

How to make a new you

Reinventing yourself takes time, effort and a clear purpose

What does it mean to reinvent yourself?

Martini: It means that you are experiencing a rebirth of sorts. When done in a professional context, it means that you are adding to your skill set in a way that is meaningfully different than what existed before. It is a profound shift in who you are and what you do.

Susler: In the context of being a lawyer, it means changing or expanding your practice areas, possibly your job.

For example, I first reinvented myself in private practice by changing from the defense side to the plaintiff's side of the table. I later reinvented myself by going in-house and becoming a business/commercial lawyer.

How does one go about doing it?

Martini: First, you need to have clarity about how you want to reinvent yourself and your reasoning behind it. This will ensure your intentions are genuine and that you are undergoing this transformation for a reason. Then, you need to figure out what steps you have to take to get there. You should break this process up into smaller steps, then map out what you have already done and where you need the most work.

For example, taking classes, reading books and speaking to others who are knowledgeable about a new area can help provide important guidance. Mentoring is crucial and invaluable during these times of transition.

Sometimes, just jumping in and taking on a new role is the best way to learn — kind of like riding a bike. There is often no substitute for just stepping into a new set of responsibilities and making them your own.

Susler: It takes discipline, focus, patience and a lot of hard work. Some reinventions are primarily a shift in focus while others require learning entirely new substantive skills. For example, my PI defense and plaintiff's practices were substantively the same, the approach was quite different.

Reinventing myself as an in-house business lawyer involved a more dramatic change, although I quickly realized I could draw upon my litigation experience despite the apparent differences in the practices. While my switch from defense to plaintiff's work was planned and intentional, my move to in-house was a leap of faith.

Key to the initial transition was a deep dive into educating myself, including going to as many ACC (Association of Corporate Counsel) CLE programs as possible and reading substantive materials relevant to my new practice areas as well as about what it means to be a general counsel.



Inside Out

Christina L. Martini is a practicing attorney, author and columnist. She is chair of the Chicago intellectual property practice group at DLA Piper and sits on its executive committee. She focuses on domestic and international trademark, copyright, domain name, Internet, advertising and unfair competition law.

Martini's husband, **David G. Susler**, is associate general counsel with National Material L.P., a manufacturing company primarily engaged in steel processing and aluminum extrusion. He has a general practice, providing advice, counseling and training to all business sectors and operations.

Watch them discuss this topic more with the Better Government Association's Andy Shaw at chicagolawyer magazine.com. To submit a question for future columns, e-mail questions.insideout@gmail.com.

When does it make sense?

Martini: Reinventing yourself makes sense when you are no longer enjoying what you are doing and do not feel a strong sense of fulfillment.

It is also timely when you are trying to develop additional skills so that you can further strengthen your value to your existing employer or if you are trying to improve your marketability with new prospects.

It is a critical step along the path to meaningful growth and is particularly key in the leadership context.

Many great leaders have gone through a number of significant transitions over the course of their careers in an effort to make themselves well-rounded, nimble and ready to take on the most senior level positions in their organizations.

Susler: I agree. My move from defense to plaintiff's PI was the fulfillment of a lifelong goal. I transitioned to in-house when I realized I was burned out and no longer wanted to do PI litigation. In both situations, I knew I needed to transition in order to be able to continue practicing in a satisfying and meaningful way.

What are some do's and don'ts?

Martini: It is important to consciously choose to reinvent yourself and to be an active participant rather than being an observer in the process.

You also need to make sure this transition makes sense for you and that it is something you truly feel passionately about. These changes usually take a lot of work and are done over time, so you need to be both patient and realistic about what you want to achieve. Do your best to strike the delicate balance between expanding and diversifying your skill set and being too scattered. Also, maintain your focus as you juggle the responsibilities of both your current position and those along the path toward something new. Keep your head in the game.

Susler: Transitioning your practice can be difficult substantively, financially and emotionally, so you must think critically and do your homework. Do not just leap to your friend's idea of a dream job, chase the hot area of the month or simply chase where you think the money is. You will not be happy and will soon be longing to reinvent yourself once again.

Think carefully about why you want to transition — is it the particular job, the practice area, being a lawyer?

Think carefully about what you want to do and what you think will hold your interest for a substantial period of time. Reinvent yourself as the person and the attorney you genuinely want to be. ■

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