



**Lowenstein Sandler's Women's Initiative Network
Podcast: Real Talk**

**Episode 42: Listen to Your Gut: Choosing the
Right Legal Career Trajectory**

[Megan Monson](#), [Diane Moss](#), [Leah Duggins](#), [Sarah Scott](#), [Patti Scott](#)

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Rachel Dikovics: Welcome to the Lowenstein Sandler podcast series, the Women's Initiative Network: Real Talk. I'm Rachel Dikovics, counsel in Lowenstein's White Collar Defense Practice Group and a member of the Women's Initiative Network at Lowenstein Sandler. Before we begin, please take a moment to subscribe to our podcast series at lowenstein.com/podcast or find us on iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, or SoundCloud. Now let's take a listen.

Megan Monson: Welcome to the Women's Initiative Network: *Real Talk*. I'm one of your hosts, Megan Monson, a partner in Lowenstein Sandler's executive compensation employment and benefits practice group. I'm joined today by a handful of my colleagues who I'll turn it over to introduce themselves. Diane?

Diane Moss: Good morning, Megan. Thank you. I'm Diane Moss, counsel in Lowenstein's emerging company's venture capital group, focusing on intellectual property, artificial intelligence, and commercial transactions. We're joined here by three guests, Sarah Scott, Leah Duggins, and Patti Scott. Can you each introduce yourselves?

Sarah Scott: Sure. I'm Sarah Scott. I'm Lowenstein's associate general counsel. Thanks so much for having me here. I'm excited to talk to you all.

Leah Duggins: Hello everyone. I'm Leah Duggins. I'm the legal counsel and administrative director for the litigation department here at Lowenstein. Thank you guys so much for having me.

Patti Scott: Hello, I'm Patti Scott, the firm's director of professional development. I've been here for 19 years, and I'm thrilled to be participating in this talk today.

Megan Monson: A legal career is a marathon, not a sprint, and not all legal careers look the same. There are many ways to leverage a law degree in creating your

professional path. At one or more stages of a career, you may find yourself meeting or wanting to reinvent yourself professionally.

Diane Moss: So, we've asked three of our colleagues to join us today to share some insight into their career paths and different ways that they have utilized their legal degree. Sarah, Leah and Patti, thank you again for joining us.

Megan Monson: So, to level set, can you share a little bit about your legal career journey? Leah?

Leah Duggins: Sure. I'm happy to. I started my legal career after law school at a small firm here in New Jersey where I handled commercial litigation and employment matters for mainly corporations and financial institutions. I did that for a few years and once I was about three to four years in, I felt it was time for me to find my next role. I was able to get great experience there because as I'm sure some of you know, when you're in a bit of a smaller firm, you get the experience that you may not get as early in a larger firm. So, I could have gone to and looked for an opportunity in a larger firm, but I really wanted to work at the attorney general's office. I just felt that it would really allow me to use my legal skills for the benefit of everyday citizens. So, I decided to apply to the attorney general's office and ultimately landed a role as a deputy attorney general in their legal affairs and employee relations unit.

Shortly after I started in that role, however, I was asked by Debra Edwards, who was the executive assistant attorney general at the time, which for those who may not know is the third in charge. So, you have the attorney general, then the first assistant attorney general, and then the executive assistant attorney general, and she asked me to work with her on special projects. So, I said, "Okay." And so, I worked with her on various special projects for the divisions that she managed. And after working in that capacity for a few months, I was promoted to special assistant to the attorney general. And in that role, you typically provide legal and operational guidance on a bunch of wide-ranging matters to the divisions that you handle. And so, my divisions were the Juvenile Justice Commission, which is where I actually first met Natalie Kraner and Alex Shalom because they were on the other side of the aisle. And the divisions were the Juvenile Justice Commission, the Equal Employment Opportunity Office, the Division on Civil Rights, and our Boxing Commission, which is very interesting.

And so, I did that for a few months and then in June of 2016, Christopher Porrino was sworn in as the 60th attorney general for the state of New Jersey. And shortly after he arrived, Debra Edwards approached me and

said that General Porrino wants to talk to you about a potential new role, which was very scary. And I'm thinking, what could this be and what could this role be that he's looking for me to do? So, I met with General Porrino, and he basically mentioned that he was looking for someone to be responsible for managing the office's community outreach initiatives. Each of the divisions within the Department of Law and Public Safety do a number of community outreach initiatives on their own. But what he felt was needed was someone on the executive level to be keeping an eye on all of those things and making sure that the messaging was clear, that the messaging was coordinated, that each division knew what the other divisions were doing, and if the state had initiatives that we felt were important to just make sure it aligned with what each of the divisions were doing on their own.

And so candidly, when we talk about why we make the decisions we make, at the time I'm thinking, I am an attorney and I'm doing a lot of policy work at this time, and even though I volunteer every now and then, the community outreach and engagement wasn't really in my specific set of skills. But I also felt that when the attorney general asked you to do something specific, you try it and you take it on and you don't be afraid. So, I stepped into the role and became the director of community programming and outreach statewide for the Department of Law and Public Safety. And ultimately you serve as a liaison to stakeholders across the state to connect them with the office's initiatives.

And so I did that for a little while and it just so happened that at the time that I was going to be leaving to go on maternity leave, it was toward the end of Christopher Porrino's tenure at the office of the attorney general because we knew a new administration would be coming in shortly. So, I actually left out on maternity leave at the office of the attorney general while Christopher Porrino was still the AG, and then he made his transition here to Lowenstein. And so, while I was actually still out on leave, he reached out to me and said, "I think there's a position you'd be really great for. It's actually similar to what you've been doing for us now across the state, and might you be interested in joining us at Lowenstein." And so, I won't go into too many details about the back and forth between Chris and I when he asked me that because I was a new mom, I had a set of twin boys, and I'm thinking, "This is a lot. I don't know if I'm going to be able to do it." But he, hard worker and good at what he does, he's very convincing and then that is how I joined Lowenstein in 2018 and have been in this role ever since.

Diane Moss: That's great, Leah, what a path. Sarah, can you share?

Sarah Scott: Sure. Happy to. Mine's much less interesting, I'm pretty sure. Or at least more straightforward. I started out at Patton Boggs MLAW 100 firm in the New Jersey office there doing the World Trade Center litigation. We were the defense counsel for the city and the contractors and spent a couple of years at Patton Boggs until the market fell out and the case settled, and they didn't need a Newark, New Jersey office anymore. So, I bounced around. I tried a couple of different firms. I went to two different firms. One a very, very small, I think six attorneys, one more of a midsize firm. I realized neither of them were a right fit for me, and I had felt very early on that I didn't think I was a partner track sort of lawyer. I had always sort of wondered what else was out there for me to do. And so, after two to three years of these littler firms that were not satisfactory to me, that weren't really doing what I wanted to do, I started looking for what else could I do with my law degree, and I found my way to Lowenstein.

Megan Monson: One of the points you made Sarah, I think, is really important that you recognize early on that making partner in a law firm wasn't your desired career path. And some people may not be as comfortable doing that self-reflection, especially early on. So, I think it's important for our listeners to use this as a reminder that you should always listen to our inner voice. We know ourselves the best, and there are a lot of different ways that you can have a meaningful, successful legal career.

Sarah Scott: Yeah.

Megan Monson: Patti, would you mind sharing your story?

Patti Scott: Happy to. My career journey began at a small firm in northern New Jersey where I started as an associate almost 30 years ago now. I was a defense litigation attorney, and I also counseled clients on employment matters. But some of my favorite matters were the section 1983 civil rights cases that I handled in federal court. I got a lot of experience early on with depositions and mediations and arbitrations and the civil rights cases got me into court often. I was promoted to partner in that smaller law firm, which ultimately then merged with a larger firm soon after I went in as a partner. And as we know, the integration of two law firms and their cultures and their expectations around client service requires intentionality and thoughtfulness. I had some concerns following that merger, and I decided to explore some new opportunities, but still as a practicing attorney. So, I went to a reputable recruiter to discuss a move to another law firm. Wasn't sure if I'd go in as a partner, wasn't sure what the role would be, but I was pretty set on a practicing position.

And while I was in her office one evening, and we had met on a number of occasions as she got to know me and tried to figure out what would be a good fit for me, phone rang. It was in the evening, and it was the then HR director of Lowenstein who called and said that after seven or eight months of searching on their own for a new professional development director, that they were giving the job search to the recruiter. So, the recruiter tells me about the opportunity. Never actually says to me, "would you want this job?" just dangles the bait, plants the seed. She'd met with me two or three times, so she knew me well, and the rest is history. By January 2006, I was the director of professional development for Lowenstein, where I've now been for 19 years, and I have spent far more of my career in professional development and human resources than I did as a practicing lawyer.

And in my role at Lowenstein, I always say my job is to ensure that the firm is delivering the best-in-class programs, resources, and initiatives on the professional development front so that our attorneys are developing more quickly here than anywhere else that they could be at the same time, and that they're doing that in a welcoming and engaging environment. And that's the summary of the career journey.

Diane Moss:

Thank you, Patti. I think each of your stories showcase the versatility of the law degree, the use of it that's tangential to the practice of law. So, I think that's awesome, and I think it's really important to highlight these opportunities. Have there been particular experiences or do you have particular advice that you'd like to share with others who may be at the same crossroads where they're trying to decide, I have this law degree, I'm not sure that partnership track is the right fit for me, but I do like being close to the practice of law. Sarah, do you have particular advice for those at a crossroads?

Sarah Scott:

Sure. I'll start by just echoing what Megan had said earlier about listening to your gut. Early on, I knew that I wasn't really a rainmaker, and I didn't understand the partnership track and just it felt like it wasn't for me. So, one of the things I would say is listen to yourself. Know what type of lawyer or professional you want to be. There are lots of options. For me also, I found it difficult to balance children and heavy court schedule and things like that. So just knowing that there are options, paying attention to maybe what your friends are doing, what your colleagues, having a really strong network is really key, I think, to switching. I always tell the story to people about how I got this job, and it's heavily I knew this person who knew that person, who knew that person, who knew that person, and connected me with the right people at Lowenstein. So really keeping your

professional relationships strong and knowing what you want out of your life is helpful to figuring out if you want a non-traditional role.

Diane Moss:

Patti?

Patti Scott:

Sure. This is one of my favorite things to talk about, and I'm going to stick with this theme about listening to your inner voice. So, the pivot was one of the top, I would say, three to four things I've ever decided to do in my life. I knew immediately the job description had me written all over it. My heart was in the role immediately as soon as that recruiter talked to me about the things that the Lowenstein Sandler professional development director would do. But the change was not made without serious self-reflection and processing. And there were a few things. I think it comes down to about three subtopics where I really needed to process. One just high level the initial reaction that you're having when you're thinking through this is, am I really willing to walk away from a 15-year investment in this career that I've built? LSATs, Law School, bar exam, a judicial clerkship, nine years of practice, working your way to partnership and being really proud when you earn that title. So, there was just that.

The second thing is there was going to be a change in terms of income earning potential. My husband and I knew that right away when I came home and started talking to him about this possibility, this idea. The head of the firm that we had merged with when I was still practicing law was incredibly keen on helping me become a rainmaker. He saw something in me and continually communicated high expectations for my future, which I appreciated really very much. I knew my personality lent itself to networking. I could talk to the walls. I like talking to everybody, whether it's a big room or a small room. I enjoy it. I enjoy people's company and I'm comfortable asking them about themselves, which is really what networking comes down to. A lot of talking about what makes people tick. So, I thought I had some aptitude to build a book of business.

When my husband and I talked about what I might be leaving on the table in terms of income potential over the next five to 10 years. It wasn't insignificant in terms of what I was likely to be earning in a brand new job in human resources. The good news was I wasn't yet making those big bucks at the time. We did talk about me waiting five to 10 years continuing to practice and seeing if I still wanted to make the pivot, but I knew that it would be much harder at that point in time. And so, we decided that I would pivot right then in there. But if I'm being candid, the third thing I wanted to mention is I did have a little bit of what I always call an identity crisis. Everywhere we went, whether it was barbecues, weddings, dinners with friends, you would talk to them about this move

that I had decided to make. And people would unanimously universally say, "you left partnership in your law firm?" "You worked so hard for that." "You just told us about that promotion two years ago." "Why did you leave a partner role for a non-practicing role?"

So, I engaged in a lot of self-talk to cross that bridge because I knew what was waiting on the other side, which was a really fulfilling day-to-day experience, and I never wavered on the fact that taking the job was the right thing to do. I never questioned that. But I did have some difficulty in those conversations when friends and acquaintances weren't as supportive or excited as I had hoped they would be. So, getting back to the listening to the gut theme, my advice to people is always to look in the mirror and reckon with who and what you see, and then be true to that person who's staring back at you.

What do you really want? Not what do these other people who you talk to on the phone once a week, maybe twice a year, maybe only once a year, what do they think about the choice that you made? There's going to be a lot of opinions, opinions about what the priority should be, what an upgrade or downgrade looks like. Then too many times, I think that people force themselves to stay a course that really doesn't sync with their inner gut and with their passions. And only you walk in your shoes every day. Only you spend every single waking moment looking through the lens you look through. A lot of these people are thinking about you just in those conversations at the barbecue. You need to think about that.

And then just the last thing and what is really important, you need to know a lot about the organization that you're about to join. Lowenstein's always been a destination firm, but for people who are in non-practicing positions, it's so much the case. They have always believed that there's a lot of value that the business services group can offer to the lawyers of the firm and to each other at the firm, and then to the clients. And we talk about it all the time. We know that we are dealing with, on the management side of the house, the same issues, the same questions, the same opportunities that our clients are grappling with, and we can help our clients. We can talk directly to the clients who our lawyers are trusted advisors for, and we can help build out the brand that our lawyers have with them. We can talk about change management strategies that we've used to accomplish something that the client's trying to do, and instances where AI can help them streamline or software solutions that we may be dealt with a year ago that the client's now dealing with. So, there are ways we can be directly in touch with clients of the firm to add that value. So, I joined a firm that really valued non-practicing positions, and that is why

almost two decades later, I am still thrilled that I was in that recruiter's office that night when Ann Rebarick called.

Megan Monson: Patti, I love that you mentioned that you're getting conversations from people and everyone has an opinion, and it requires you to do that self-reflection and stand firm to your belief. That holds true not just for professional decisions you make, but really any decision you make. And so, I think that's a really good piece of advice for our listeners to have it as a takeaway. Leah, do you have any, we'll call it words of wisdom that you would share with people who are at these types of career crossroads?

Leah Duggins: Well, I think Patti and Sarah did a really great job of really answering the question and giving some great wisdom. I think the only thing that I would add is, and to echo what Patti said, is sometimes we have an image in our mind of what our career looks like and what it should be from maybe we're in law school or talking to family and friends, and we are so beholden to it and want to stick to that even when opportunity may present itself or you do the internal searching and realize that I could be good at this other role and I don't have to, in my case, be a litigator, be a litigation partner somewhere. I can still be fulfilled and happy elsewhere. So, I would say try not to stick to a path that you already have set because life takes you in so many different directions and there are many different paths to happiness. And our younger selves who were at least in my case, becoming a lawyer, you morph in change as you get older and your priorities shift and it's okay for your career to shift with those priorities.

And the other thing I would say is don't be afraid to step outside of your comfort zone and take on a new role or responsibility that you may not have as much experience in or don't think you're as strong in because there are opportunities for growth and development and for you to learn a new skill. And I will say that a hundred percent, that community work that I did and liaison with all of those stakeholders made me uniquely qualified for this role that I'm in now because that's pretty much what I do all day and across the firm.

Diane Moss: I think of it as the moving train that's going to a law firm when you're in law school and we all get on the train. Many of us get on that train not realizing that there are different trains or that that train may stop at different career path destinations. So, I think it's wonderful for you guys to really share your experiences. Sarah, you're in a unique role being in-house counsel to other attorneys at a firm. Do you have any particular advice or tips that you can share that have helped you be successful in

this role? And can you describe a little bit about what your responsibilities are as in house counsel to a bunch of attorneys?

Sarah Scott:

Happy to. I'll start with the second question because I think that'll help find my first answer better. I started at the firm actually as the conflicts attorney, and that is also something that a lot of people might not be familiar with. I was hired originally to come in and help the firm analyze its conflict reports, make sure that the attorneys were carefully entering the correct parties into different matters, getting waivers when needed, and it was really a completely different experience for me. I had never worked in that field before, and that was my segue into becoming the associate general counsel. So what I do now is on top of still continuing to help with complex questions and anything that the attorneys might need in onboarding new clients and new matters, I work with the firm's general counsel on risk management issues, claims against the firm, insurance questions, engagement letters, audit letters, and sort of these weird internal functions that the law firm needs to deal with that are legal in nature but really should not be handled by billable attorneys. So that's the scope of it. We're essentially the firm's in-house legal department. So, tips or tricks.

The tips or tricks, I would say, I think you could probably hear it too just in this podcast we're having. I think I'm more of a backseat role in terms of being a good listener is important for, I would say someone of my role, being able to be non-reactive, hearing what people are saying to you without immediately saying yes or no or this or that. Really having to have a thoughtful reaction to things. I remember many, many years ago, an associate called me seven times in a row when I was in a situation where I couldn't answer the phone, and so finally when I was able to get back to her, she was hysterical, a mess. I have screwed everything up. I'm in trouble. And being able to say, "No, take 10 steps back. Let's talk it through. There's nothing that you could have done that life changing, world ending." So just having that personality I think is a helpful trait. Just being able to listen and analyze and not do anything too quickly.

Diane Moss:

I think that's a great skill for life in general. Thank you.

Megan Monson:

You shared a lot of good information about your journey to where you are now. Are there ways particular to your current role that your law degree has helped you in dealing with attorneys?

Patti Scott:

I would say without a doubt that being a lawyer for almost 10 years has been really helpful to me in this role. I will say that at the time that they were hiring for this position almost 20 years ago, I don't know which

people were on which side of it, but there were different people involved in the decision-making process who thought that they should have a former practicing lawyer in this role and others who thought it was important to have someone who had not been in a practicing lawyer role. Apparently, they ultimately decided it was okay to have a former lawyer. I would say though that it has helped me so much with understanding lingo. Simple things like understanding what presentation slides, continuing legal education slides are, course descriptions. Whether or not a course description needs to be fleshed out further. I don't do that work anymore, but it made it really easy for me to understand that. I understand what partners are talking about in performance roundtables when they're describing the soft skills that distinguish one associate from another one. I get the nuance. I get why they're looking for this skill because I remember meeting somebody who had that skill and brought that to the table.

Why networking skills development programs like the one that we have here run by four of our partners is so important. Why it is so important to realize that no matter what your career plan is, that you should be networking. I don't care if you're in a law firm in another job, a job that you don't even consider to be a "career." Everybody's networking every day, and we don't realize it. But I understood that from having been a lawyer, and then I can leverage all of this when developing initiatives to help the partners and the firm and the associates meet our collective goals. Also, I run programs that are going to be non-billable time commitments for most of the people who are breathing life into them, but I understand what these lawyers are up against.

I remember what it was like to have an hour left at the end of the day, late at night, and try to figure out, should I eat dinner first at 10:00 at night or should I enter my time into the system? I remember what it was like to be just looking for more time. I spent good chunks of time over the last five years working with our practices, associates, our partners, and other business services groups on our work allocation processes. And as a business manager, I know that a better-balanced utilization system is one that's good for culture, for client service, and for the overall vitality and health of the law firm. And I also remember the days where you just need to go find that go-to person who can just get it done and help you survive the very next deadline. So, I feel like my past history as a lawyer has helped me with these change management initiatives where I can be more patient and more resilient. When people don't react at first the way that I wish that they would I don't take it personally because they understand better where they're coming from.

Megan Monson: Yeah. And I could say, Patti, think from being on the receiving end of that, I think it is very helpful for you having had a legal background because you do understand those pain points and make it very easy to converse with the attorneys.

Patti Scott: Thank you so much. And we have worked on a lot of things together, non-billable things over the years. Lots of great things.

Megan Monson: Leah, what about you? Has there been anything in particular based on your legal background that's been very helpful in terms of your current role now?

Leah Duggins: Sure. So I would say the easy and more obvious answer is I was a former litigator, so being the administrative director for the litigation department is very helpful when speaking with my practice group leaders and partners and they're mentioning, I'm going to trial and we're talking about rates and the budget and the legal spend and we need to get our attorneys training more on their feet experience. Being a former litigator, I understand what all of that entails. I was that associate who needed to get oral argument experience. I was that associate who the partner would come in and was like, "You're spending too much time on this matter, and you spent too many hours on research." And so, understanding those needs of the attorneys in the department, it's definitely helpful having come from a litigation background.

But I would also say the not so obvious is when you are a lawyer and as everyone here who knows has dealt with it, right? Your client may send you something and they may say, "I need you to do this" or "I want to do this," and you have to dissect and think, is that what they really need? They're asking for this, but is this the thing that they actually need and what are they really saying? What are they not saying? I think that as lawyers, we do that often. A lot of it is managing expectations for our clients. And I think that that is something that particularly when I'm dealing with my attorneys in the department, that different practice groups have different needs, they have different requirements, and being able, when I get that email, to actually understand and use my analysis skills to say, "What are they really asking? What do they really need?" is really, really helpful in this role. And I think that if I were not a lawyer, I don't know that I would be able to do that as effectively.

Megan Monson: I think it also makes you uniquely situated for the associates and counsel to be able to come to you when they have questions because you do have that legal background and you can understand and have been down

that path. And so, it just makes it a lot more relatable and approachable because you have that experience.

Leah Duggins: Absolutely.

Diane Moss: I think your added value of the interpretation and translation skills in this context for the population that you're working with is really value added.

Megan Monson: This discussion has been fantastic, and thank you all for sharing your perspective on these topics. Does anyone have any final words of wisdom for other strong female professionals out there?

Leah Duggins: I have a word of wisdom I think that I would like to share, which is very simply, most decisions that you make can be undone. So what I mean by that is if you decide to go down a particular path and you want to try something out, if it is not working or if it doesn't fit or you don't feel good in that role, like Sarah talked about being in those roles and just realizing it wasn't for her, you can try the other thing, the new thing. And if you find that that's not for you, as Diane mentioned, you can pivot and you can go try the next thing. I think we think of these decisions as if they're going to change your life forever and change your trajectory forever. But I know plenty of professionals who have tried something, done something and said, "You know what, this is not really for me. I'm going to either go back to where I was or I'm going to look for this other thing." Or it at least helps them figure out where they really want to go. So, I would just say, most decisions are not final. Trust your gut. And if it's not working, then you change it again.

Diane Moss: And I think this is both inside and outside of the law firm context because your stories and your roles are great opportunities in house but there are a myriad of them outside of the firm context that women can pursue with their legal degree. But thank you so much for showcasing what you can do inside of the firm. We appreciate you.

Megan Monson: Yeah. I just want to thank Sarah, Leah, and Patti for joining us again today. I'm sure our listeners have found your insight and perspective very helpful. This has been another inspirational and thought-provoking discussion. Thank you for joining us for another episode of the Women's Initiative Network: *Real Talk*. We'll see you next time.

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