

Career Paths: Mapping Out Your Future (Program Notes)

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On January 26, 2018, Stephen Seckler moderated a panel at the Boston Bar Association. The program was designed to help law firm associates in understanding their career options as they progress. The panelists consisted of a partner at one of Boston's most prominent law firms, the managing partner of a midsized Boston firm (someone who began his career at another large Boston firm) and two attorneys who work in-house (who also began their careers at major Boston firms). The discussion was lively and insightful. Members of the Boston Bar Association can see a video replay of the program for free at

<http://www.bostonbar.org/edu/CLEProduct?ID=26641> (Non-members can purchase the replay.)

The following is a summary of some of the key takeaways from the session.

Speakers

Joseph F. Savage Jr., Goodwin Procter LLP; Patricia Davis, Mevion Medical Systems; John T. Morrier, Casner & Edwards, LLP; Raquel J. Webster, National Grid USA

Themes

There were a number of broad themes that came up throughout the program. Many of the speakers described career happiness as a work in progress. It is not a destination; it is a journey. The panelists all stressed the importance of getting perspective from other lawyers and other professionals, both inside and outside of one's firm.

The panelists advised attendees to meet other lawyers for coffee. They encouraged the audience to talk to partners, associates and in-house counsel outside of their firms. "Don't wait for the information to come to you. Go out and get the information and get perspective; that's how you will advance your career." According to everyone on the panel, there are many people out there who are willing to help you if you ask.

Joe Savage

Joe Savage talked about his life at two major Boston firms and how he transitioned from government service. Joe began his remarks by acknowledging that at large firms, the time demands remain great. He also stated at the outset that at a large firm, business development is an imperative.

Success at a large firm requires hard work and "sufficient talent". But you also need to be people savvy to navigate the internal bureaucracy. At the same time, 95% of work at a big firm comes from existing clients or referrals from existing clients; so doing great work is critical.

Joe claimed that he doesn't work that hard at business development; but he noted that he has been in a lot of places and built a lot of relationships (he does white collar litigation at Goodwin and that is a practice area that is heavily driven by referrals.) Those relationships have been a key source of business for him.

Joe stays at biglaw because the problems are sophisticated and the work remains interesting. He also said that biglaw offers a great pro bono platform. He never wanted to be at a small firm because he didn't want to have to be involved in firm administration.

Joe stayed in the public sector for 13 years, something he didn't intend. He thinks being a prosecutor is the best job you can have (the work is interesting; you build great trial skills; you have a high level of responsibility and your impact at a junior level is unsurpassed). He said that he had a lot of control over his schedule while working for the Department of Justice.

Eventually, Joe decided to leave government because he got frustrated by the bureaucracy and wasn't having fun anymore. His plan was to go to a big firm where nobody did white collar.

Moving from the public to the private sector required getting the hang of generating business. He was also a little surprised by the pressure at biglaw; there was a learning curve in learning how to speak to clients.

While Joe emphasized relationship building as a way to build a law practice, he mentioned that doing panels and writing is something you can do as a younger lawyer; you don't need to have business to do that. He acknowledged that it is hard to carve out the time to do this; there are so many client demands (it never feels like you have time). But it is not optional (it's just not billable).

Joe talked about his time at the law firm of Testa Hurwitz and how he is actually much happier at Goodwin. He believes Goodwin is a much stronger platform. But he would never have left Testa if the firm had not imploded. He also commented that being part of a large firm which dissolved has been very good for his career. The Testa alumni network has been a great referral network for Joe (and for many other Testa alumni).

Patty Davis

Patty Davis talked about her transition from being a patent lawyer at a large IP boutique to doing IP work and then general counsel work for technology companies. As an associate at a law firm, Patty got very good at writing patents. But the firm didn't want her to do anything else (she was too profitable). For Patty, going in-house was a chance to branch out into related areas of legal practice and learn new skills.

At Boston Scientific, Patty said she was allowed to do a much broader mix of work. But she also commented that not everyone wants this—for some, it is more comfortable to be a specialist.

Patty noted that when you are in-house, you are responsible for the client which is YOU—this means you can be called on at all hours. If CEO walks in door, you will need to drop what you are doing.

She also advised that if you are in-house, reach out and do other things; show initiative. Do not wait for the work to come to you. Also, when you go in-house, you need to be more self-sufficient. The GC doesn't have time to hold your hand. Similarly, at a small company, you don't have a huge legal staff so you need to be more nimble about areas of law where you may not have as much experience.

At a law firm, you get to really know an area of law (Patty misses that); in-house, every day is a law school exam and you will be expected to have flagged the issues.

Patty commented that in-house can be a little lonely (it is hard to be friends with colleagues because your duty is to the company)—outside counsel can be the place to vent.

Patty belongs to a general counsel group. That is her network—and it is crucial (she taps into the contacts of the GCs in that group almost on a daily basis.)

John Morrier

John Morrier began his career at the law firm of Mintz Levin. In a relatively short period of time, he established himself at a prominent mid-sized law firm where he now serves as managing partner.

According to John, it is no brass ring to be a non-equity partner at a large firm with no idea how to develop business. The way to succeed is to have your own clients. That is a key part of success at a law firm. John noted that he had some clients who weren't a great fit for Mintz.

At a smaller firm, John says he has more control over his practice; clients still have a tremendous amount of control over his day; but he doesn't have to wait for a senior partner to come in the office.

John tries to do something every week to nurture his network (with individuals or groups)—(i.e. making sure his network knows who he is, where he is and what he does.)

As managing partner, John makes sure “all the animals in the cage get along”. He leaves it to his executive director to handle more of the day to day functions like recruiting and hiring or integrating lateral hires. John noted that his firm has hired 21 lateral partners since he arrived and they are all still at the firm.

John advised large firm associates to be ready to move. John told the audience “you should always be planning out the future; look at the people who are ahead of you.”

In deciding whether to stay at biglaw or move to a smaller platform, John told the audience to ask themselves some questions: “If you could get clients, who would they be? Would they be better served at a big firm or a smaller firm?” If the answer is that the clients you want would be better served at a smaller firm, then you need to move on.

Raquel Webster

Raquel talked about her move out of biglaw into a government role at the City of Boston and then to a corporate law department.

Raquel said she thrives on non-profit board activity and giving back. She is on the board of a charter of school, the Women's Bar Association, the Northeastern University School of Law Alumni Association and several other boards.

One of the reasons that Raquel decided to leave private practice is that she doesn't like the idea of asking clients for business. She moved into a government role to get more hands on experience but eventually, she needed to earn more so she returned to the private sector as in-house counsel.

One of the things she likes about being in-house is being in the middle of issues that she is hearing about in the news. At National Grid, she is either in hearing mode or managing outside counsel on cases. She describes her work now as quasi-litigation. She is really an advocate for National Grid policies.

Raquel talked about the importance of taking initiative when in-house. She will sometimes ask her colleagues if she can work on something if it sounds interesting (she works in a large law department so they have lawyers who do a lot of different things including labor and employment, real estate and litigation). But she acknowledges that she got much better training when she was in private practice.

When Raquel was thinking about leaving biglaw, she did a lot of informational interviewing. She advises younger lawyers to make time to do these informationals long before you have to move. That way, you will be much less desperate when it is actually time to go.

Raquel met the GC of her current company several years ago while doing volunteer work for the Boston Bar Association. A year after she met the GC, she applied for a job at the company, but the GC said she was too junior. Eventually, the GC contacted her and told her to apply. So the moral of the story is to build relationships early in your career. You never know where they will lead.

Raquel talked about the importance of being persistent with networking. She told the audience "Don't give up!" If you email someone once and they don't respond, keep trying.

She suggested that people are much more likely to get an interview when they have a personal connection with someone at a company (or if you know someone who can call someone at the company). Patty Davis echoed this. She said that a resume that is walked over by hand will not be ignored ("we get thousands of resumes; when someone walks in the resume, it gets attention").

Finally, Raquel and other members of the panel told the audience to make sure you have a strong LinkedIn profile (include details about the work you are doing and try to have a few recommendations).



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