

SAY “YES”: Reinventing Yourself in the Legal Profession

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(by [Janet Meub](#))

Clients come and go. There is no guarantee that you will keep the work. This is true for many reasons. You can win every trial and cost-effectively resolve every case for a client who will transfer the work to another firm or attorney willing to charge a lower billable rate. The claims examiner who directly assigns you cases leaves the insurance company or is replaced. The company's new general counsel chooses to use her law school classmate for the transactional work you provided for years. Perhaps you do not reciprocate the inappropriate crush the assignor of work has on you (yes, this can happen to women in the law). The court rules in your client's favor, eliminating 20 cases nationwide. A corporate client is sold or goes bankrupt. Or maybe the work stays (and stays...), and you want to leave! You will land new clients or land on your feet in a more supportive environment if you embrace the unfamiliar by saying “yes” to new work, experiences and opportunities.

I graduated from law school in 2001 and began working at a 15-attorney general practice firm in Youngstown, Ohio. My first “litigation” experience occurred the day after my swearing-in ceremony. A partner sent me to the Mahoning County Courthouse to take a debtor's exam. I was nervous about my lack of experience, afraid to appear “green,” and uncomfortable asking the 60-some year-old debtor probing questions about his obviously precarious financial situation. Despite being asked out by the debtor and my pen leaking ink all over my face and new suit, I walked back to my office with confidence. However, my anxiety and discomfort in the face of new professional opportunities has never fully dissipated, and that's okay.

During my first two years of practice, my assignments were varied – from attending workers compensation hearings on behalf of employers to assisting a university client on real estate and land bank transactions, filing residential foreclosures, and fighting traffic tickets in municipal court (for the managing partner because “it was good courtroom experience”) to attending bankruptcy hearings on behalf of creditors, and more. With the bottom name on the firm letterhead, it was my responsibility to answer the cold calls from people “looking for an attorney to do X, Y and Z.” Feeling the pressure to bring in my own work and demonstrate my value to the firm, I took on a child custody case and a dispute with a mortgage company from these calls. I was frantically researching different areas of the law to find the answer to that day's dilemma. I was, as they say, a jack of all trades, master of none. I longed to be an expert on one topic.

A law school classmate tipped me off about a job at a firm in Pittsburgh where I could increase my salary and perhaps hone my skills in one practice area. I moved to Pittsburgh in 2003 to start anew. This would be my niche. For the next 15 years, I defended physicians, podiatrists, counselors, psychiatrists, dentists, nurses, and chiropractors in negligence cases. While every case required mastering some new (to me) aspect of medicine, the procedural course (preliminary objections, discovery, depositions, expert review, summary judgment, trial) and the legal theories remained the same. I made partner. And, as I had hoped, I was able to navigate my clients through the legal process and manage the emotional trauma of having their professional reputations publicly questioned. I will not say that it was without its challenges, but my practice became routine. I knew what to do and when. I knew what experts to engage depending on my clients' specialties or the medical issues involved.

For whatever reason, at every one of my firms, I am the attorney that coworkers seek when a friend or family member needs help. A partner at one of my first firms bought me a Lucy from Peanuts “Psychiatric Help 5 /The Doctor is In” sign to hang on my office door, commenting that there was always a line to see me. Save for a few times when the matter was too complicated or required special experience (taxes!), I have generally said “yes” when asked to assist. While helping people makes me feel good, the pressure I place on myself (to do a good job, to not disappoint, to get up to speed while juggling a full caseload) and the scary uncertainty when tackling something new is intense. All of these exercises outside of my comfort zone were confidence-building and exposed me to new people and new challenges. In the long run, saying “yes” has paid off.

Through my medical defense work, I became friendly with an experienced plaintiff’s attorney. He called me one day and asked me if he could recommend me to a non-profit to review its vendor contracts and provide general legal advice from time to time. He knew I was not a transactional attorney as we had tried two cases against each other in court, but he said that he knew the client would like me. He was sure about me, even if I was not sure about myself. What began as an occasional contract review led to more employment and professional liability work. I have done legal work for that same non-profit for the past eight years. It followed me to my current firm.

Another time, one of my partners asked me if I might handle the labor negotiations for a successor collective bargaining agreement for one of his clients. He was nearing retirement, wanted to transition out of the labor practice, but he also wanted to keep the work at the firm. He promised the client that he would stay involved “while training someone younger.” Then, at not the ideal time for me, dealing with two sudden family emergencies, I was asked to take on labor negotiations for a client two hours away (pre-pandemic, pre-Zoom). But, I said, “Yes, and I loved the work. Ultimately, this led to assisting another colleague with labor negotiations and helping with his employment caseload. I said to a friend who wanted to submit my resume for an employment litigation position, “Why not,” and here I am.

I have listened to attorney friends bemoan their circumstances at lunches and happy hours for more than two decades. A law school classmate asked me years ago if she should leave her firm because she felt that she was not getting the trial experience she wanted. My friend worked for a partner who never let her sign the pleadings she drafted or contact the client directly. She agonized over her situation, but she stayed at her firm making partner on schedule. However, it was 15 years before she finally tried a case on her own! Another friend was hired to work in a practice group that left three months after his joining the firm, but he has remained there for years doing “mind-numbing” work and is paralyzed at the thought of starting over.

You may have your own fears and insecurities. You may have achieved a status you are unwilling to lose. You may truly be stuck in your current position because of age or finances. However, it is possible to improve your work situation without uprooting yourself. For example, saying yes to taking on new work or a pro bono or a best interest case, handling a landlord-tenant dispute, serving as a guardian *ad litem*, or representing an indigent client may provide new experiences, and also, you may discover a new “you” after all.

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