



## What Is A Man Worth? What Can He Do?

*Okay, you're a lawyer making a lot of money but you aren't feeling especially satisfied. Contrary to what you might think, you have a myriad of career choices that are limited only by your self-awareness and your capacity to let go of old models of the job search.*

**By Dennis Coyne**

Occasionally a new client begins the conversation in a simple and straightforward manner: “I need help finding a job.” I immediately think of what such a statement reveals about the client, and what he expects of me, of himself, and of the coaching work that we will do together.

### **The Common Thread In All The Jobs I Had Growing Up Is That I Simply Set Out To Fulfill The Expectations Of The Position**

And, when I hear, “Help me find a job,” I think of the jobs I’ve had growing up. Raised in the Upper Midwest, my first jobs as a boy were shoveling snow for a few bucks a sidewalk. As I grew older, I learned how to operate a power mower, and how to cut grass and stay clear of the flowers (pretty much) alongside the edge of the garden. Later, I had an afternoon paper route and learned how to get the papers delivered and collect the money from my customers, while learning how to get along with the other paper carriers. As I moved from grade school to high school, my jobs became more sophisticated. I worked after school in a warehouse and learned how to deal with co-workers. In college, I branched out into more diverse work settings, including work in a local brewery (with lots of rest stops and all the beer we could drink) and as an orderly in a psychiatric ward.

The common thread in all those workplaces is that I applied for a job that someone had, convinced them I could do that job, and simply set out to fulfill their expectations for me in the position. Like a chameleon, I conformed to the requirements listed in the job description. That’s what “finding a job,” meant to me growing-up. The problem is, that’s what “finding a job” means to many bright and talented lawyers as summarized in the following examples.

### **Mary's Focus Was Outside Herself, Not On Who She Is And What She Wanted To Accomplish**

Mary is a talented partner in a respected law firm, doing litigation in a highly specialized area. Her recent accomplishments include a million dollar verdict for a client. Yet, as successful as she is, Mary doesn’t like being with her law firm; the politics and culture of the firm don’t suit her. So, she retains me to help her find a “job.” She explains that she wants to know where the jobs are, who has them and where they are posted. To me, Mary’s approach is no different than a high schooler’s. The focus of her thinking is outside herself, directed to whatever jobs can be found “out there.” She doesn’t take stock of her many talents and accomplishments,

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nor does she reflect on who she is and what she wants to accomplish in her mid-career years, and afterward. I counsel her to focus on the path she would like to take, if only she could. And, given her talent, Mary is likely to be able to take a path of her choosing.

### **Peter Seemed Startled At The Proposition That He Could Create A Job Description, And Advocate That He Be Given The Position**

Peter is another example of how the failure to redesign one's "job" and be challenged by it can diminish a lawyer and leave him burned-out. Peter is a friend and a partner in a very large law firm. He travels the world doing transactional work for his clients. By every economic measure, he is very successful. A couple of years ago Peter complained about his job to me, characterizing himself as a fish in a very small pond. When I asked Peter to draw the pond on a large pad of paper on a nearby easel, he drew such a small image that I could hardly see it. He then lowered his voice and confided that the pond was dry.

A few months ago Peter and I met again. Peter reported that his job situation really hadn't changed much. He did say that he had been approached by the management of his law firm and asked if he would be interested in a management position. Although Peter was not interested in that particular job, moving into management did have some appeal for him. He sighed and gazed out the window, perhaps catching a glimpse of the many years of dry-pond living in store for him. I caught Peter's attention and suggested that he consider drafting a job description of a management position that he would accept. Peter seemed startled at the proposition that he could create a job description, and advocate that he be given the position. We finished the discussion and Peter left promising to get back to me with a job description he would really enjoy. I'm still waiting to hear from him. Perhaps he really is busy or, more likely, Peter finds it all too easy to leave his job the way it is, rather than design a different future.

### **How To Pursue A New Job: Think More Strategically!**

So how do I suggest pursuing a new job? I recommend that you not assume that your task is simply to "find a job." Think much more strategically! Approach the task with the mindset that your next job won't last forever. Then consider who you'll be working with and on what stage you want to play. Do you want a bigger stage or a smaller one? Either direction has its plusses and minuses.

Identify people who are doing things that interest you. Interview them and find out how they got where they are. Consider how you might get there, too. As you talk to them, be aware of your own reaction. How are you feeling and what is your mood? Perhaps your response to the interview will surprise you, and you'll learn something about yourself. Perhaps the job that once interested you no longer does; or the job that seemed too big for you may now seem doable.

Ask your friends and trusted acquaintances to tell you what they think you do well, or what they suggest you consider doing next in your career. You can talk with them individually, or you can do what I did - invite them to come together and meet as your virtual Board of Directors. However you get the feedback and suggestions from your friends, you are likely to think about yourself in new ways, and be inspired to take steps to retool your career.

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### **I've Found The Variety And Challenges Of Managing A Diverse Work Life To Be Much More Invigorating**

Consider living a portfolio life. That is, do a number of things that together form your professional life. For example, I practice law, teach law, coach lawyers and consult with law firms, lead continuing legal education programs, facilitate meetings, and write. Before, I was a partner in a major firm, focused solely on practicing law. I've found the variety and challenge of managing a diverse work life to be much more invigorating. In my new lifestyle, I'm meeting more interesting people and am having much more fun!

If you are worried about finances being an obstacle to positive change, talk to someone who can help you create a budget and think through your financial position. Typically, clients find comfort in the information and support a financial resource can provide them. And some of the things you decide to do to simplify your finances can provide you with a sense of well being.

Of course, consult with those who are the stakeholders in your life. Most often, the spouse or life-partner welcomes the changes that you have in mind, once they are reassured that life will go on, and that there are important benefits to be realized if you move forward and take the steps you are considering. If you have children, don't assume that they will simply want you to make the maximum income. When my clients have talked with their children about a new job, even one with less income or less prestige, their kids have typically encouraged them to set out in a new direction. The prospect of a happier parent, or more time with mom or dad, is often what children prize the most. As the parent authors her own life and manages change, she comes to realize that she is setting an example for her children to do the same. Most parents want their children to author their lives, rather than merely doing a good job of satisfying the expectations of people around them.

### **The Job Market Is Not Understood Simply In Terms Of Buyers And Sellers**

Getting a job is much more than simply learning to sell yourself to those who buy services like yours. The job market is not understood simply in terms of buyers and sellers, as Carl Sandburg so aptly described in his poem, "Buyers and Sellers":

What is a man worth?  
What can he do?  
What is his value?  
On the one hand those who buy labor,  
On the other hand those who have nothing  
to sell but their labor.  
And when the buyers of labor tell the  
sellers, "Nothing doing today, not a  
chance!" – then what?

At one time or another, everyone hears: "Nothing doing today, not a chance! Then what?" Rather than being daunted by the rejection, we can reflect again on what we have to offer, where we are in our careers, and what we want to do next. And with such self-awareness, we can have conver-

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sations with others who might want to partner with us and give us the opportunity to create the future we want. In such a scenario, we aren't selling ourselves. Rather, we are claiming ourselves and searching for opportunities where we can flourish, not simply survive. The truth is, many people find just such opportunities every day. You can be one of them. But before you take your first step, I strongly recommend that you rethink what it means to look for a job. Once you've made that commitment, you are well on your way. ■

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