



Changing Careers? A Roadmap from Practice to Professional Development

by Jody Rosen Knower*

Interested in moving from practice to the world of professional development? Here are 10 tips to help you make the transition:

- 1. Revamp your résumé.** In addition to detailing your practice experience, highlight any roles related to learning or career development. Were you a formal mentor? A teaching assistant in law school? Have you served on a relevant committee at your firm? Have you been active in recruiting? Do you have any formal teaching experience? Have you been a speaker at conferences or bar association events? All of these are indicators that you have the passion and skills to build a career in professional development.
- 2. Set up informational interviews—lots of them.** The same job title can mean very different things at different firms. Positions may include responsibility for learning and development, recruiting, diversity, associate reviews, work assignments, CLE accreditation and compliance, summer associate programs—or all of the above. You'll want to understand the nuances of various professional development roles, the importance of organizational structure and culture, and the kinds of challenges and opportunities professional development professionals typically face.
- 3. Consider government and law-school positions, too.** Some of the largest government agencies, such as the New York City Law Department and the U.S. Securities & Exchange Commission, have professional development positions. And virtually every law school has a career services office, where you can build key counseling, programming, and marketing skills, among others. If you ultimately want a professional development position in a firm, these roles can help get you there. Or you may be delighted to discover that they are a perfect fit for you.
- 4. Scan job postings.** Both the Professional Development Consortium (www.pdclegal.org) and NALP (www.nalp.org) list openings on the public sections of their websites.
- 5. Check your finances.** Expect a pay cut—especially if you've been in private practice at a large firm—and plan accordingly. NALP regularly conducts salary surveys of its members, and these provide helpful benchmarking data. However, they are not publicly accessible—you will need to rely on your network to obtain a copy.

- 6. Build your expertise.** Review the Professional Development Consortium Competency Model (available at www.pdclegal.org) and take an inventory of your knowledge and skills. Identify a place where you can grow—and demonstrate your commitment to the field—by taking one of dozens of available continuing-education courses in relevant subjects. These include adult learning, career counseling, coaching, instructional design, learning measurement, online learning, organizational development, and talent management. In New York City, NYU’s School of Professional Studies (www.scps.nyu.edu) has a particularly rich catalog of courses. If time or money are in short supply, purchase the relevant texts and study on your own.
- 7. Write a persuasive cover letter.** As important as your résumé is, your cover letter is where you make—or break—the case for your candidacy. Flesh out the most germane elements of your résumé by telling the story behind the bullet points. Underscore the ways in which your practice background will help you add value to the organization. Acknowledge that you are making a career shift, and then make clear that you have the motivation and determination to succeed.
- 8. Keep up with the conversation.** Stay abreast of trends in the legal market, learning and development, career planning, and the legal profession generally. This will aid your job search, enhance your credibility in interviews, and accelerate your climb up the learning curve once you land a professional development position. In addition to reading the usual legal trade publications, look for thought leaders to follow. Check out Talent Think Tank (www.talentthinktank.com), a collaborative blog with more than 20 contributors from a range of legal talent management backgrounds. Join relevant professional groups on LinkedIn, where new ideas are discussed and noteworthy articles are frequently shared.
- 9. Join a New York City Bar Association committee.** Serving on a committee immediately expands your network, burnishes your credentials, and helps you stay informed about the profession. There are several professional development-related committees at the City Bar, including those focused on career advancement and management, diversity, law students, lawyer recruitment and retention, and new lawyer practice and skills. Committee participation is limited to members. Information and applications are available on the City Bar website (www.nycbar.org).
- 10. Be patient.** The right job may not present itself right away. Although there is typically a steady flow of openings in New York City, it will likely take time to find one that matches well with your qualifications, interests, and personality. Ongoing networking and informational interviewing will give you the best chance of hearing about positions before they are posted. Good luck!

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