by working hard and doing a good job for that person. Often that route will earn you a good income and the respect and appreciation

of your boss, but it won't provide the skills for you to become that boss.

Take on pro bono matters that force you to make judgments and live with the consequences. Write the article about something in which you have an interest—with your name on it, not your boss's. Participate in an organized bar activity that allows you to interact with other lawyers in your discipline who are outside your firm. Watch how they think and approach issues. Develop a mentor outside the firm. This is not disloyal. It is a way for you to expand your knowledge base and obtain a level of objective advice that does not naturally flow from your place of employment.

Craft a course of CLE study that helps you develop a skill set. Don't just rely on what your firm may offer or scramble at year-end for a course or two to give you the credits to keep your license. Plan a curriculum for yourself. Consult with experienced lawyers in your specialty and get their views on what would be helpful.

Make the time to mentor someone junior to you. Talking through the issues that person faces will make you think about your own situation in a different light.

By engaging the profession this way, you will find that notwithstanding what you may be spending a significant amount of time doing at the moment, the practice of law is not all about reviewing e-mail or conducting due diligence. You may also find that life in a firm can offer more than the means to pay off student loans quickly.

More importantly, however, you will be developing the skills and relationships that create opportunity and take you through a professional life on your terms. The process never really stops if you are good. It's called a career.

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ILLUSTRATION BY CHRIS GUSH