

Talking about love

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“I was tingly and nauseous all over. I was either in love or I had smallpox.”

- Woody Allen

Feb. 14 is a day about love. It’s a day to step back and reflect on what is really important to us — in our personal lives, our love lives and, yes, even in our professional lives.

As far as the latter, finding what we “love” about practicing law is not always easy, whether you’re a seasoned practitioner or a relatively new attorney.

Tough love

No matter where you are in your career path and what you do for a living, you know about tough love. If there’s one good thing (and probably the only good thing) to happen as a result of the post-2008 economy, in my view, it’s that very few people feel “entitled” anymore.

Pre-2008, I knew many law students and new law school graduates who felt confident that they had done everything right. They aced their classes in school and found legal work experience during their summers and during the year. They played the game, but somewhere in the middle, the other side refused to play anymore and took home the ball.

As law firm clients started to demand better value, law firm management almost everywhere was forced to call the game.

After 2008, most of the fielders left deserted on the bases still hoped to play. Some expected generous Big Law offers of employment because they had done everything right.

While the market has slowly and steadily made positive strides, the robust days of pre-2008 are gone. In 2014, students in the top 10 percent from the best law schools are still scratching their heads, trying to make sense of a slowly rebounding market that largely still fails to reward so many.

By now, we all know too well about tough love.

To pay the bills, job seekers in most every industry have needed to leave behind their own career goals, to some degree, in order to creatively consider and fulfill a prospective employer’s needs. They’ve prioritized the ability to work somewhere over the prospect of fulfilling their own professional dreams.

The positive here is that we have all become more appreciative of the jobs we have, even if they’re not perfect. In today’s world, we have to fight for what we want more than ever; nothing comes easy.

Yes, it’s market forces that have wildly run amuck, leaving the legal world’s pendulum far from its pre-2008 center. OK. We’re listening now.

Given this “new normal,” as coined by legal muses Patrick Lamb and Paul Lippe, how will lawyers choose to embrace what market forces have created for us, make a living and rekindle love in our profession?

Seasoned attorneys looking for love

**"When we played softball, I'd steal second base, feel guilty and go back."
-Woody Allen**

Years back, you may have been attracted to law school for many reasons. What inspired you to apply in the first place?

If your goals have changed, do you enjoy your practice today? If you are not practicing now in the area that once had you smitten, do you still have interest in that area? Does your heart skip a beat when considering expanding or retooling your practice? If so, is it possible for you to grow your practice in this area? Specifically, is your practice area in demand in 2014?

Some attorneys find themselves retooling every day, stretching and mastering new skills in growing practice areas. The trick here is to recognize what you don't know and when it may be time to look for help from a seasoned practitioner in the area.

In 2014, when a senior attorney talks to me, looking to retool or rekindle his or her feelings of why he or she went to law school, my focus for him or her centers first on the gut — that pit in the stomach that develops on Sunday nights. My initial goal is to find different ways to combat that pit in the short and long runs.

No doubt, it can be challenging to transition to a new practice area. Today's razor-thin job market boasts fewer jobs and more competition than in recent history. The attraction to law that once inspired many to attend law school, learn and master the Socratic method, pass the bar, find a job and then practice has experienced rough brakes and breaks. It's tough out there when you're looking for love, a new job or practice you will love.

New attorneys looking for love (in all the wrong places?)

If you're a new attorney looking for a permanent position in law, have you narrowed your search to a few legal fields that have you head over heels? How long have you been looking for love? You may decide at some point in your job search that you will need to step back, at least partially. What kinds of positions are you seeing posted out there? And if you find positions, most require post-law school experience, right?

Finding a legal job in 2014, without prior work experience as a lawyer, is no small task. I suggest, however, starting to think counter-intuitively. If you can shift your focus from your own immediate needs to those of a prospective employer, who you don't even know yet, your professional crushes can more easily translate into a possible, real position.

How so? Even though you're not engaged in an argument, try looking at your job search through the eyes of a mediator. Mediators know that to resolve issues between disputing parties, they have to strike at the root “needs and interests” of each of the parties, peeling back the onion's layers to hit the core issues that matter the most to these individuals.

In this very laborious way, the parties in mediation eventually come to a better realization of their own needs. They also learn how to function with the other party in a way that meets those needs.

Finding full-time employment is really no different. It's not brain surgery (you did the hard work in law school already). Again, you may just need to take a step back.

As hard as it may be to try to ascertain what the needs and interests of a prospective employer may be — or simply those of an attorney you meet at Starbucks — if you are creative and a bit energetic, you can surely find out what keeps them up at night. It is important for you to ask them open-ended questions about what they do. You need to keep the conversation going over time, getting to know each other.

Your relationship is not one-way either, where they are simply helping you. You should make an effort to help them as well. Maybe their child is interested in attending your alma mater, and you can provide counsel?

Perhaps they'd like your input before an article is published? Maybe your new legal acquaintance has been under pressure to bring in more clients and don't have time to blog or get up to speed with social media? Possibly, that's just your thing. Perhaps you can share some great ways to bring in business, gleaned from your former professional life in sales?

Whether or not your coffee date has a job to offer, there may still be an opportunity for you to reach into your legal, sales or computer-savvy bag of tricks to help him or her sleep better at night. As your relationship continues (don't forget about him or her after just one meeting), it will be easier for you to see how you can hit a chord with him or her.

One sure-fire conversation stopper? That's the J-word — asking for a job. If you have ever gone on a first date with someone who clearly is ready to get hitched, how did that make you feel? Probably like bolting.

Your coffee date is no different. Don't end the conversation before it starts. Again, the more you zero in on, consider and find ways to fulfill your coffee date's needs — likely someone you may not even know — the closer you will be to finding real love. This is not infatuation anymore. You will be making your own luck, finding a way to fill a need and perhaps creating a new opportunity.

You may have what it takes right now to land a job you will love — even without the typically required legal experience. Try looking at industry needs overall and specific hot issues that most busy lawyers don't have the time to investigate or master. Think of ways that you can meet those needs, and you may also create a stepping-stone for yourself.

The sooner a job seeker learns that the job search is all about a prospective employer, the sooner he or she will be hired. Remember Woody Allen: when it comes to life and love, "eighty percent of success is showing up."

-- Nancy Mackevich Glazer