

A woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing a black coat over a red top, stands on a brick building's steps. She is smiling and looking towards the camera. In the background, two people are walking up the stairs towards a glass entrance. The building is made of red brick with large windows. The scene is outdoors with some bare trees and a clear sky.

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

Weary Attorneys Forge
Careers Outside BigLaw

By Erin Coe | January 3, 2017

Liz Brown left a career in BigLaw and now teaches business law at Bentley University.

Liz Brown liked being a patent litigator in her 20s. She enjoyed writing snarky letters to opposing counsel and had a knack for explaining complex patent issues to a lay jury. But by her 30s, the Fish & Richardson PC partner had grown weary of the constant state of being on call and the adversarial nature of the job. She became increasingly anxious about going to work. She slept next to her BlackBerry every night and felt sick whenever she had to answer email from other partners.

Making partner was like being in “a pie-eating contest where the prize was more pie,” she said. She worked hard to become partner, but once she achieved it, she realized she had to put in even more effort to establish origination fees and do what it would take to make equity partner. She felt successful, yet unfulfilled. It wasn’t long before she called it quits from the practice of law. For good.

“I think the law and I got married too young, and we grew in different directions,” said Brown, who is now an assistant professor of business law at Bentley University in Massachusetts. “I wanted to be proud of my life, and I wanted my career to be something I looked back on and said, ‘I did a good thing,’ not just ‘I made a lot of money.’”

Just over a year out of law school, Casey Berman landed a plum in-house counsel position at Workshare, a document security software company where he was overseeing licensing, corporate deals and litigation for the company in San Francisco. But he felt he was always reacting to what salespeople and other executives wanted him to do rather than tapping into his own creative spirit.



Casey Berman authors a blog to help disgruntled lawyers transition out of the profession.

The tipping point came a few years later when he was on a company retreat in London, and he put on his name tag with a job title that read “admin.”

“I didn’t like that title,” said Berman, who is now a director at marketing strategy firm Schireson Associates. “It wasn’t a position that showed I was creative or proactive. That was a trigger for me to do something else. The universe was telling me, ‘Here, this is what we’re going to call you so that you get going.’ That was in April [2004]. By July, I was gone.”

Brown and Berman are among a stream of attorneys who are saying goodbye to the practice of law every year to embark on new career paths. Some are starting their own businesses and embracing their entrepreneurial sides. Others are becoming writers and artists. And some are

finding new ways to serve the legal industry as attorney recruiters or law professors.

The reasons for moving on from the law are as varied as those who leave. Some cite the rigid structure of the legal industry, with its long hours, increasing pressure on developing business and tougher climb to partnership in a time when the industry remains volatile and competition fierce. Or they might say the choice was a personal one, where they wanted a career that was more meaningful, allowed them more balance in their life or made the best use of their strengths. The transition beyond the law isn't always a smooth one. Often there are no clear signs pointing to the next big thing. But most attorneys say they'd still go to law school if they had to do it over, and have found their legal background has helped them be more nimble as they move into new careers.

Breaking From BigLaw

According to a study of 5,000 attorneys who passed the bar in 2000 and were surveyed over the next 12 years, nearly 67 percent of female and 75 percent of male respondents started out in private practice in 2003, but by 2012, less than 40 percent of women and 49 percent of men were still in private practice. The most common destination for those leaving private law firms was to work at a business organization, either as inside counsel or in a position that did not involve the practice of law, according to the study, known as *After the J.D.*, by the American Bar Foundation and the National Association for Law Placement Foundation for Law Career Research and Education.

Who's Most Likely To Leave?

Women and minorities are more likely to leave the law altogether than other groups, according to the study by the American Bar Foundation and NALP Foundation.

Women overall make 80 percent of what men make, and while women are compensated about as much as men in government and nonprofit roles, they receive only 65 percent of what men earn in roles at private firms and businesses. Women also make partner at a lower rate and leave law firms at a greater rate, Nelson said.

Based on the foundations' new joint study of gender and racial bias in the legal workplace, African-American female attorneys experience the highest rates of social isolation and are the least likely to make partner. All male groups — Asian, black, white and Hispanic — make partner at a higher rate than their comparable female groups, Nelson said.

"We find that women, and especially women of color, are much more likely to feel isolated in the workplace, don't socialize with partners or other associates, don't get the mentoring they need and are not on committees," Nelson said. "There is a higher attrition rate for those who are more isolated."

About 20 percent of respondents overall were no longer practicing law by 2012. Of those lawyers, most — 38 percent — went into business, while 25 percent moved over to nonprofits and educational institutions and 19 percent started working for federal or state government agencies. Although the study focuses on individual attorneys, it's likely that the attrition rate at law firms is much higher than 20 percent and may be as high as 80 percent before partnership at some firms, particularly larger ones, said Robert Nelson, director emeritus of the American Bar Foundation.

“Attrition is a challenge for firms,” he said. “They would like to keep their most promising lawyers, but attrition has been part of their business model for a while.”

Often there is not just one reason why attorneys say goodbye to the law, but rather a multitude of factors. Sometimes they are dissatisfied with the way law firms are structured and the relentless demands from clients and other attorneys, or they may leave for personal reasons — attorneys’ interests change and they yearn to do something more satisfying.

Brown, 46, decided to go to law school because she wasn’t interested enough in numbers or blood to pursue a business or medical degree and because she had been told time and again she was good at arguing with people. After graduating, she worked as a litigator at several firms, including Morrison & Foerster LLP and Covington & Burling LLP, before ending up as a partner at Fish & Richardson in Boston. She excelled at being able to make complex inventions understandable to jurors during patent trials, but over her 12 years as a lawyer, she became disillusioned by the realities of working in the legal profession.

“Most people don’t appreciate how isolating it can be and how much time you spend in a room by yourself writing motions and fighting with other people,” she said. “Litigators may have gone into the law with the idea of being advocates, counseling clients and collaborating in a people-oriented profession, but most cases settle and most litigators never see trial in private practice. They are working around the clock and responding to discovery deadlines and motions. It can be soul-sucking work.”

At the same time, she was deeply conflicted because being a lawyer carried with it a connotation of success, identity and community, and she didn’t know what else she wanted to do.

“It’s very hard to give it up,” she said. “The law is a cushy life.”

But she realized that while she had colleagues who reveled in the adversarial nature of litigation, she was no longer one of them. The discomfort with her job only grew more pronounced when she became pregnant. She physically couldn’t put in the hours she was used to, and she found no easy way to reduce her workload.

“I asked my husband whether it was worth it to earn more money working at a job I didn’t like,” Brown said. “He and I agreed that the best mother is one who is happy with her work, and I did not think I would be that.”

Three months after her daughter was born in 2008, Brown was unable to reach a “workable agreement” with her firm and left the practice of law.



Amy Impellizzeri, a former Skadden lawyer, published her third book last month.

For some attorneys, it takes years to decide that the law is not for them.

After 13 years as a corporate litigator in New York City, Amy Impellizzeri went on a yearlong sabbatical in 2009 and then took a leave of absence that turned into three years. Only then was she ready to officially cut ties with the law.

When she received an offer from Skadden Arps Slate Meagher & Flom LLP after only a few years as a litigator, she thought she had struck it big. She initially was excited by working on high-profile litigation for the firm's mass torts department, but over time, she missed the autonomy she enjoyed at her previous smaller firm, Landman Corsi Ballaine & Ford PC, and found she had fewer opportunities to be creative.

"There was something ultimately that I felt was lacking in what I was doing, and I had this creative, entrepreneurial itch," said Impellizzeri, 46. "I made a decision to leave on a sabbatical for a year to see if the grass was indeed greener."

By the end of her sabbatical, she was working on the executive team of Hybrid Her, a startup for promoting women entrepreneurs, and writing her first fiction novel. She then received a leave of absence from Skadden, and during that time, she got a call from her agent who showed interest in Impellizzeri's book idea on lawyers leaving the law.



Impellizzeri signed copies of her latest book with her daughter Grace, age 8, by her side.

“That was my aha moment,” said Impellizzeri, author of “Lawyer Interrupted,” a guide for leaving the law. “It just made me realize that that was the book I wanted to write. The American Bar Association greenlighted it within two months. And while I researched and wrote it, I began to appreciate the versatility of the law degree ... and practicing law was not in my future anymore.” Impellizzeri released her second work of fiction, “Secrets of Worry Dolls,” in December, and her next fiction novel is slated for 2017. She also teaches creative writing workshops at the Yocum Institute for Arts Education in Pennsylvania.

Searching for Fulfillment

One theme running through the stories of many of the attorneys interviewed by Law360 about why they moved on from the law is they were on the hunt for happiness and fulfillment in their work, and they kept coming up short in their law practices.

Professionals used to view happiness and satisfaction in a career as a luxury. It was considered icing on the cake as they kept their heads down, put in their dues and paid back their debts. But those factors have become higher priorities for many in recent years.

“Across industries, there is more of an expectation that people not just get a paycheck out of a job, but satisfaction, happiness and a good feeling about their contributions,” said Deborah Epstein Henry, founder of consulting firm Flex-Time Lawyers LLC. “What makes up an employee who is going to be promoted and retained is a more complex set of factors than what it used to be.” Lawyers aren’t known for being happy, and that can have a major impact on the people around them. While the general population has a 10 percent rate of depression, the rate is 28 percent among lawyers, according to a February study by the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the American Bar Association’s Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs.

Tips For Moving On

Lawyers who are feeling burnt out may be tempted to quit on a whim, but planning is important. If you’re considering moving on from the practice of law, these tips can help ensure you land on your feet.

- Identify which aspects of your work you love and which you don’t. “Getting that career assessment piece to get clarity drives the whole rest of the relaunch process,” said Carol Fishman Cohen, CEO and co-founder of career re-entry firm iRelaunch.

- Confront your fears about leaving the profession, whether it's the loss of identity or the impact on your finances. "You can align with another identity, like a vice president or CEO or entrepreneur; you don't need to stick with your identity as a lawyer for life," Berman said.
- Consider whether a smaller firm or solo practice may be a better fit. "Attorneys at small and midsized firms tend to stick it out," Barnes said. "They like the work and feel an important connection to clients."
- Pursue your passions on the side first. "If you want to explore writing, write on the side; if you are feeling entrepreneurial, start your own business or your own website and cultivate it on the side," Impellizzeri said.
- Build your network. "Become a member of a professional association, attend events, get involved in planning events, contact people in the field and build relationships with them that has nothing to do with your job search," Cohen said.
- Don't go it alone. "You either want to be going through this process with a friend or group of people," Cohen said. "Set up a weekly meeting or phone call so you remain accountable for the goals you set yourself for the prior week."

"Lawyers can be miserable people who are not supportive, and it can be a drag to work with people who hate their lives," Brown said.

Changes within the legal industry have created a tougher work environment at law firms. It's harder to make and stay a partner as firms narrow the top of the pyramid and put a greater emphasis on productivity; there is increased pressure on lawyers to develop business and not just focus on doing good work; clients have more leverage to be selective with the law firms with which they work and the rates they pay, which can lead to lawyers working more for less and becoming overburdened; and lawyers are tethered to technology and expected to be on call for clients and partners.

"As the business of law firms changes and becomes more about the bottom line, the lack of flexibility will continue to drive people to leave in waves for various reasons, such as they are no longer a fit for what the demands are or they don't enjoy it and want to look for something else," said Sarah Van Steenburg, managing director of Major Lindsey & Africa LLC's associate practice group in Washington, D.C.

But just as the industry is facing more competition and more demands from clients, the lawyers coming into the profession are changing, too. Because the partnership track has become harder, there is less incentive to stick it out for years to get the brass ring. And many attorneys, particularly millennials, are staying in their jobs for shorter periods of time. Getting more money as they work under heightened billable hour expectations isn't as much of a draw as flexibility in their careers and engaging in meaningful work that contributes to their communities.

For some, it comes down to a question of size. While working at BigLaw may be competitive, prestigious and lucrative, it is not allowing some attorneys to build enough of a relationship with clients to make their work satisfying.

"If attorneys have less of a connection with clients, the less they feel like practicing law, and the

less they feel like practicing law, the more likely they are to leave,” said Harrison Barnes, managing director of BCG Attorney Search. “Attorneys who get into giant firms and are not coming into contact with clients are the people I see leaving the law the most.”

Instability in the legal marketplace also may be playing into decisions to leave the law, especially given attorneys’ tendency to be risk-averse. Corporate law departments are continuing to move work in-house, and demand for legal services is expected to remain flat in 2017.

“When the market was less volatile, people felt like they couldn’t make a change,” Henry said. “But after seeing people get pushed out because of the volatility in the market, lawyers may feel that their jobs are not as stable as they may think and that their decision to leave is less of a risk. Because there is so much more volatility in the career paths for lawyers, it may give them a silver lining of freedom and choice.”

The financial crisis in 2008 that forced many attorneys out of jobs and left law school graduates scrambling for work may have helped some attorneys realize that job options beyond practicing law are out there for those with a law degree.

“Lawyers were pushed out after the economy tanked, and they were finding other avenues and talking about them,” Impellizzeri said. “There was a fundamental shift in awareness that ‘wait a minute, [being a lawyer] may not be all I have to do.’”

Repurposing the J.D.

Even if lawyers are not satisfied at the moment with the particular job they have, they are still happy with their decisions to go to law school and the doors that their Juris Doctor degrees have opened for them, researchers have found.

Twelve years after passing the bar, 76 percent of respondents reported they were strongly or moderately satisfied with their decision to become a lawyer, and two-thirds of respondents said they would go to law school if they had to do it over again, according to the study by the NALP Foundation and American Bar Foundation.

Berman, 43, realized only after he began classes at University of California, Hastings, College of the Law, that he wasn’t all that invested in a law career, but pushed through anyway, waiting for something to click. He graduated in 1999 and eventually found himself managing legal matters for Workshare, a software company that develops document review solutions. It was a job that many people wanted, but it didn’t suit him.

“I was too reactive ... and I was negotiating agreements and doing things that the sales people wanted me to do,” he said. “I wanted to do deals, create things, think of marketing campaigns and be a high-level strategy thinker.”

Since leaving the practice of law in 2004, he has launched a series of ventures: building Gytha Mander, a high-end men’s fashion line that he sold in 2006; co-founding Kid Friendly San Francisco, an online guide for family activities in the city; and creating the blog Leave Law Behind to help disgruntled lawyers transition out of the profession. In addition to working at marketing firm Schireson, he is the managing director of San Francisco investment bank Berman Capital LLC. When Berman thinks back on his legal career, he’s happy he did it. Being a lawyer and then realizing that this wasn’t a career he wanted was a turning point for him.

“Being in that spot gave me confidence to know what I wanted to do — something else,” he said. “Attorneys may feel down and depressed for wanting to leave the law, but there is a bona fide way to get out. It takes work and thinking in a different way ... but if the will and momentum are there, anyone can do it.”



Beverly Watson felt dissatisfied with the life-work balance as an associate at Shearman & Sterling.

Beverly Watson, who is currently in between jobs, said she left her career as an associate at Shearman & Sterling LLP’s project development and finance practice in 2005 not because she disliked being a lawyer, but because her other passions — being an entrepreneur and working on international development — were stronger. She also got the sense that law firm life wasn’t flexible enough.

Watson, 44, considered several of the female partners in her practice area as mentors, but as she looked at what they gained in their careers and what they gave up in their personal lives, she wasn’t interested in making the same kind of sacrifice.

“I knew I wanted a life that had balance,” she said. “I wanted a family and kids, and most of the partners I knew in the New York office didn’t have kids or were single. They worked crazy hours, sometimes working until 2 or 3 in the morning, and then they would be back in the office at 7. ... When I asked myself, ‘What does success look like in a law firm?,’ it didn’t feel like it was success. I felt like there was more.”

Watson said her legal training has consistently helped her navigate different business ventures since leaving at the end of her fourth year as an associate at Shearman. She went from private practice to working for the Millennium Challenge Corp., a quasi-governmental organization that helps alleviate poverty through economic development, as a director in Mozambique. While she worked on the business side to create a \$500 million project focused on infrastructure, agriculture development and private-sector engagement, she also found herself serving as a facilitator for keeping colleagues on the business side and lawyers at the organization on the same page.

Dealing with Mozambique law to implement some of the projects also became part of her job, and being a lawyer helped her identify the legal issues that needed to be resolved, identify local counsel and work with the legal team.

In 2007, she began her own company that led short-term international service trips to Mozambique, South Africa and Brazil as a way to help students get engaged in sustainability and poverty alleviation. Again, she leaned on her law degree as she raised funds for the company, sorted through employment laws for interns and consultants, and launched projects that had legal components, such as helping South Africans obtain organic gardening certificates so that they could increase their income and assisting a group in Brazil get its land rights recognized.

Where To Next?

Positions in academia, government, business, finance, recruiting and consulting are just some of the possibilities for attorneys seeking a new career.

Popular nontraditional career paths for attorneys include alternative dispute resolution counselor, privacy officer, compliance manager, e-discovery director, fraud investigator, public policy analyst, legal editor or publisher, and law technology expert.

Corporate lawyers may decide that instead of facilitating deals, they want to call the shots, and move over to the business side. Lawyers who have enjoyed serving as trusted counselors and problem-solvers may see potential in financial advising.

Lawyers' skills tend to fall in the categories of counseling, managing, advocating, writing, organizing and helping, Brown said. "Those talents and strengths can be used in lots of professions," she said.

Lawyers are also making second careers as writers, artists, project managers, psychotherapists, rabbis, career coaches and nonprofit executives.

Watson later became vice president of network relations at Laureate International Universities, where she worked with universities to collaborate on international projects, and then chief operating officer of education startup XQ Institute in Oakland, California, a position she left in August. She said she is currently exploring new social-impact entrepreneur opportunities.

"I use my legal training every day," she said. "Problem-solving, taking a lot of information and distilling it, and negotiating how to come up with win-win situations are skills I learned while in law school and practicing at a law firm, and they have made me a stronger businesswoman and a stronger communicator."

She also said those detail-oriented years as an associate where she ensured all the periods were in the right place in contracts and worked on complicated closings of deals with people in different time zones have given her a sharper eye. Even working into the wee hours of the morning broke her in for good.

"Because of my legal training, I know how to be effective, even at 1 and 2 a.m.," she said. "Those long hours [as an associate] prepared me to be a strong entrepreneur."

When Brown left her law firm, she "flailed around with no clue" for a year and a half before heading to a retraining program that initially provided her with the unhelpful advice that based on

her skill set, she'd be a great lawyer.

She gave a number of jobs a try, but many were false starts, like only realizing after training to be a fundraiser and receiving a second callback interview for a position at a private school that she just didn't like asking people for money. She also served as an executive director of an angel investor group that funded women-led startups, but that was on a part-time volunteer basis. Brown eventually landed a job teaching law to business students as an adjunct professor at Bentley University. The position was barely a paid internship and demanded a lot of work, but Brown loved it. Just as she succeeded at making inventions understandable to jurors sitting on a patent case, she found she excelled at explaining how the law works to people aspiring to be future business leaders.



Liz Brown teaches business law at Bentley College in Waltham, Mass. (Photo: Rebecca Bishop/Bentley University)

After a couple of years teaching courses, receiving glowing student evaluations and publishing academic articles, she became an assistant professor of business law at the university. That achievement came four years after leaving her firm, and she said she has transformed from someone who dreaded going to work to someone whose hardest part of the day is the few minutes before her class begins — she's that eager to start teaching.

"I'm a different person," she said. "I feel much better about my role in life. I'm a better daughter, wife, colleague and friend. I'm much more energetic, and I have more to give. I'm a nicer person than I was when I spent so much of my time unhappy."

She also works as a career coach for lawyers seeking a change, and in 2013, published a book she wished would have existed when she was seeking out new opportunities, “Life After Law: Finding Work You Love With the J.D. You Have.”

Despite unpleasant years toiling as a lawyer, Brown said she does not regret the time she spent practicing law.

“I don’t know how I would have lucked into this amazing career if I hadn’t had that experience [as a lawyer],” she said. “I really hope I do what I do forever.”

Impellizzeri has held a number of jobs that have not required a J.D. since leaving the practice of law — running a startup and working for an advocacy group to promote better work-life balance legislation — but she said her legal training was the differentiator that helped her be successful. She, like many of the former lawyers she interviewed for her book, said even if the practice of law was something they ultimately didn’t want to do, they were grateful they had earned their law degree and worked as lawyers.

“I feel like this is the natural evolution of my career,” she said. “I loved the time I practiced law, but this new journey is most fulfilling.”

Erin Coe is a feature reporter at Law360. She [recently wrote](#) about the gender-based pay gap at large law firms.

