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# The New Succession Planning: Winding Down Your Career Without Leaving the Law Entirely

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Five years ago, I published the article "Succession Planning for Your Career: What Comes Next?" in *GPSolo* magazine. At the time, I was reflecting on the deaths of both of my parents during the pandemic and thinking deeply about how I wanted to spend the next chapter of my own life. I was also beginning to work with senior lawyers who were wrestling with questions about retirement, identity, purpose, and legacy.

Much of what I wrote then still rings true. Lawyers continue to struggle with questions about when to slow down, how to transition clients, and what life might look like after decades of professional success.

But a great deal has changed since 2021, not only in my own life, but also in the legal profession and society more broadly.

My wife's parents have also passed away, and she is preparing to retire. I completed my own transition out of legal recruiting and now focus exclusively on coaching lawyers. Along the way, I have had hundreds of conversations with attorneys who are trying to figure out what comes next.

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Those conversations have led me to a conclusion I did not fully appreciate when I wrote the original article.

### Why This Conversation Matters More Than Ever

Most lawyers are not looking for an exit. They are looking for a redesign.

The legal profession is aging. More lawyers are practicing into their 60s, 70s, and beyond. At the same time, advances in technology, increased longevity, changing attitudes toward retirement, remote work, and artificial intelligence have dramatically expanded the number of options available to lawyers contemplating their next chapter.

Personally, I have no plans to retire anytime soon. What I do anticipate is greater flexibility and a greater focus on those activities that I find professionally and personally satisfying. In recent years, I have published my first book with the ABA, expanded my coaching practice, and become increasingly involved in leadership activities within the profession.

At the same time, my wife and I hope to travel more and spend time working from different locations while remaining professionally active. Technology now makes that possible in ways that would have been difficult to imagine for many professionals just a decade ago.

### What Hasn't Changed

Yet, despite all these new options, many of the psychological barriers that make career transitions difficult for lawyers remain exactly the same.

Lawyers are still risk averse. We spend our careers helping clients identify what might go wrong. We anticipate problems, issue warnings, and develop contingency plans. Those skills make us effective counselors.

Unfortunately, they can also make us reluctant to experiment.

When lawyers contemplate change, they are often able to generate an endless list of reasons why it won't work.

- What if I don't have enough money?
- What if I get bored?
- What if I lose my professional identity?
- What if nobody can take care of my clients?
- What if I regret the decision?

These concerns are understandable. But they often prevent lawyers from exploring possibilities long before they need to make a decision.

Identity remains another significant challenge.

After 30 or 40 years of introducing ourselves as lawyers, partners, managing partners, judges, or general counsel, it can be difficult to imagine who we might be without those labels.

Lawyers want to avoid becoming a "P.I.P."—a Previously Important Person. Many lawyers worry that stepping away from a leadership role or reducing their workload will somehow diminish their relevance.

For some lawyers, that fear becomes a powerful barrier to change.

### Life Doesn't Always Respect Your Timeline

One lesson that has become increasingly clear to me is that life rarely unfolds according to the timetable we create.

Many lawyers tell me they will think about succession planning "someday."

The problem is that someday often arrives unexpectedly.

Health events, family responsibilities, caregiving obligations, burnout, changes in firm leadership, or simply a growing realization that the work is no longer satisfying can force decisions that have been postponed for years.

One lawyer I worked with had become increasingly unhappy as a litigator. He had spent years building a successful practice but found the work less fulfilling than it had once been. He had begun exploring opportunities with a nonprofit organization and was considering a transition.

Then he experienced a cardiac event that landed him in the hospital.

The next day, he gave notice to his partners.

His story is unusual only in its details. I have heard many variations of the same theme. Significant life events often clarify priorities that we have been postponing. The pandemic was one of these events.

That is one reason I encourage lawyers to start thinking about their next chapter long before they need to make a decision.

In many cases, the question is not whether change is coming. The question is whether we begin preparing before circumstances force the decision.

### What Has Surprised Me Most

Perhaps the biggest surprise I've had over the past five years is how few lawyers actually want to stop working altogether.

When I first began focusing on these issues, I assumed that most lawyers were trying to figure out how to leave practice.

Instead, I have found that many are looking for ways to continue working while shedding the parts of practice they no longer enjoy.

One lawyer I interviewed gradually reduced his workload over a five-year period while transitioning clients to younger partners. During that time, he increased his volunteer work, explored graduate programs, and developed interests outside the office.

Another lawyer I wrote about shifted from private practice into public service after a successful career in a large firm.

A corporate lawyer I worked with wanted to spend more time serving on boards and with grandchildren while remaining professionally engaged.

Another attorney transitioned from litigation toward mediation and mentoring younger lawyers.

What struck me then, and continues to strike me now, is that these lawyers were not running away from work. They were redesigning their lives to spend more time on the activities they found meaningful and less time on those they found draining.

### New Models for the Next Stage

Once lawyers realize they do not have to choose between practicing law full-time and walking away completely, a wide range of possibilities emerges.

Some lawyers move into of-counsel roles. Others reduce their workload while continuing to serve a select group of clients. Some transition into mediation, consulting, board service, teaching, or mentoring. Increasingly, I am seeing lawyers create portfolio careers that combine several of these activities.

The goal is not necessarily to stop working. The goal is to spend more time doing work that remains meaningful while reducing the activities that have become draining.

I am also seeing more solo and small firm lawyers merge their practices into larger organizations. In many cases, they are not looking to leave the profession, at least not right away. They are simply looking to hand off the parts of practice that no longer energize them.

For some, that means offloading tasks such as drafting, dealing with discovery disputes, reviewing endless volumes of information, or constantly having to market the firm. For others, it means shedding the burdens of managing staff, technology, recruiting, collections, and firm operations.

These arrangements often allow them to continue doing what they enjoy most—maintaining client relationships, providing strategic advice, or mentoring younger lawyers—while leaving the rest to others.

For many, that is a more attractive option than either maintaining the status quo or walking away completely.

### The Remote Work and AI Revolutions

Technology has also dramatically expanded the number of ways lawyers can design their next chapter.

Videoconferencing platforms existed long before the pandemic, but it took a global disruption to normalize their use. Today, I have several clients who divide their time among multiple homes depending on the season. Others have relocated closer to children or grandchildren while maintaining active practices. Many continue serving clients from locations that would have been impractical a decade ago.

Artificial intelligence (AI) may have an even greater impact. While much of the discussion focuses on disruption, I have become increasingly interested in how AI may extend careers. In my own practice, AI has dramatically increased my efficiency, allowing me to spend less time on administrative tasks and more time helping clients. Rather than making experienced professionals obsolete, these tools may enable many of us to remain productive and engaged longer than we once imagined.

For some lawyers, AI represents disruption. For others, it represents leverage. The difference may depend less on the technology itself and more on a lawyer's willingness to adapt.

### Letting Go Remains the Hard Part

Regardless of how these changes impact individual lawyers (some do not want to navigate learning new technology), one challenge remains remarkably consistent—many lawyers struggle with letting go.

Some have difficulty transitioning client relationships. Others believe no one can serve their clients as effectively as they can. Some remain financially anxious despite being financially secure. Others fear losing status, structure, or identity.

I have also seen lawyers stay longer than they intended because they had not adequately prepared the next generation to assume responsibility for key client relationships.

The lawyers who seem happiest in their next stage are often those who begin experimenting early. They cultivate interests outside work. They develop relationships and activities that are not dependent on their law practice. They test new possibilities before they need them.

They do not wait until they have all the answers.

They start with small experiments and allow the future to unfold.

### Résumé Virtues and Eulogy Virtues

In my original article, I referenced David Brooks's distinction between résumé virtues and eulogy virtues.

The résumé virtues are the accomplishments that define our professional success. The eulogy virtues are the qualities people remember when our lives are over.

I find that distinction even more meaningful today.

Many of the lawyers I work with have already achieved significant professional success. They have built practices, generated substantial income, led organizations, and earned the respect of their peers.

The challenge now is deciding how they want to spend the years ahead.

- How do they want to contribute?
- What legacy do they want to leave?
- How do they want to be remembered?

These questions become increasingly important as lawyers gain the freedom to make choices based on purpose rather than necessity.

### The New Question

For many years, the central question was often, "When should I retire?"

Today, I think there is a better question.

How do I want to spend the next ten, 15, or 20 years?

For some lawyers, the answer will involve retirement.

For others, it will involve teaching, mentoring, consulting, mediation, board service, public interest work, travel, family, hobbies, or some combination of those pursuits.

For many, it will involve continuing to practice law, but in a different way.

The most successful transitions I have observed rarely involve walking away from everything. More often, they involve selectively letting go of the parts of professional life that no longer serve them while preserving the parts that continue to provide meaning, purpose, intellectual stimulation, and connection.

The question is no longer whether change is coming. The question is whether you are preparing for it.

Five years ago, I was asking many of these questions myself. Today, I have a clearer understanding of what I want the next chapter to look like, and I'm actively living it. I do not want to stop working. I want to continue doing work that I find meaningful while creating greater flexibility and freedom in how I live.

Many of the lawyers I speak with are arriving at a similar conclusion.

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