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Journal of Consumer Attorneys Associations for Southern California
ADVOCATE

February 2018 Issue



“He just took it up after many years of sitting at his computer all day, who knew?”

Teaching an old dog new tricks

SWITCHING LAW FIRMS AFTER 30 YEARS INVOLVES RISK ASSESSMENT,
HARD WORK AND OPTIMISM

I passed the 1981 Bar Exam and then worked at the same plaintiffs' law firm in Los Angeles for 38 years. It was 38 years and two months, to be exact. I always thought I would retire there. Years flew by. Lawyers came and went, but for some reason, I stayed. We all celebrated life for many years together at my old firm. All the usual stuff: new-hire lunches, farewell lunches, weddings, Bar Mitzvahs, and unfortunately, too many funerals. We played in a lawyer softball league, and even won a few games. We had great success along the way, and by great success, I mean hundreds of millions of dollars recovered for thousands of clients. It's the stuff that I dreamed of

in law school. I was a *Plaintiff's lawyer*. I got to try cases, *and* I got paid for it. What was not to love?

Obviously, over 38 years, I got comfortable at the office. I was a partner. I had seniority. If I needed something to make my life easier at work, it could usually be arranged. And, as one might imagine, over 38 years, I made many friends at the office. There was a core corps of attorneys at the office, even a few with more seniority than me. One day at lunch, we calculated that four of us had been employed for a total of 160 years at the office! So, I was *very* comfortable with my co-workers. Not just co-workers, these were my friends.

It was in year 37 that I realized things were no longer working – that I needed something more from the law firm where I had spent the last 95,000 hours of my legal career. In fact, I needed a complete change of environment. The reasons why do not matter here. Like any long-term relationships, things change. Whether a marriage or a law partnership, the relationship takes work. The practice of law cannot be set on auto pilot. Therefore, I decided that my relationship with the old firm would somehow need to end. But what then? So many questions needed to be answered. I still loved being a trial lawyer. I felt like

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I still had many good years left, even though I was suddenly 60 years old. I also had requirements: I only wanted to do plaintiff work. I required a firm with litigation support due to the types of cases that I handled. After all, I'd been fortunate all those years to have the luxury of staff to work with.

And so, I began a process of imagining my new work life, wherever that might take me. It led to a period of self-reflection, self-doubt and self-evaluation. Was I still marketable? Would anyone even *want* me? After all, I'd only worked in one place for 38 years. It was all I ever knew. Why would anyone hire a sixty-year-old lawyer? Was I too old? Would I end up starting over at age 60? I imagined myself covering *ex partes* just to pay the bills. I went through the emotional torture of enthusiasm, insecurity and, ultimately, optimism. I say optimism because my gut told me that I could still win cases. After discussions with my wife, I decided that yes, I *was* still marketable, that this dog *could* learn new tricks.

Starting over

I began my search. After 38 years, I needed to take stock of myself and sit down and write a resume. I was more accustomed to being on the receiving end of a resume, having interviewed hundreds of job applicants over the years. Now, it was my turn to summarize my entire career on a couple of pages, and make myself look half-way interesting. Handing that resume over to a new firm to check me out was a point of no return. After a couple of interviews, I found a firm that was interested in me. Once I accepted the offer from the new firm, my life was about to change.

First, I needed to give notice at the old firm. Reactions to the news of me leaving were intense. It turns out, nobody really thought I would ever leave. Was this a joke? "No." Would I reconsider? "No." Once the reality of my leaving set in, I went into efficiency mode and began to draft exit memos on files, and transition people into taking my place. Now, this was really going to happen. Files were transferred. Boxes were packed, and off I went to the new office. I left on a

Monday and started at the new firm on a Tuesday.

The night before my new job began, I barely slept. It has always been that way for me the night before big events: the birth of my kids, my wedding, closing arguments – I do not sleep. It is my brain telling me, "This is something big." My mind raced all night as I imagined my first day. I woke up with butterflies in my stomach at 5 a.m. Excited, I could not wait to start my new job. I tied my new tie. My shoes were shined. I was like a kid on a first date. It *was* a first date.

Driving to work was easy. I knew the way because the new firm was only half a mile beyond the old firm. I had to drive *right past* the old firm. Once I drove past, and did not turn in to the old driveway, I knew, this is it. I am really "moving on." There was no turning back.

On Tuesday at the new office, I knew I was "not in Kansas anymore." Suddenly, I had a new reality. Everything was different. I no longer knew my way around. I was a stranger in a new world. I felt pressure to perform, all self-imposed, of course. I felt both a rush of excitement and the fear of failure. What if this was all a big mistake? What if I left a sure thing for this strange-looking office, where everyone moved so much faster, wearing headsets as they walked the halls speaking *en Español*? I reminded myself that I had already crossed the point of no return. I was in it. My gut told me it was time to do what I knew how to do. I started over.

It turns out, it was not just the surroundings that were different, but the entire approach to plaintiff's litigation. After a proper orientation, I was introduced to 75 new faces in 15 minutes. Meeting so many people in such a short time was a bit overwhelming at first. Soon, I found myself at my new desk, staring at a computer that looked completely unfamiliar. At the old firm, I would get in every morning, pour a cup of coffee, sit at my desk and jump on my computer. I knew all my cases. Everything just worked. I never spent any time thinking about *how* to get my work done. I'd been doing it for so long that I just did it.

Now, this new computer just sat there looking back at me. I swallowed my pride and called for help to figure out how to turn on the computer and get into the system. Then, I began to explore. It has two screens (which I have now come to love). I never knew the advantages of two computer screens. Now I am able to keep my work in progress on the left screen, while I handle my incoming email on the right screen. No more switching back and forth from document to email. So much time has already been saved every hour of every day of every week. Amazing.

The computer system itself is also far more complex than I had ever experienced. There are multiple passwords that need to be input. Different aspects of the computer system have their own password system. Some of the databases are also password protected. I wondered: Am I working at a law firm or the Pentagon? I decided it was up to me to figure the entire computer system out. After a couple hours of trial and error, I was chasing my tail. It was definitely time to ask for help again. Someone explained what to do (more than once), and I returned to my computer. Piece of cake, right? Wrong. Knowing how to navigate the computer system was not enough to actually start working. I needed to understand the office operating system in order to find all of the information I needed to work my files. What the heck is an office operating system? I never used one before.

The office operating system

The office operating system consisted of databases, filing systems, scanning protocol and a personnel structure. Everything is inter-related. I soon realized: There is a plan here. From the moment a case comes in, *everything* is part of a master litigation plan. At first, I needed to talk to several people just to understand how to read a file. It turns out that different people had jobs they were doing to build the case and, when they did their jobs correctly, the case was actually put together for the lawyer to be ready to litigate. They say there are no

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stupid questions, but I felt like a rookie when I asked about each step of the process. It is humbling to have a “twenty something” file clerk smile politely at me while I naively ask, “How do you do that?”

Understanding the firm’s litigation system took a long time with my first few cases. And the new cases were coming fast; three the first week. Three more the next. I also brought some cases over from the old firm that needed my attention. In week three, I signed up some additional cases that kept me busy. Having many good cases is a nice problem to have, but my caseload was growing, and I needed to learn how to navigate this new-fangled system – pronto. I was three weeks behind in week two. So, I found myself continuing to make friends with the paralegals in the office. They couldn’t have been nicer. I repeatedly asked them to explain for me what is meant by this and that. After 38 years of practice, it sometimes felt like I was starting out a beginner again. My first three weeks were humbling. Each time I learned something new, I put up a Post-it reminder.

For a couple of weeks, I had Post-its up *everywhere*, reminding me where to find things in the system, until I got the hang of it. My office was splattered in a confetti of Post-its, reminding me of my new commands. I was not accustomed to feeling lost in a law office. I worked until 9 p.m. some nights. My wife said I was married to my job. Gradually, I became familiar with the new office format. I asked fewer questions each week.

Each day I forced myself to learn a new aspect of the computer. I keep a cheat sheet of the new computer tasks I learn. It’s a pretty big list. The technology is at first intimidating, but then amazing. I never knew so much file information could be scanned, entered and tracked so efficiently. All I had to do was learn the system, and now I feel like I have learned a new language. I learn something new every day, just by exploring. The IT guy is my new best friend. He is like a machine. I email him a question asking how to do something, and he spits out the answer by email. If only all my *legal* issues were resolved so efficiently.

Even the phone is different

Beyond the computer system, simple everyday office equipment can also be difficult to learn to use for the first time. Take the new phone system, for instance. It looks so harmless and inviting, just sitting there waiting to be picked up. But it is not so easy. It is internet based, whatever that means. I never heard of such a thing before. When I began practicing law, we still had rotary phones! I took an online training course just to learn to use this new phone system. Now, when the office phone rings, if I do not pick up immediately, it forwards automatically to my cell phone. If I am not in the office to take the call, the message goes to my voicemail on my cell. No more need to call in to the office for messages. What a time saver! But learning how to work the darn thing is way above my pay grade. One day I had four lines ringing all at once and I had no clue what to do. I sat there frozen, staring at all the flashing lights, while I kept talking to the one call on my line, as other lines rang endlessly in the background. Now I have a different cheat sheet of what button to push when the lines light up all at once. Personally, I think the phone should be as easy to work as the toilet. Everyone uses it. (I figured out the toilet no problem, thank God.)

My new online support staff

I have also developed relationships with online consultants that I never had before. Previously, I had traditional face-to-face interactions with people like a Lexis rep and a benefits consultant. At the old firm, we would meet periodically. Sometimes we would have lunch. It was always in person. They were nice people. I even got a holiday gift one year. Things have changed now. It seems I have now entered a sort of virtual vendor world, where anonymous vendors now know I exist.

Take Westlaw, for instance. One day, my new Westlaw rep reached out to me in an email “cold call.” She sent me her photo on her email (I assume it was really her). She even sent me a hyperlink that I could click to connect to her for

instant service. Law library at your fingertips. What a concept! Now, I just need to make the time for the training. In fact, I have a couple of virtual trainings to do from vendors of other litigation services we use as well. They keep inviting me back by email, reminding me to do my training. It is like Big Brother making sure that I complete my training. I am not even sure how these companies get my contact information. But they email me and remind me, and eventually, I will fall in line and comply.

It was the same issue with the benefit company. They sent me a link to get information on medical, disability, dental and life insurance. Careful what you wish for, because there is more information there than anyone should ever want to know about these products. Having these types of virtual “contacts” instead of a live person is certainly different from “old school” meetings. It saves time and seems to be more efficient. I cannot say that I miss physically meeting with these vendors. The current practice frees me up to spend valuable time on litigation, business promotion, or, dare I say, with my family. I know that if I wanted them to come out to the office to explain something, they would be out here faster than the click of my mouse.

I am now starting to see results with my new cases. I am feeling a sense of gratification at being able to help clients once again. My cases are tough in many ways. The catastrophic injuries are sad. The facts of the accidents or conduct are aggravated and liability can sometimes be a challenge to establish. Punitive damages will be alleged in many cases. These are all clients who have suffered life-altering events, and they are counting on us to get them justice. Whether it is disfiguring burns or loss of limb, we will passionately fight for them. They will have a team of dedicated lawyers and staff that will not back down from the fight. Having a firm with so many resources dedicated to that battle makes my job so much easier.

Despite some bumps in my learning curve, things will get easier with time. I know that. I now have a paralegal

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and a secretary. Once my entire new team is in place, I won't always be trying to figure things out. I think I will even get to the point with my new computer where I grab a cup of coffee, slide into my chair in the morning and just start working again.

Lessons learned

So, what have I learned from my decision to start over? A lot. I've learned that I am capable of much more than I ever thought. I've learned that even at my age, I can be whatever lawyer I want to be. I can still learn anything and everything, and try a plaintiff's case with a new young team.

I have learned that no matter how comfortable you might be in your career, it is still possible to start over if you find the right fit. I can imagine plenty of situations where people change jobs for all the wrong reasons: a slight raise, a disagreement, "the grass looking greener." None of those situations applied to me, because my move was more deliberate and, I like to think, well considered. Making a major career move involves risk assessment. One must consider his or her current situation and weigh the risk of losing it against what is "out there" for them. That is the rub, of course; you never know. Even once you make your move, there is hard work and adjustment, to be sure. And then, there is the human component. There are so many people who are affected: old and

new, at work and home. But if you correctly assess the risks, and are willing to do the hard work, you can better your situation – even if you do qualify for AARP.

On a personal level, I still miss my friends at the old firm. It is strange to drive past the old building and not turn in to go to work. I think about how they must be doing each time I drive by the old address. I still make an effort to stay in touch with them, and I hope we will. If our friendship was built on more than the existence of the firm itself, it will survive.

Fortunately, my new friends at the firm share my passion for law and consumer justice. The lawyers here are both brilliant and funny. I am certainly not lonely. I am building new friendships here with the staff too. They are abundant, skilled, energetic and completely charming. Their enthusiasm is infectious. This of course does not happen by accident. There is something really special going on here. They have some great office traditions that make the place very special. *I love* coming to work. I now realize that having titles and trappings is no match for having fire in my belly again, and a belief in my future. "If you want to run fast, run alone. If you want to run far, run with a pack."

I've realized there is a tendency to get comfortable as the years go by. With longevity comes the risk of complacency. We do not want to get stale in our thinking, in our firms or in our careers.

The practice of law is ever evolving, and it takes effort to keep up. It is important to also stay hungry. It keeps us energized. I like to think that you are only as good as your last case. The beauty of a firm is that it can produce a volume of great work. I am already seeing that body of work take shape at my new firm. Each case can be better than the last. I am seeing that too. For me, the risk of changing jobs paid off. I can now see a better future, and my entire outlook has changed. I am up every morning before sunrise, excited to go to work. There is still so much more to do; so many people we can help.

So, it turns out, I've learned many things about myself and about the practice of law from this move. And yes, I've learned a few new tricks along the way.

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