

ABOVE THE LAW

Career Alternatives

The Great Escape: Nonlegal Careers For Lawyers

Are you a lawyer interested in moving to a nonlegal career? Start that journey here.

By Neil Handwerker and Kimberly Fine on January 09, 2025 1:01 pm

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(Photo by Taylor Hill/Getty Images)

Ed. note: This is the first in a series of articles by our friends Neil Handwerker and Kimberly Fine of [ex judicata](#), who will be writing about lawyers interested in transitioning to nonlegal careers.

The wave of lawyers and law students interested in leaving law for new careers continues to grow exponentially. It was with that tailwind that we launched *ex judicata* in July of 2023.

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ex judicata Hypothesis: “Every practicing lawyer knows at least two other practicing lawyers who would like to leave law for a new career.”

ex judicata Hypothesis #2: “Every civilian knows at least one practicing lawyer* who would like to leave law for a new career.”

*My cousin, my friend, my ex-wife, my brother-in-law “...is a lawyer and they...”

ex judicata was designed to be the first total solution for lawyers and law students interested in leaving law for new careers. Here are the Top 10 things we have learned to date:

1. Against “recovery”

Lawyers who have left law and friends and family of lawyers who have left law use the phrase “recovering lawyer” accompanied with a chuckle way too much. There are three problems with this.

Not funny. Not original and to quote the mighty Gabriel Byrne in *The Usual Suspects*, “You’re missing the point!” You are always a lawyer and should be proud of all you have accomplished. This is just a new chapter where you will still be calling on your JD skill set.

We had the pleasure of interviewing Professor Scott Westfahl at Harvard Law School last year. He told us: “When I left my law firm for a nonlegal job, I had a lot of people asking me at the time, ‘What are you doing? You’re throwing away your 10 years of practice and your law degree.’ I’m like absolutely not, because I knew I could leverage all my experiences to do well on my new chosen career path.”

2. Two converging themes driving the exodus

Lawyers who have hit the wall and/or dislike practicing law and want to find something else.

Lawyers who enjoy practicing law but would like to move to a career more in line with their passions and/or lifestyle. Never has the entire world of work been more transparent. Lawyers and law students are embracing the chance to use their JD skill set in alternative careers.

3. Never too late for a Second Act

While most of the activity is younger lawyers in law firms and law departments pivoting, there is a growing base of older, more experienced lawyers who want to make a change. We are seeing this most often in partners, say 55 and above, who have already enjoyed a successful legal career. They want a Second Act.

The following example is illustrative: We were tasked by Marsh & McLennan to find a senior bankruptcy partner at a major law firm to come aboard in a newly created nonlegal job in their Global Turnarounds Group. We placed a Paul Weiss partner, Alan Kornberg, in the position, thankful for this unimagined Second Act.

4. The JD ain't what it used to be

The definition of a JD degree in the American work force is evolving.

Old: A JD is a law degree.

New: A JD is a foundation for myriad careers. Law being just one of many paths.

Kellye Testy is the Executive Director & CEO of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS) and widely perceived to be the most influential person in legal education. One of her mandates is expanding the universe of opportunity for law students beyond the traditional practice of law. She gave us the following definition which we have co-opted and use all the time. "A JD is a degree in complex problem-solving. And if there is one thing the world needs more of, it is complex problem-solvers."

5. Asked and answered

In LinkedIn polls we have conducted asking "What is holding you back from leaving law?" the answers rank as follows:

1. Economics. Can't afford a cut in pay
2. Fear of change
3. Don't know what else to do
4. Perceived loss of prestige

6. However....

Yet, hands down, the question we have gotten most often since starting *ex judicata* is "Where do I even begin? (to try to find a new career)." Nothing to do with how to afford to make a change or tips to overcoming fear.

This may make sense as, anecdotally, we have found in working one-on-one with lawyers, if we help them isolate a career more in line with their passions and purpose, money questions and fear become much more manageable.

7. Know thy coach

There are a boatload of lawyer coaches out there who will show you how to leave law. There is nothing new here. Back in 2014, Liz Brown in her book, [*Life After Law: Finding Work You Love with the JD You Have*](#), came up with this wonderful sentence, which we've seen so many people use as if they just came up with it: "Law is the only career that has a sub-profession dedicated to helping people get out of it."

Here's the problem. These lawyer coaches fall into three categories and one can easily get lost in the noise.

- Well-meaning people who genuinely want to help fellow lawyers get out but have no concrete plan as to how one actually does this or actual jobs their clients can apply for.
- Not-so well-meaning people who see this as an easy way to make money since there are so many unhappy practicing lawyers.
- People with solid advice, suggested jobs to apply for, and a track record of helping fellow lawyers leave law for successful new careers.

8. The ABA is behind the curve

The ABA has been slow to get onboard. All you really need to know is that the lead article [Nine Non-Legal Jobs You Can \(Really, Truly\) Do with a Law Degree](#) on the ABA's Alternative Career site spells "nonlegal" wrong. The most up-to-date piece under "latest resources" is dated October 4, 2023.

9. (Some) law schools are with it

The law schools *are* acknowledging the growing desire of some students for alternative careers *right out of law school*, with more and more actually starting law school knowing they don't want to practice. The most enlightened law schools like Michigan State and Northeastern even have programs designed for students graduating into law adjacent fields like legal ops and legal tech.

10. Firms forget

Am Law 100 firms have been pouring millions into alumni programs designed to keep better track of their alumni, provide networking, and keep them in the family. Most programs fall short, with alumni working in nonlegal careers an afterthought. But a few law firms we are working with realize that, if cultivated properly, alumni no longer practicing law can be a secret weapon in driving referrals back to the mothership.

Neil Handwerker and Kimberly Fine are the co-founders of [ex judicata](#), a website providing information, resources, webinars, coaching, money management, and inspirational content for lawyers and law students interested in moving to nonlegal careers. This is their second startup together. Feel free to [email](#) them with any questions or suggestions or connect with them on [LinkedIn](#).