



## **In Search of the Rest of Your Career**

by Chere B. Estrin, Ph.D.

We all start out headed in one direction, and darn it, if we don't end up in another. There are estimates that people have three to five completely different careers just in one lifetime. That doesn't include variations on the career you have now such as going from a litigation paralegal to case manager to paralegal administrator, for example. That's a lot of time invested, if you include the decision-making process, transition time, learning curve and years to gain a little experience.

I am emphasizing *career changing* rather than changing careers. This means taking charge of your present career and changing it around to best suit your needs rather than switching careers all together. But change is hard. I should know. Starting out as a paralegal administration some years ago and becoming an entrepreneur to executive in a Fortune 500 corporation to exec in an \$80 million company then back again to entrepreneur all the while staying in the legal field, I seemed to have created a pattern of pushing change on myself rather than opt for a secure road.

I am pleased to have been able to leverage my paralegal background in every way possible. At this stage, I'm really relieved I didn't take my mother's advice to be an elementary school teacher in order to have "something to fall back on, just in case." Geez, for additional insurance, she wanted me to marry a dentist – in the Valley – with a pool, and yeah, a guesthouse in the back. Well, <sigh> things were different back then.

Twenty years in the legal field has taught me to listen closely to those professionals who want "something new, something different." The meaning of "something different" is generally creating an emotion people can get excited about instead of the usual routine and repetitious duties. Now that I think about it, I've never seen a paralegal get energized about a job in order to put more profit in a partner's pocket. However, when I suggest a change to an organization where a paralegal makes real difference, I see faces light up.

For many people, a career move may be complex. They may say they want a job where they make a difference but in truth, they want something beyond the tedium or the familiar. But as stops come up and fear of the unknown sets in, commitment to radical change becomes hampered in reality. They are only trying on the idea for size. It's okay to undertake this kind of investigation. But be honest here. Are you committing to exploration or are you committing to change? Or, in fact, are you just fooling around with the idea? What you commit to has a profound effect on the outcome.

If you are struggling with critical decisions, creating career change does not have to be impossible. Remember: It's okay if you don't know what direction you want to head just yet. Here is an opportunity to use your fact-finding skills to get enough information to get an intelligent decision about your next career move.

## **Strategy #1**

Leverage your background. One successful way to initiate change is to leverage prior work experience so that it is strategically aligned with anticipated changes. What you do now affects your future position. This may mean a move to a firm with a new practice specialty; a transfer from law firm to in-house legal department or government; an “up and out” leap to a related area such as litigation support, recruiting or marketing; a climb up the ladder to management or even to a vendor or teaching position.

## **Strategy #2**

Take baby steps. Plans for big successes often result in big failures. Chop up the path to reaching your goal into small, palatable steps. Simplify your process and your self-esteem will zoom as you accomplish each step.

## **Strategy #3**

Research your goals. Understand what you’re doing and where you’re headed along with the consequences and impact it will have on your career and personal life. Change can be frightening, so keep the road positive. Experiencing anxiety does not mean you made the wrong decision. Keep the transition simple and don’t compound any problems. For example, if you are considering switching jobs, don’t quit your current position until you’ve found another. Tough it out. (There are exceptions, however, such as extreme emotional distress.) With proper research and a flexible plan, bear in mind, you’re in the home stretch.

#### **Strategy #4**

Put structure into your plan. Identify what works. Practice, practice, practice; talk, talk, talk. Get a flexible plan on paper with a checklist. Find someone you trust to talk to. They may have good input and certainly will have another point of view. Choose wisely, though. Any Negative Nancys can kill the best formulated plans. Anticipate and prepare for problems and understand the possible outcome.

#### **Strategy #5**

Go slowly. Impulsivity lacks deliberateness and can cause setbacks. Create a bridge to your career change. What does the bridge look like? It could be holding on to your current situation; it could mean a hiatus; a back-to-school break or more. That's not to say, however, if you are absolutely miserable you shouldn't vary your plan. You may wish consider a transition job while you are implementing your strategy.

#### **Strategy #6**

Create your new world. As you reach your goal, your new world is about to begin. But it can't happen by itself. You have to work at it. In my situation, I started a new paralegal training company. I now have a fresh career avenue in continuing legal education. (Hmmm...is it at all possible that in the back of my mind, I was somehow listening to my mother after all? Funny, how that works.) Changes for me include: how, where and with whom I work; the hours I put in; less stress; much more creativity and increased intellectual stimulation. Oh, yes, and there is one major factor: I'm having a great time while I'm doing it.

Career changing, while risky, can be fun, exhilarating, stimulating and overwhelming all at the same time. The legal world around us has changed

significantly in just a few years. To keep up or even just to stay in it, we all need change. The most profound thing you can do for your career is to discover and lead a truly authentic life by bringing the best of whom *you* are to whatever you choose to do.

*Chere B. Estrin, Ph.D. is CEO of Los Angeles-based **Estrin LegalEd**, a well-known paralegal training organization. She is founder of the **Paralegal SuperConference™** and Estrin LegalEd's new division, [www.LegalProResumes.com](http://www.LegalProResumes.com). She has written eight books, including The Successful Paralegal's Job Search Guide (Thomson Delmar) and The Paralegal Career Guide (Prentice-Hall). Ms. Estrin can be reached at [Chere@EstrinLegalEd.com](mailto:Chere@EstrinLegalEd.com).*