How to Navigate a Different Career as a Legal Professional

Written by Teresa Matich

There's so much more to do with a law degree beyond practicing law.

Choosing an alternative legal career can seem daunting, but if it's what you truly want, the rewards far outweigh the challenges.

To dig into this topic, we spoke to Nicole Abboud-Shayan at ClioCon 2019. Nicole handles business development at WordRake and blogs, speaks, and creates content to help build a better future for legal professionals and their clients. As an expert at building a different legal career for herself, she's great at helping other lawyers find their own paths as well.

Teresa Matich:

How did you decide that you no longer wanted to practice law?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

It was a long time coming. It was kind of a long and windy road. But growing up I always wanted to be a lawyer, like most lawyers who grew up wanting to do that. And I was all about it. I loved law school. I passed the bar and started practicing.

And it was about a few months into the practice of law that I just felt this really weird feeling that I could not shake off. It was a feeling of great unhappiness, but I stuck it out for about five, six years thinking that maybe it's just a new lawyer thing—like I just needed to get over the learning curve and maybe I'd find my stride and learn to love it, but I never really did.

I was just kind of unhappy for a whole five years, and I was just moping around and complaining to anyone who would listen. I finally decided to do something about it. And that was when I first started my podcast, which helped me eventually quit the law.

Teresa Matich:

Wow. And what sort of reactions did you get when you did that?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

I posted a video on YouTube where I talked about quitting. It was the day I decided to quit completely. And on YouTube I got a lot of great reactions. In real life, I got a lot of supportive comments. A lot of lawyers who were like, "We're so happy for you. It's what we want to do. We just don't know how to do it. So thank you for actually saying it out loud." And then I had some people who were like, "Oh, you're crazy. You should have given it time. You really should think this through. What are you doing?" But for the most part, there was a lot of support really from the people that I know.

Teresa Matich:

And how did it feel to finally ...

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

To finally leave? I just remember feeling really, really happy the day I decided to finish all my cases, wrap things up at the law firm, and actually start my business—and then tell people that, "I'm in business now." I remember thinking *this is really what I was meant to do*. I just kind of took the windy path to get there, but it was just happiness. I don't know how else to describe it.

Teresa Matich:

That's amazing. That's so great.

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

It was a good feeling. It was a feeling I always looked for when I was practicing, but never really found.

Teresa Matich:

And why do you think, if you're meant to be a business owner at first, why did you try practicing law first?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

Well, I think a big part of it was I was stubborn. I wanted to be a lawyer when I was a kid, so I told myself I have to see this through. I really wanted to be a lawyer. I really thought that would put me in the best position to be able to help people. Now I realize law's not the only way to do that.

Another part of it was not knowing what the practice of law really entailed until I actually did it. And I think that's common for a lot of law students, especially if they don't have anyone in their family who is a lawyer, because they have no one, they have no mentors, they have no one to look to. That was me. No one in my family was a lawyer. No one I knew was a lawyer. So I just was going off of what I thought being a practicing attorney was. So there's some disillusionment there, just not knowing what it's like.

But just going back to what you said in terms of whether it's meant to be—I thought starting a business was something I was meant to do as well. But now I realize I don't talk about meant to be, I don't know. I don't know what that means anymore, because I think we think we want one thing and life takes us in a different direction. So for now I'm building my business, building my speaking business as well. But I'm open to what the future brings.

Teresa Matich:

That's great. Sounds like a great attitude to have.

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

I mean, I've learned the hard way that as much as you try to plan for the future, the future has its own plan. So you can never really anticipate what's to come.

Teresa Matich:

And what's been your biggest challenge throughout starting your own business and media company and all of that?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

For me, it's been my confidence, I guess. Just the lack thereof at certain times, and not having enough faith in myself that I can do something. When I started my business, it was marketing and branding for lawyers, and that's not my background. I was a poli-sci major. So a little part of me was just wondering why would people trust me? Why would lawyers want to work with me?

I proved that I could do it, and do it well, through my own efforts on my social media, My show, which I was able to grow. So I was just not really believing that I could do it for other people. And then the more I did do it for clients and was able to produce results for them, the more I was able to build up that confidence that I lacked in the beginning. So yeah, I think just having the faith in myself—the belief that I could do it—was the biggest hurdle I had to overcome.

Teresa Matich:

Very cool. So now you no longer practice law, but part of your business is helping legal professionals find meaning in their own career so that they can stay in the practice of law and be successful lawyers. What's the biggest challenge that you see people facing in your work?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

So, I guess I help people in the sense that I talk about the things that I went through. So whether it's helping them stay and find meaning in the profession or leave, if that's really their path, if that's really what they want to do. I think the biggest challenge is just getting people to get the courage to actually pursue whatever it is they want to pursue, whether it's transitioning from one practice area to another, opening their own practice, leaving big law, starting a practice, leaving the profession altogether, starting another type of business, or going and teaching or whatever it is that they're actually passionate about.

I think the biggest challenge is knowing how to muster up the courage to take that first step. Because once you take that first step, then it just kind of gets going. Right?

I believe that when you decide on something and you put it out in the universe, doors just open up for you. Not easily, but they do eventually. So the first step is just proclaiming what you want to do in life, and then actually following through.

Teresa Matich:

How do you help people get up the courage to take that first step?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

I don't even know. I've had a lot of people tell me that when I talk to them, they just feel motivated at the end.

Teresa Matich:

Wow.

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

I don't know what it is that I say. I don't think I'm especially motivational, but I think I'm just very realistic about things when people tell me they're unhappy and they don't know what to do. I am not the person who says, "Okay, quit everything and go pursue your passions." Because I think they have to be realistic about life. You need to make money to survive. But I do tell people that, I mean, life can be either really long or it can end tomorrow.

So I think the longer you stay in a profession or in a career that you hate, the worse it's going to get, the harder it's going to be to leave. So I just tell people to really take a hard look at where they are and where they want their life to be, and then start taking that step to get there. And usually that's enough to get people motivated. Sometimes it's right away and sometimes I've had lawyers come back to me two years later and tell me, "You know what? We heard you say something two years ago on your show, and we finally did it. We finally opened our own practice. So thank you for that motivation."

Teresa Matich:

Oh wow. That's so cool. So you help people find meaning in their careers and you also help them be better leaders in their practices, right?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

Yes. I try at least. So I've always been really into leadership. I've read all the books, I listen to all the big leadership gurus, I guess. And it's not a very sexy topic, especially for millennials, and that's who my audience is. But I really think that's the basis of everything that, I mean—if you're trying to build a business or even if you're an employee, an associate—if you can master leadership or if you can at least train yourself on becoming a better leader in whatever position you're in, I mean that's a sure way to success. So yeah, I'm really into leadership. I think that even if you are leading yourself, that's where it starts. So I'm always encouraging people to learn about leadership and learn how to do it, even if it's just them in their own practice. Cause that's where it starts.

Teresa Matich:

What does leadership mean to you?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

You know, I don't know if I have a great definition for it, just because I feel like it's many things, but I think leadership is just the ability to influence. And it doesn't have to be a big crowd of people that you're influencing. I think if you're just affecting one other person's life, that's leadership. If you are able to encourage and empower someone else to do something that they didn't think they could, that's leadership. So I think it has many definitions. I'm still struggling to figure out what's a great, succinct way to describe how I feel about leadership. But for now, I think that's the best I can do.

Teresa Matich:

Fair enough. So a lot of small lawyers ... you talked about people opening their own practice, and there's the craft of law, but there's also the business side of law—now that you're a business owner helping these people, do you think it would be more

productive for lawyers to think of themselves as business people more? Do you think there's a barrier there a little bit?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

So I think for lawyers who run their own practices, yeah, they definitely should think of themselves as business people and business owners, because they are business leaders. But I don't think it's for everyone. I think it does take a certain skill and trait and personality, all of which can be learned and practiced, I suppose. I think if you're an associate within a firm and you don't want to develop business, even though I always encourage people to do that, I don't think it's necessary. I think some people are built for just the practice of law and that's okay.

But yeah, if you do open your own practice, definitely you're a business owner. And so become familiar with everything that that entails from the accounting to the networking, the business development, the growth, the leadership, definitely.

You know, actually, a friend of mine, Mike Whelan, he recently came out with a book and it's all about that topic exactly: Should lawyers become experts or should they be entrepreneurs? And he kind of talks about the difference between lawyers who just need to be experts in what they're doing, and that's what they should focus on, as opposed to lawyers who aren't going to be the ones who go out and bring in business and actually build their practice. And he sees a difference between the two. After reading his book, I'm convinced I'm kind of leaning in that direction as well. But I think at the end of the day, if you're building your own practice, then yes, you are a business owner.

Teresa Matich:

Makes sense. And what advice do you have for lawyers who want to find meaning in their careers?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

I think the best advice is to try to find some time and take a step back and just be with your own thoughts for a while, which is easier said than done. I think it's very hard for lawyers, who are very busy at work but also at home—maybe they're raising families, they've got responsibilities. It's hard to actually take time to really think about what you want and whether or not where you are currently is meaningful to you or if it's providing fulfillment.

So I think the first step is to step back, be alone with your thoughts. So whether that's trying to get away, escaping your responsibilities for a little while, like with a weekend in a hotel room somewhere. But thinking about what you really want, being self-aware enough

to know what brings you happiness and what you really want to be doing in life. And yeah, thinking about that.

Teresa Matich:

That's great. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

No, I don't think so. I mean, thank you for the opportunity to share my message. I hope it's inspirational to someone out there, and I think for any listener who is struggling with finding fulfillment in their careers and doesn't know where to turn, this podcast is certainly a great one. There are a lot of podcasts that lawyers put out, sharing their stories about how they found fulfillment in their careers. So just know that there are resources out there, there's help, there's no need to kind of stay unhappy for any longer.

Teresa Matich:

Thank you so much.

Nicole Abboud-Shayan:

Thank you for having me.

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