



## Labor of Love

by Chere B. Estrin, Ph.D.

I am at a point in my life where I want work that is tailor-made to my hopes, wants, dreams and desires, not to mention my life experiences. I want to be paid for what I love to do, not have to do to earn a salary.

After 25 years or more (mostly more), in the workplace — from a musical theatre background to paralegal to paralegal administrator to entrepreneur to top-ranking corporate executive back to entrepreneur — I have formed the strong opinion that work should be a form of self-expression, a medium of joy and self-satisfaction. That work should be an instrument toward growth is not an impractical notion. It is a reality.

In today's working world, the definition of work from tedious drudgery into the purpose of life is a paradigm shift of impressive proportions. Work is no longer separate from any of us; it is an integral part of us. The question: "What do you do?" takes on significant meaning. Work is no longer the means to an end; it is an end in itself. Money, financial security, power, fame, and prestige are ceasing to be the goal of work; instead, they are its by-products.

I'll tell you what led to all of this. Right after 9/11, I, like so many thousands of others, found myself in an industry (legal staffing), that quickly

went so far south, it made Antarctica look like a tropical paradise. Frankly, I didn't know what to do. I had been in this industry for so long that getting out seemed overwhelming. What would I do? I wasn't sure I was going to come out of that long, dark tunnel. The light at the end of it seemed to be a train coming my way. I was stranded, stuck, panicked, and over 40.

I needed to rethink my entire career. Good God!

The irony? This is what I had been teaching paralegals for years. I wrote books and articles and gave lectures on the subject. I was an AUTHORITY on the topic of career change for heaven's sake but had reached the end of my rope. But the reality was that I wasn't honest with myself. 9/11 was not only a horrible event for the country, it signaled the end of an era for me. I had to go deep within for the answer, and to get it, I first had to get to the truth.

And the truth? It wasn't about the marketplace. I just didn't *like* the business anymore. Whoa. Hold on there, Missy! You were the Queen of Legal Staffing and you didn't want to do it anymore? Unheard of. Disloyal. Waste of years. Exactly what my clients told themselves when they wanted to change directions.

To condemn a person into an occupation he or she hates for the better part of a lifetime would seem like refined torture, but that is what we routinely do to ourselves. All the more reason to cheer, then, the change looming on the horizon. I had studied career changes for years and knew that in today's world, we can take charge of our work. This is true not only because human potential is infinite but because the very forces of life conspire to push us in the direction of our dreams and desires.

The Internet, the global economy, technology, the virtual workplace, lifestyle changes, the satellite revolution, and new attitudes have freed us

somewhat from the onus of insecurity. The urge to dive and nestle into the ostensible safety of a law firm for the rest of our lives is no longer compulsive.

Moreover, there are more opportunities today. We have a staggering number of alternatives to the traditional paralegal route leading to occupational nirvana. When else have we had at our command the possibility of earning a living in media, the military, entertainment, government, public law, teaching, technology, health care, business, hospitality, communications, transportation, research, and innumerable other forms of industry?

Searching for the right work is either the offshoot or the beginning of a larger search towards wholeness or happiness. Working for material gain such as money, fame, or prestige carries with it a price tag that more and more people are unwilling to pay, forcing them to look within for more enduring satisfaction.

A good friend, Deanie Kramer, was a paralegal for years. When she discovered her number one priority was helping others, it was easy to leave the law firm and open a legal clinic. That led to a fascinating part-time job as mediator for the TV show, "Divorce Court." She gained purpose and fun all in one swoop.

The ending of my successful adventure in legal staffing caused me to look at other career options. I forced myself to branch out. I took classes in career coaching, and I have to admit, loved it. The ability to help others seemed to give me a purpose. Imagining myself as the next Dr. Phil, I hung out a shingle as a career coach and clients starting coming through the door! All I had to do was sit there in a comfy chair and administer sage advice. Worked for me! Or not.

As clients started to unload, I realized they fell into three groups: those that needed therapy and definitely not me; those that needed a little clarification and direction and were soon out the door never to be heard from again; and

“others” who were lifetime whiners and nothing I ever said would make any difference. To make matters worse, when it came to the whiners, I was a career coach without empathy. Not a pretty picture if you wanted to start a new career.

The specter of financial insecurity lurks everywhere, particularly in the beginning of the path. The question, “What will happen to me?” ping-pongs in your head. You tell yourself you won’t make the same money. Believe me, it’s a made-up story. Do yourself a favor and tell yourself a different story. Moving away from the safety of the herd and carving an individual path calls for courage and self-belief.

Jeannie Johnston, founder of ParalegalGateway.com, is a prime example. She started a website for paralegals based upon her strong belief in the need for paralegals to come together in this new technology. Consequently, her website is highly successful, attracting interesting paralegals from around the country.

Don’t misread me, though. Fear and insecurity are real. The choice to move into a new path therefore has to be an individual one. For many, the path can appear too tough or perilous. Working for a firm or organization that is not right for you but pays the bills may be a comfortable way to live. Unless we are compelled to move into another direction for either internal or external reasons, we may not have the endurance to make a success of it.

Ramy Kassabgui works for the SEC. He is a Surveillance Specialist with the Internet Enforcement Branch. In other words, he catches criminals in the financial investment arena. He has a purpose, an exciting job, and a zest for his career. If anything were ever to happen to his job, he would be able to walk away and say, truthfully, that he had indeed made a difference.

For Ramy, Deanie, and Jeannie, their calling emerges from who they are, not from what they learn. Despite the pressures of society, of security, and

public endorsement, at some point they turned their dreams into reality getting paid for what they love to do, not have to do to earn their salaries. I wanted the same piece of heaven.

Back to the basics I went. Still, facing a career change is not easy. Figuring I had nothing left to lose, I went through the same steps as my clients. First question: what skills support your desires? Figuring out what I loved was easy: creating businesses and shows (there was that theatre background), writing, teaching, interacting with interesting people. Intellectual stimulation, travel, and speaking engagements were all on the wish list. It was painful but I analyzed my skills. Really, who wants to know this stuff?

In the past years, abilities emerged to create, implement the creation, financially build, lead a team, put concepts together, direct people and bring them together. So what's a gal (at this age) to do? You'd think I would know these things by now. I remembered Eleanor, my mentor for many years. "Leverage your skills," she taught. "Leverage, leverage, leverage."

Then, bam! (Okay, maybe it wasn't quite "bam"! ) I realized all of this led to building a paralegal seminar and training company, which meant staying in a field I loved, continuing to create, utilize training and writing skills, and work with great people. All of this, and remain an entrepreneur (which was important). Suddenly, I no longer felt so lost.

With the creative process was in place, and knowing my staffing career was indeed over, I was free to build castles. One of the things I came up with The Paralegal SuperConference™. The idea reminded me of being in the theatre. At the same time, my paralegal skills for organization, problem solving, coordination, detail, and follow-through were utilized. Putting together the best

speakers in the paralegal field and choosing hot and important topics — over 30 sessions in two days — I used my network and made new contacts.

I'm working 80 hours a week and think of myself as one of the luckiest people in the world. We now hold anywhere from 8-10 SuperConferences around the country and at this writing, over 3,000 paralegals around the country have attended SuperConferences.

I learned a great deal during this sometimes agonizing, always motivating experience. Moving into creative employment can teach you the existence and importance of the right brain. Working in a field you love allows you to experience pleasure. Ask yourself, "how long has it been since I experienced joy?"

Looking back on my career change, I can assure you; this is the dividend to beat all dividends. It's time to recognize that work and self are intimately intertwined. Work is derived from who you are, and in turn, it impacts your very being. The marks you make in society need to be strong, unique, and positive. In realizing your perfect work, you are realizing yourself.

In the end, I wonder: Who could really ask for more? Not me. That's for certain.

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