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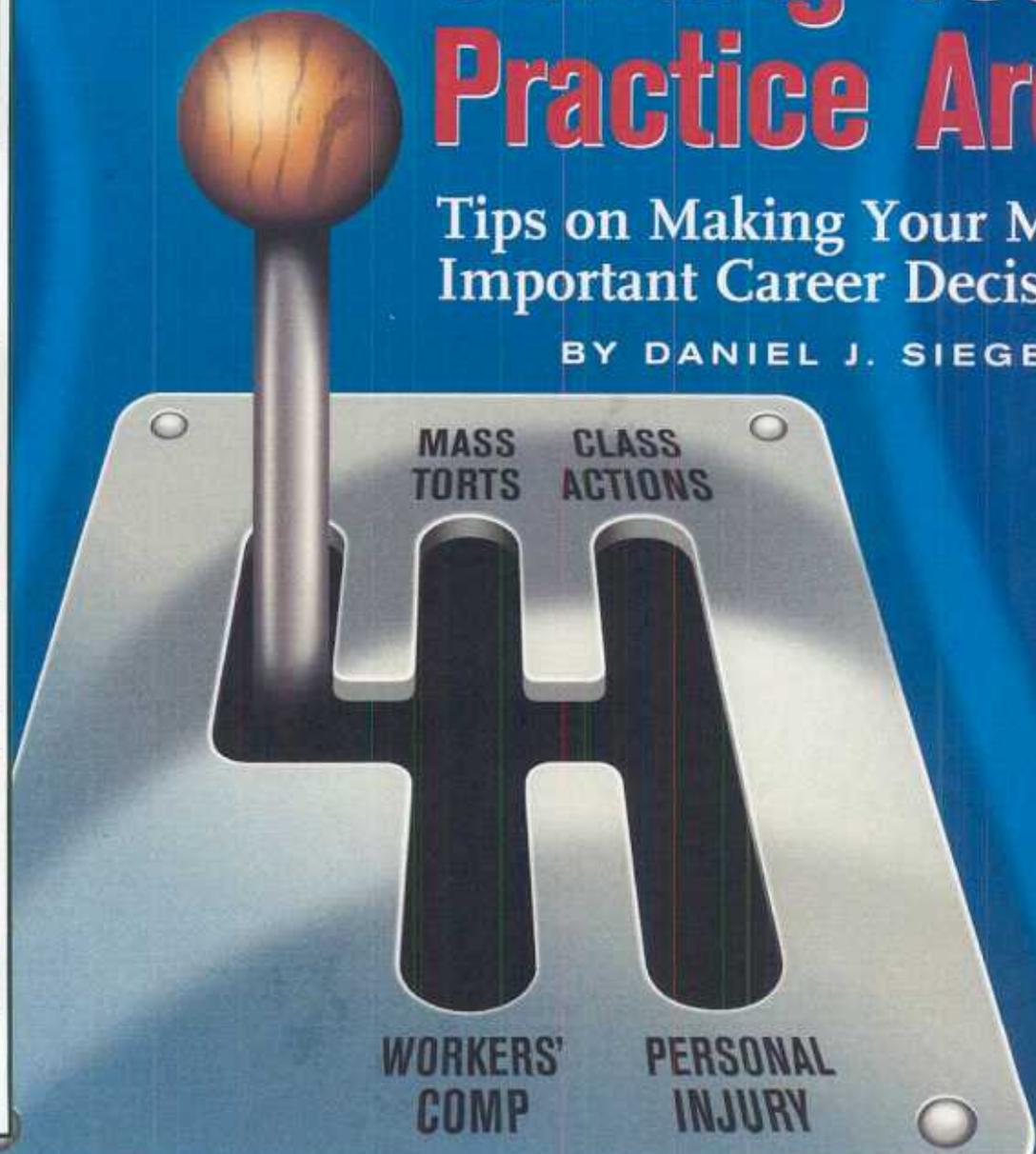
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SHIFTING YOUR AREA OF PRACTICE

BY DANIEL J. SIEGEL





It seemed like a simple idea. Not only did I want to change jobs, but I also wanted to change my practice area. Never did I anticipate the obstacles. Eventually, two years after deciding to shift courses, I reached my goal and proved that, despite what people say, you can overcome the way you're stereotyped and change your legal career.

I learned a lot along the way. I learned to be patient, and I learned that placement firms are not always the best resource when trying to change the type of law you practice. I also learned that you must network, network, network.

It helps to have some historical perspective about how I went from a lawyer whose practice focused primarily on workers' compensation and personal injury cases to one who now handles mass torts, class actions and pharmaceutical litigation. During my third year of law school, a personal injury law firm hired me as a law clerk and in 1984, upon graduation and passing the bar, as an attorney, handling automobile accident cases. Life was miserable. Two years later, and just three weeks after my wedding, the firm and I separated, with me seeking greener pastures. At that point, the only options suggested were with other personal injury firms.

My search led to Senior Judge Ethan Allen Doty, who was still on the bench and had known me for about fifteen years. He suggested calling a small plaintiff's personal injury firm, which hired me. Life was good. Here was a job with the opportunity to work largely on my own, handling the firm's workers' compensation practice. In addition, I was heavily involved in the office's traditional automobile and slip-and-fall practice, with some complex cases mixed in, thus augmenting my litigation experience.

While I grew personally and professionally (by 1998, the workers' compensation caseload had grown dramatically), I became bored and felt as though my practice had lost its intellectual luster. I was torn. My salary was good, I was a partner and well known in the legal community (becoming co-chair of the Philadelphia Bar Association's Workers' Compensation Section in 2000), yet change was becoming essential.

At a crossroads about whether to leave or spend the rest of my career doing what had become boring, I chose the former. I explored many possibilities: joining other firms, starting my own practice or working with friends who were attorneys. Each option seemed to focus on continuing to handle workers' compensation and personal injury cases, which no longer interested me. My goal then was to utilize my litigation experience and handle more complex cases, like class actions and mass torts. What I did not know was how to change my career in midstream. I tried everything, or so it seemed.

Networking initially led to dead ends. Legal placement firms were not interested. One placement firm, whose senior partner I have known for years, never responded after receiving my resume. Another firm said they would get back to me. They did not, at least not until I made repeated calls, and only then was I told that none of their clients was interested.

Over time, I became more bored and restless and realized that a move was needed sooner rather than later—sooner now being almost two years after beginning the search. Networking again, I called a law school classmate and confidant, Marc Raspanti, explaining that it was time to make a move and asking for his help. He delivered. Less than a week later, Marc told me to fax my resume to Joel Feldman, managing partner at Anapol, Schwartz, Weiss,

Cohan, Feldman and Smalley, one of the firms that was, as it turns out, on my short list of firms for which I really wanted to work.

Unbeknownst to me, Joel Feldman discussed my availability with Bernard Smalley, an Anapol Schwartz partner who knew me through trial lawyer activities. Bernie endorsed my joining the firm. In addition, Marc assuaged Joel's concern that I would not fit in because the firm's lateral hires generally had significantly fewer years of experience.

Joel Feldman called about a week later, asking where I was. Apparently, someone had arranged a lunch interview with Howard Levin (another Anapol Schwartz partner), Joel and me, but no one had informed me. The call shocked me, forcing me to improvise a story to explain the sudden appointment to my old office. The interview appeared to go well, but having been summoned, unprepared, for the meeting, I was concerned.

A few days later, Joel called to inquire about my interest in working with Sol Weiss, who heads the firm's class action and pharmaceutical practice. He explained that Sol had a "strong personality," and that he (Joel) had discussed my ability to work with strong personalities with Marc Raspanti, who felt that there would not be any problem. I welcomed the opportunity, immediately set up an interview and met with Sol. He offered me the job, which I accepted, joining the firm on January 1, 2001.

Although nervous about making the transition from workers' compensation and personal injury to class actions and mass torts, my fears were unwarranted. The job felt right from day one. The cases were fascinating, the firm's

atmosphere professional and thoroughly encouraging. I adapted to my position quickly and have never looked back. Perhaps the key was the enhanced level of respect I received, not only from opposing attorneys, but also from within the firm. One friend commented that I no longer had a "permanent migraine" on my face, and many commented about my newly found ease and confidence.

As an aside, after joining Anapol Schwartz, one of the placement firms that I had consulted called to offer congratulations and to inform me that the firm was one of its clients. Of course, they had never contacted Anapol Schwartz on my behalf because they, like almost everyone else, considered me a workers' compensation attorney and were unwilling to assist in a career change.

I learned many lessons in my job search. First, network, network, network. Second, do not change jobs for the sake of change. If possible, a job should "feel" right before you make the change. Third, do not assume that placement firms can help; when you want to change the focus or substance of your career, these firms do not seem to have the vision to help. Fourth, be patient. Although the luxury of time was on my side, it was not a substitute for the misery of boredom. And finally, network, network, network. ■

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