

Making a Change: Switching Careers Within the First Five Years of Practice.

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When I was a 2L, I decided that I wanted to practice family law. I enjoyed the idea of litigating, negotiating, and helping clients navigate a potentially scary and foreign legal process.

Cue the typical law student overachievement mode and sprinkle in the delightful panic of getting a job in a terrible legal market. I interned, I externed, I volunteered, I clerked, and I networked. I did everything that I could to gain experience in the field of family law and build my resume so that I could (hopefully) find a job after I passed the bar.

I got a job. And not just a job, but the job I wanted. I was practicing family law at a boutique law firm in Minneapolis. The other attorneys I worked with were awesome and the head of the family law department was an excellent attorney and mentor. I was gaining good experience, becoming an expert in my field, was appearing in court on a regular basis. I was also rewarded with the satisfaction that I was furthering my clients' goals. Everything was perfect and I was confident that at the ripe age of 25, I would never, ever, leave my firm. Three years into my practice, I made partner. That was probably one of the most exciting days of my life.

One year and nine months later, I quit. Family law burnt me out.

Burning out on family law started slowly at first. There are a lot of really great family law attorneys in Minnesota, but there are also some not so great ones. The constant bickering, battling, and fighting every single day started to wear on me. I worked so hard for my clients, but sometimes there were facts and circumstances outside of my control and I couldn't get the result that they wanted. Even if I had a case where my client "won" on every single issue, the high cost of protracted litigation often overshadowed the success.

After several years of practicing I was miserable and did not know what to do. My entire professional development and identity revolved around being a family law practitioner. I went straight from undergraduate to law school without any real work experience, and while I gained significant legal experience in law school, it all centered around family law. Once I began practicing law, I gained a lot of experience litigating and became really successful with a very specific set of skills. However, I could not see those skills transferring to any other career. I felt trapped because while I was a skilled family law attorney and a partner in a law firm, the bottom line was I didn't want to litigate anymore.

During this time I started thinking about other career paths but I was scared that if I quit family law, I would essentially be starting over.

I was wrong.

Earlier in my career as a family law attorney, I had the opportunity to have lunch with an extremely prominent and successful attorney who (literally) wrote the book on ERISA law. She was brilliant, charismatic and I liked her immediately. During lunch we discussed collaborating on an article focusing on the intersection between family law and the Affordable Care Act.

Years later, we reconnected and I learned her firm was looking for a new associate. I was interested in the position, but knew that I had to become competent in employee benefits and ERISA law. This challenge would be similar to when I started out as a family law attorney. At that time, I had only limited experience and knowledge of the applicable law. To evolve into the expert I eventually became, I had to work hard to gain knowledge, experience, and move up within my firm. I knew this was something I could do again. Luckily, I had some limited experience with ERISA law and employee benefits in dividing marital assets in a divorce and began to supplement this knowledge by learning as much as possible about this particular area of law. I started reading treatises, statutes and articles that were applicable to employee benefits and ERISA law. I also attended seminars and CLEs that dealt with the Affordable Care Act and attended law school classes taught by my current bosses Darcy Hitesman and Scott Wold.

In September 2015, I started my new career as an ERISA and employee benefits attorney with Hitesman & Wold.

A large part of landing my new position was based on my previous track record. I succeeded in the area of family law and knew that same drive and intelligence would lead me to succeed in the field of employee benefits. While not all of my family law skills are directly utilized in my new position, I know I have the foundation and skillset to learn and apply the tax code, ERISA law, state and federal statutes, and case law. Also, I benefit from working with the best attorneys in the employee benefits field. While I miss my old partners, I don't miss family law and find my current work both fascinating and challenging.

The key lesson I learned is that it's not impossible to change career paths, even for "newer" attorneys who don't have extensive resumes or a background in a different type of law. If you work hard, become an expert in your field, and demonstrate that you can be successful, your drive and achievements can overshadow your knowledge in a particular area of law. The proof that you can be successful in what you're doing now will translate to your next position.

About the Author

Kelsey Karls is an attorney with Hitesman & Wold, practicing in the areas of ERISA law, employee benefits, and healthcare law. She enjoys spending her free time with her husband traveling, sailing, SCUBA diving, and running with scissors.