

In our second article on changing legal specialism, *Marialuisa Taddia* speaks to careers advisers and solicitors who have taken the plunge to hear their experiences and tips

Starting over

For some it is redundancy. For others the hallowed path towards partnership appears strewn with potholes. It may simply be a question of lifestyle. Whatever the motive, many lawyers are reshaping their careers, either by switching specialism, leaving private practice for in-house roles or abandoning the profession altogether.

The *Gazette*

has spoken to solicitors who have changed course – as well as legal career experts – for their insights.

Tight job market

First the bad news. Switching practice area is not easy. Julian Summerhayes, a former lawyer now advising law firms on the use of social media, says that during his 14 years in practice as a dispute resolution lawyer he saw few 'cross-discipline moves', such as

going from corporate law to family law, or from insurance law to employment law. Furthermore, switching has become harder since the start of the recession: 'Before 2008 there was more evidence of people switching specialism. But the job market is tight at the moment.' He adds that firms are looking for a fast return on investment and want recruits to hit the ground running.

Simon Broomer, also a former solicitor and since 2001 director of CareerBalance, a City-based consultancy that advises barristers and solicitors on changing career direction, says: 'The structural changes within the

profession mean that there is much more emphasis on specialism now.' Broomer believes that this creates difficulties for newly qualified solicitors, who are pushed into narrow specialisms by firms, particularly in the City. 'If there is great demand for acquisition finance lawyers or derivative lawyers this is where they are going to end up.' This means that law firms are less flexible when it comes to people wanting to switch.

Nevertheless, solicitors can and do make the move. Says Sarah Fulbrook, a legal headhunter at Deacon Search: 'A lot depends on the change you want to make. If you want to move, for example, from banking law to restructuring law, or from corporate to commercial law, it can be easier to do it within the same City law firm, provided there is internal support for the switch.'

Your employer may not be supportive, especially given the tough economic times. But if things are not overly busy in your department, you could offer to help out in an area of the firm you are interested in. That way

you can get some brownie points for thinking about boosting the firm's revenue and this also enables you to get some experience in other areas,' says Judith Perkins, chair of the Junior Lawyers Division of the Law Society.

But whatever the circumstances, to switch you may need to change employer, which may mean going to a smaller firm. Broomer points to a recent example of a lawyer he advised who returned to work

Continued on page 12



CHANGING SPECIALISM

Case study corporate to family

Sarah Fulbrook trained with Eversheds, qualifying with the firm as a corporate lawyer in 2001. Three years later, she requalified as a family lawyer, and most recently worked at the London office of Manches.

Fulbrook says: 'I did not enjoy corporate law. Unfortunately this happens to a lot of trainees who are not necessarily enamoured with the areas of law that they are qualifying into.' Not wanting to build up an 'enormous debt', she took a law school sponsorship from a large firm. 'Many people are channelled into commercial law because the large firms offer financial support to enable them to get through their CPE and LPC studies.'

Fulbrook explains that training contracts are geared towards specialisation in order to facilitate the move into a job the sponsoring firm wants to fill: 'I specialised in this area without thinking too much about the long-term consequences.'

Fulbrook's switch also required her to leave her firm. When she decided to move to family, many large commercial firms had cut back on private client work.

Fulbrook wrote to law firms, setting out 'very concisely why I would enjoy family law'. You have to be 'very persuasive', she says.

She had no practical experience of family law but some knowledge, as it was one of her law degree electives. 'I also spoke to many people, for example matrimonial lawyers, to find out as much as possible about what it was like in practice and I read a lot about family law,' she says.

Fulbrook did not immediately go to work for Manches. She started at ASB Law, a regional law firm with offices in Surrey and Kent: 'I kept an open mind and had to take a salary cut, but it was worth doing. I was very lucky to find a firm that was willing to take a punt on me.'

A strong academic record helps too – she graduated from University College London and did her LPC at the College of Law in York – and training with a well known City law firm was a real plus. 'With enough determination and an open mind, it is definitely achievable,' she adds.

Sarah Fulbrook is now a legal headhunter for Deacon Search, a London-based firm that specialises in partner appointments. She stopped practising in 2007, deciding to switch to recruitment for lifestyle reasons. However, having experienced two very different areas of law, she feels well equipped to do her job.



some people find it quite daunting to make the move.' He adds: 'It's just a question of sitting down and doing some book work alongside some practical training. All lawyers have done that already. It is not beyond them intellectually.'

However, Summerhayes has some words of caution: 'If you are doing it for the money, or if you think there may be more work available in one area in the future, I would question that. Every area of law will at some stage come under pressure.'

To make a success of things, says the JLD's Perkins, the most important thing is commitment: 'You have to demonstrate an understanding of the practice area you want to go into and the type of client you will be dealing with. Showing an enthusiasm for that will tie everything else in together.'

Moving in-house

Increasingly, solicitors are leaving private practice for an in-house role (see case study, opposite).

CareerBalance's Broomer notes that over half of his lawyer clients are considering this move. 'The conditions of work, particularly in the City firms, are not so appealing now to young lawyers. They are not attracted by a partnership and are fed up with the long-hours culture and the kind of relentlessness of working in a very competitive City law firm environment.'

Broomer notes: 'Ten or so years ago in-house was seen as a place for second-rate lawyers who could not make it in a private practice. That's changed. Now the opportunities are growing, in-house jobs are better rewarded and they give you a career progression.'

The JLD's Perkins says: 'People are becoming more interested in in-house positions for a number of reasons – variety of work on offer, work-life balance and stability of employment. And as you are part of a business you are seeing the impact of your work on the business's profits and losses.'

However, there is a downside. Martin Chivers, director of Career Legal notes: 'When it comes to pay reviews, you are a cost to the business. Your salary will not necessarily go up every year as it does in private practice, just because you are one year more qualified. If you want a pay rise you need to ask for it and show the

Continued from page 11

after a nine-year career break to do family law, having previously practised as a commercial litigator. 'She turned over a completely new leaf because she was not embedded in a practice somewhere,' says Broomer.

So how do you prepare for the switch? Try pro bono work, suggests the JLD's Perkins: 'There is a lot of work on the business side of things, assisting small charities that don't have money to pay corporate legal advisers.' Other forms of unpaid work are beneficial, for example shadowing solicitors who practise in your chosen area, observes Broomer.

Taking a hit to income in the short term will in any case be likely. Fulbrook says: 'You have to be prepared to take a pay cut at the beginning and a step back in terms of PQE level.'

External retraining courses are also useful. Kathryn Harwood, partner and head of wills and estate planning at Napthens in Preston, says: 'Research what qualifications you can undertake and what retraining is available. Gaining

confidence in a new area is about making sure that you are being trained properly and that there is a secure foundation for what you are doing.'

The JLD, in association with the The College of Law, offers retraining courses. And there are free seminars run by chambers. 'Barristers will always be more than happy to answer any questions you have over a glass of wine afterwards,' says Perkins.

Also, consider raising your profile by writing articles on the chosen discipline, or via social networking, for example LinkedIn. 'I encourage my clients to look at the specialist interest groups and join in the discussions. It is a very good way of making contact with people in a particular field,' says CareerBalance's Broomer.

Finding out as much as possible about the new area of law is important. Fulbrook says: 'Talk to everyone you know, including friends and family. You have to be sure that the grass is likely to be greener for you.'

Nick Jarrett-Kerr, visiting professor at Nottingham Law

School, recommends secondments – for example, with a bank or institution to gain experience in the relevant sector. For less experienced lawyers, another route is becoming a Professional Support Lawyer (PSL): 'That would give you experience and allow you to build up expertise in your chosen area.' Doing paralegal work for a while in the chosen sector may also be useful, experts say.

Remember that many of your existing skills will be transferable, says Napthens' Harwood, who moved from family law to wills and estate planning. She says: 'I think there is a correlation between family, and wills and estate planning work as you have to have good interpersonal skills to deal with both.'

There are also parallels between commercial litigators and family lawyers. Both have to produce fairly detailed witness statements, adds Broomer, who concludes: 'It's not rocket science. Quite often you sit in these large law firms and you look around you and you think everybody is a fountain of knowledge in their own area and

CHANGING SPECIALISM

Case study property to in-house

Annalisa Checchi was a four year-qualified property solicitor at Withers when she was made redundant in 2009. She was unemployed for 10 months before finding an in-house position at residential property investors Regis Group plc as head of their legal department. Then, in February 2010, Checchi joined business services company Liberata UK Limited as legal counsel.

Checchi completed her training and qualified into property with West End law firm Gordon Dadds in 2004. However, she wanted to pursue corporate commercial law at the time, but was not able to find any openings; partly, she believes, because she was trained in a West End firm.

Before moving to Withers, in April 2006 she joined another West End law firm, Jeffrey Green Russell, working in its real estate department for a year.

'There was always the feeling that I would not necessarily be satisfied with just focussing on area of law,' Checchi says, adding that she had a strong interest in business, stemming from her background in a family of business people.

Checchi sees her redundancy as an 'opportunity' finally to do what she wanted – move in-house. 'In private practice you have the divide between you and the client, you are not necessarily in the thick of it. Whereas working in-house you are employed by your client. It is much more "hands-on" and it is very challenging because you can be asked many different things.'

Her job has included negotiating commercial agreements, issuing County Court claims and advising on compliance issues. Checchi also had to get up to speed with EU and domestic public procurement regulations, intellectual property and employment law.

One advantage of being in-house is better work-life balance: 'You have much more ability to manage yourself and your own work. We all have laptops and we can work from home if we need to. In a law firm, you have to be seen to be there and to be working.'

Any downside? Her small team of two solicitors has no secretarial support and therefore they need to be competent at typing, she says.

Checchi would not consider going back to private practice. She fears being trapped as a property solicitor again. And she believes that the traditional law firm model, with the advantages of partnership, may have had its day.

value you added to the business in the last 12 months.'

Chivers adds: 'Normally in private practice you have access to PSLs and paralegals and all sorts of infrastructure. With in-house, often there are two or three solicitors and a secretary and that's it.'

So what other skills and personal qualities are needed for the role?

You must be happy dealing with people who are not lawyers, says Chivers. In addition to commercial nous, a would-be in-house lawyer must also show people management and business development skills. So, if you don't already possess it, gain some 'cutting-edge business exposure' by looking for opportunities to build personal relationships with clients, particularly entrepreneurs and people who run small businesses, or through a secondment, adds CareerBalance's Broomer. ■

● An extended version of this article, including more case studies and information on JLD/College of Law retraining courses, is available at lawgazette.co.uk/features.



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