



NEW YORK  
CITY BAR

**Event Synopsis:**

**“Exploring Non-Practicing Roles for Lawyers in Law Firms”**

April 19, 2016 at 6:30 p.m.

Sponsored by the New York City Bar Association’s  
Committee on Career Advancement and Management

By Jean Vrola\*

**Moderator:** Daniel S. Goldsmith, Legal Director, Litigation Department, Proskauer Rose LLP

**Panelists:**

- June Su, Attorney Recruiting & Development Manager, Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP
- Carlos Davila-Caballero, Director of Diversity & Inclusion, Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP
- Alison Abend, Director of Marketing & Business Development, Morvillo Abramowitz Grand Iason & Anello P.C.
- Eilish Cahalan, East Coast Director of Training & Development, Sidley Austin LLP

The moderator, Dan Goldsmith, introduced each panelist, all of whom were lawyers who transitioned into non-practicing roles at law firms. Dan indicated that the panelists would discuss their current roles and describe the career path that led them to that role.

The panelists agreed that the positions that they currently hold either did not exist, or were not as prevalent at law firms when they were practicing attorneys. Everyone agreed that having people serving in those support roles would have improved and enhanced their experiences as attorneys.

For those members of the audience interested in transitioning into non-practicing roles at law firms, the panelists encouraged them to reach out to people in those types of roles, as usually they enjoy having the opportunity to help others.

Each of the panelists introduced themselves and gave a brief history of their respective career paths:

- The moderator, Dan Goldsmith, worked as an attorney for eight years, and then as a high school teacher for two years, before transitioning into his current role as Legal Director of the Litigation Department at Proskauer.
- Carlos Davila-Caballero was a practicing attorney for six years, and then worked in academia for eight years, before transitioning into his current role as Director of Diversity & Inclusion at Cleary Gottlieb.

- Eilish Cahalan worked as a litigation associate for ten years before transitioning into her current role as East Coast Director of Training & Development at Sidley Austin.
- Alison Abend was a practicing attorney for two years, then served as the Director of Events at a law school, before transitioning into a marketing/business development role at a law firm, and ultimately into her current role as Director of Marketing & Business Development at Morvillo Abramowitz Grand Iason & Anello P.C.
- June Su worked in a compliance role after law school, and then worked in a career advising role at Columbia Law School, before transitioning into her current role as Attorney Recruiting and Development Manager at Katten Muchin.

The panelists were asked what led them to stop practicing law and make the transition into their current role, and each shared their reason for making that transition.

Most indicated that while some aspects of the work were unfulfilling -such as the billable hours requirement and the sometimes non-collaborative atmosphere - most enjoyed practicing. They simply discovered that the aspects of the job that most appealed to them were unrelated to the substance of practicing law. For example, one panelist indicated that she most enjoyed serving as a mentor and teaching junior attorneys when she was practicing.

The panelists found that the non-practicing, support roles they now serve in offer more opportunity for collaboration, teamwork, mentoring, and teaching. In addition, they find that having the opportunity to leverage their legal background and skills in a support role can be very rewarding.

When asked if they missed practicing law, some of the panelists indicated that there are aspects of practice that they miss at times. However, for those in training and professional development roles, they find that their work is still intellectually challenging and affords opportunities for learning more about the law on a substantive level. In fact, in non-practicing roles that involve developing curriculum for attorneys, the opportunity to learn about many different practice areas exists. Similarly, for those in marketing and business development roles, the opportunity to understand the big picture and the business of the firm is more prevalent than in a practicing role as an associate.

After sharing the above information regarding their own career paths and transition experiences, the four panelists provided practical advice regarding navigating the transition into a non-practicing role and utilizing a legal background or skill set effectively in that role. Below is a synopsis of their collective advice.

### **Successfully Navigating the Transition**

- It is not required or even necessarily preferred that you have spent a significant number of years practicing law. Rather, it is important that you can articulate the reason why you wish to transition into the desired non-practicing role, and why you are enthusiastic

about that potential new role or field. Demonstrating a genuine interest in the desired field, rather than merely a lack of interest in practicing, is key.

- The number of non-practicing roles is increasing, so there is more opportunity. However, there is also growing interest in these roles among attorneys, making the market for these jobs very competitive.
- There are a number of practical steps you can take as you prepare to make this transition.
  - First, take an inventory of the following three things: (i) your own interests and passions; (ii) the skills you possess that suit those interests and passions; (iii) and your network of people in the field you wish to enter, as they are your potential path into that field.
  - Second, network with others who have made a similar transition, or who are in the type of role that you aspire to be in. One effective way to do this is to use LinkedIn to identify people you would like to connect with, and ask your existing contacts to help connect you. Once you have connected with people, you should set up informational interviews with them, ideally in person or over the phone.
  - If you are currently working at a law firm, you should become involved with your firm's professional development initiatives and recruiting efforts. For example, join the associate recruiting or development committee, volunteer to interview prospective hires, and present CLE programs.
  - Become involved with a bar association by joining a committee and organizing a program.
  - Consult with others who are in the type of role or field that you aspire to transition into, and be sure that you have updated your resume to highlight the experience and skills most relevant to the field you hope to enter.
  - Check the online job postings daily, including NALP (National Association of Law Placement), PDC (Professional Development Consortium), NYCRA (New York City Recruitment Association), ALFDP (Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals), and LMA (Legal Marketing Association) websites.
  - Consider working with a recruiter who can assist with this process.

### **Leveraging Your Skills in Your New Role**

- Once you have successfully made the transition into a non-practicing role at a law firm, you will find that many of the skills you relied on as an attorney are transferable.

- For example, those in professional development roles involved in creating training programs for attorneys, and are often using their research and writing skills. In addition, writing skills, communication skills, and the ability to multi-task, solve problems, and think on your feet will be utilized in your new role.
- The experience of having been an attorney will assist you in coaching and counseling attorneys and in being able to keep up with the fast pace of a law firm.
- Leveraging your skills will be necessary to face the challenges that accompany serving in a non-practicing role at a law firm.
- For example, depending on the role you are in, you may find that you have to go against the grain of popular opinion and be persuasive as an influencer of the firm leaders. Disrupting the status quo and serving as the contrarian voice can be challenging.
- Also, it can be challenging to obtain partner buy in, and to gain their trust in a new idea or way of doing something, and your ability to effectively implement that idea.
- Lastly, there are a number of challenges that come with serving on the staff side of a law firm. First, serving many different constituents and considering all of their interests can be difficult. Also, balancing your every day workload and responsibilities with serving the ongoing requests that may come in from the associates and the partners will require strong time management skills.

## **Q&A & General Advice**

- You do not need to have practiced law or even have a J.D. to pursue a non-attorney support role at a law firm, such as a role in professional development, training, recruiting, business development, or diversity and inclusion. These are independent career paths in and of themselves.
- A lack of law firm experience should not prevent you from pursuing these types of roles, but you should be prepared to explain why you want the role and to describe what applicable skills and experience you possess.
- In terms of a more long term career trajectory, some people eventually leave the law firm environment and start their own consulting companies, as marketing consultants, coaches, skills-based trainers, etc. Others will leave the law firm environment and pursue a similar role at a large corporation.
- Other advice and suggestions included the following:
  - Always accept an opportunity to have an interview, as you never know where this may lead.

- Take a personal inventory of your own interests, passions, and contacts, and, in doing so, be honest with yourself.
- It may take time to find the job you want, but be persistent in your efforts.
- The people you work with and for may be able to help you pursue the next step, and it may be worth considering having a candid conversation about your goals with them.

*\*Jean M. Vrola is Assistant Manager of Professional Development at Sullivan & Cromwell LLP and member of the City Bar's Career Advancement and Management Committee. May 2016.*