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By Christina Martini
DLA Piper



By David Susler
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Consider all the options

Here is a portion of the conversation. To learn more about this topic, see the video on our website, chicagolawyer.com.

What are the factors you should consider when choosing a practice area?

Tina Martini: There are a number of factors you should take into consideration. First, you need to follow your passion and focus on those areas that interest you. It is important for you to be intellectually curious about the practice you choose. You also need to gain clarity as to where you can realistically find the practice you seek.

Some practice areas are only available at law firms, while others require you to work for corporations or the government. With each of those choices may come certain geographic and salary restrictions, so you need to know what you are willing to sacrifice to get the experience you want. I also recommend that you research the relative supply and demand for the areas that interest you to ensure that your goals are realistic.

David Susler: Be honest with yourself about what you want to do and what environment you want to do it in.

Consider your long-term goals — being a large firm partner, going in-house, opening your own firm, doing policy work or something else. It is also important to understand that your interests and passions will change over the years, though you cannot know today what those will be in 10 or 20 years.

What if you want to focus on a couple of areas, how do you do that?

Martini: You first need to have clarity as to what those areas are and to what extent there may be some synergies between them and whether it is a common phenomenon for attorneys to focus on both at the same time. If

so, it will likely be an easier endeavor. You must also figure out which employers would allow you to have such a dual specialization. If you are already employed, you need to examine how often your current employer has granted this type of request in the past, how successful others have been in following this path and whether there are any potential issues with doing so now.

If you find that the areas in which you are interested do not naturally lend themselves to a dual specialization, you will then have to do a cost-benefit analysis to determine what you are willing to give up in order to have the career you seek. In some instances, you may have to change jobs to have the flexibility you want.

Susler: Another option, especially if your job requires you to focus solely on one area, is to do pro bono work in a different area. There are many such opportunities and they enable you to expand your skills into other areas. Practicing in-house, especially in a small law department, typically requires you to focus on multiple areas.

Now that you both have been practicing for a number of years, what are your thoughts about the practice area you chose?

Martini: People ultimately end up in the practice area that is best for them. However, the right practice area for you is often not the one you initially choose. It is generally an evolutionary process, since your preferences and interests often change over time as well as the types of opportunities that cross your path.

My career has been no different. I started practicing as an environmental/real estate lawyer and graduated into a recession. These areas were very slow when I first started working, whereas the intellectual property field was a burgeoning practice and was very short-

staffed. As a result, I had the opportunity to split my time between the two groups for about a year, and then decided to switch into IP full-time as a second-year associate. This has been my practice area ever since. I know I made the right decision and waited until the right time to do it.

Had I tried to switch earlier, I would not have been ready. There was a process I needed to go through to be mentally ready for the change, but once I made up my mind, the transition was an easy one and I have been happily practicing in this area for nearly 18 years.

Susler: I chose to do personal-injury litigation long before I entered law school. A dozen years later, after realizing I no longer wanted to do that, following friends' recommendations, I chose to go in-house.

I did not truly understand what it entailed at the time. I learned on the job and quickly realized I enjoyed being an in-house generalist. After several years of experience as a solo in-house lawyer at two different companies, I developed not only the skill set of an in-house generalist, but the passion to be one. When the opportunity came to move to my current company, I knew it was exactly what I wanted and I pursued it.

Almost six years later, I know I made the right choice. I handle a myriad of legal substantive areas, some I have a great deal of experience handling, some I get to do for the first time and that is why I love what I do. So what have I learned?

No matter what choices you make, your career will take you in unanticipated directions. If you follow the process Tina suggests, the chances are it will take you in a positive direction. ■

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