



Transitioning from Law to Business: 10 Helpful Tips

By Ameer A. Shah*

On April 27, 2015 three distinguished former practicing lawyers now business professionals comprised a panel at a program entitled, "Strategies for Lawyers Looking for a Business Job" as panelists. They discussed the many ways in which legal skills and training can make lawyers desirable employees for business jobs. All panelists agreed that the keys to making a successful transition from law to business include being open-minded, patient, and confident in your ability to learn what you don't know.

Below are 10 helpful tips from the program, which was moderated by **Robert Weiss**, Director of Business Development at YouVisit. Panelists included: **Jared Cohen**, VP of Community Experience, Teachers Pay Teachers; **Jason Gelman**, Director of Finance and Operations/ General Counsel, Updater; and **Antonia Abraham**, Chief Financial Officer, Handshake Corporation.

1. **Be Confident That You Can Learn Anything.** The fact that you made it through three years of law school, not to mention four years of college, means something to business professionals. It means that you can focus, put in the time, and learn things you don't already know. Since most of what you will tackle as a business professional will not be something you encountered as an attorney, be confident that you can learn whatever you need to know to get the job done.
2. **Network Like a Crazy Person.** We all know how important networking is to land the right fit/ right job. Particularly when you are launching a search for a business role it is absolutely to your detriment to not ask everyone you know and everyone they know holding positions you are interested in about what they do and how they landed their jobs. As one panelist put it, in figuring out what the right business role would be for her, she asked everyone she met what they did on a Tuesday. Why Tuesday? She answered that though Tuesday is an arbitrary day, she didn't want to hear a formal job description, she wanted to hear exactly what a typical day at work looked like for her contact to get a sense of whether the nuts and bolts of the job would be something she could see herself doing day in and day out.
3. **Check Your Ego At the Door.** You will likely work with colleagues who may not have the level of education or advanced degree that you hold, but have more experience than you do. Be prepared to have to prove yourself at your new job even to colleagues who may not appear on paper to have the same credentials that you have. As one panelist put it: If an 18 year old is better at coding than I am, who cares if I have 8 years of legal experience; for this job, he brings more to the table and should be respected and rewarded for that.

4. **Be Prepared to Roll Up Your Sleeves.** To break into a business role, especially if it is with a start-up company, you should be prepared to do whatever it takes, even if, as all the panelists agreed, that means taking out the trash, literally. Often, titles involving “operations” or “management” may also include doing work that seems below your paygrade. Remember: In any company, there is no “I” in “team”. If something needs to get done it never hurts to roll up your sleeves and show your colleagues that you’re committed to adding value to your company in whichever way you can.
5. **Don’t Be Afraid of a Few Fumbles.** It might take a couple of tries before you land in the right role. The key thing to remember is with the right amount of networking and research, you should be able to zero in on the business roles that interest you. But from there, it’s a bit of a crap shoot and it may take trying a couple of different roles before you land in the right one. So don’t be afraid to make mistakes when figuring out which role provides the best fit. The key thing to remember is though you may not immediately find it, with every try you get a little closer to finding that right fit.
6. **Be Prepared to Take a Pay Cut.** All panelists agreed that in order to break into their new positions they had to take significant pay cuts from their private law firm jobs – for some as much as 70%. But all agreed that the value of landing their first positions and gaining experience in a role that truly interested them far outweighed the loss in salary.
7. **Consider Investing in Additional Training.** Depending on the type of business you would like to join, additional training in web design, coding, software development, accounting, or finance may serve you well in demonstrating interest in a particular area, distinguishing yourself from competition, and in preparing you for on-the-job tasks such as customer care or troubleshooting, particularly when working in the technology space.
8. **Follow Your Passion.** Many lawyers may think intuitively that the right business or industry to join is one with strong projections for future growth. The right fit for a job, however, will likely be with a company or business that you relate to, believe in, are a fan of, or generally think is pretty cool. Don’t be afraid to dip your toes in uncharted waters if it’s with a company that you truly connect with.
9. **Make Sure You Know Why You’re Making the Transition.** Before taking on the risk and sacrifice, whether financial or otherwise, that comes with transitioning from law to business, be sure you know why you’re leaving practice in the first place. The underlying question you need to consider is: Am I running *to* business because it interests me and capitalizes on my best skills, or am I running *from* law because it hasn’t lived up to my expectations. Business roles present their own challenges and if you find yourself making the transition for the wrong reasons, you may find yourself just as unhappy as you were as a lawyer.
10. **You’re Never Really Your Own Boss.** For those thinking about starting their own businesses consider this: Many people start their own businesses because of the appeal of being their own boss. But as one panelist remarked, as a business owner, senior executive, or manager, is

anyone ever *really* their own boss? Though you may not be answering to a client or a law firm partner's demands, you surely will be tasked with responsibilities that require you to answer to someone. Maybe a customer, maybe a vendor, maybe a subscriber, or maybe fellow members of your company's management team. So make sure you're choosing to start a business for the right reasons or consider other opportunities that will allow you flexibility to manage your work schedule and demands more freely than by being a business owner.

**Amea Shah is member of the City Bar's Career Advancement and Management Committee, May 2015.*