

## Obtaining Career Freedom Through Networking

# How to Prioritize Your Career over Your Job

By Winter Wheeler



Every litigation job I ever held had been selected with the specific reason of ultimately becoming a well-rounded mediator and arbitrator. This had been my goal since shortly after law school, and I committed myself to that long-term plan beginning in 2006. And while being a litigator absolutely aligned with my grand career plan, I also spent many of the next thirteen years making a common mistake: I allowed my self-worth to be determined by my job, which in turn complicated the trajectory of my overall career.

Intellectually, I have always been able to distinguish between my career and my jobs. Yet, despite knowing that my jobs were just steps on the path to my career, I became bogged down in the minutiae of my positions in these firms, often working to the point of obsession.

Like many lawyers, I have a Type A personality. I lean heavily and uncomfortably toward perfectionism. I am also a serial volunteer who genuinely wants to give of myself in every situation. But at some point, giving maximum effort to do great work for the clients, volunteer for the firm, and meet my billable requirements consumed me. As a result, my superiors' opinions started to affect—negatively—how I thought of myself.

My personal life revolved around the feedback I received on my work and I believed that the severely internalized stress and anxiety that I felt during this time was just a natural byproduct of working to become the most knowledgeable mediator and arbitrator that I could. But it was not.

Sacrificing who I am in exchange for a paycheck should never have happened.

I am a wife and mother to four beautiful children, and I am ashamed by how much time I missed with my family because I wanted to put in an extra few hours to improve

a brief that was certainly ready to be filed—just in case. Not only did I miss out on a lot at home, but I also had to forego a lot of networking, writing, and speaking opportunities. And even though these prospects were important to my career, I would quite readily push them to the side even if something objectively non-emergent happened at the job. I constantly told myself that I would attend the mixer, write the article, or give the CLE “next time.” Yet, next time never seemed to materialize.

My husband eventually alerted me to this pattern when he asked me why I was driving myself so crazy for a job when it was just the next step in fulfilling the career goal. He then pointed out that if the stress and anxiety of the job outweighed my general love of litigating, maybe it was time to go to the next step and

actually become a mediator and arbitrator. He likely has no idea just how much introspection and action his words sparked.

My husband was right. It was time to move on. But I was not ready and honestly afraid to make the change. Not only had I wrapped so much of my self-esteem into my work, but I also had not taken the time to build a personal brand. I had marketed for the firm, but not enough for myself. Nor did I have the large networking group that my mediation career would require. I had sabotaged myself without knowing it. Realizing this was indeed a needed gut punch, it hit me that I had a lot to do before I could even think about venturing out.

Having the type of personality that I do, I created a networking plan to change the path I was on, working at it for about two years. I became much more involved in my local legal community here in Atlanta. The non-job-related community that I developed gave me a lot of confidence and helped me to develop a stronger, more positive sense of self. My network also inspired (and supported) the serious moves I made toward mediation and arbitration. And to my joy, these efforts came to fruition when I was

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invited to join the panel of mediators and arbitrators at one of the most prestigious firms in Georgia.

I had successfully divorced my job from my career—and more importantly from my self-esteem. And thank goodness for it, because what happened next would have otherwise sent me into a depression just two years earlier. I recall excitedly telling a senior partner about my huge news—which she knew had been more than a decade in the making—and her immediate response was to demean not only the accomplishment and its value to the firm, but also my personal potential to be successful.

I left the firm within two weeks and dedicated myself full-time to mediation and arbitration.

Shortly thereafter, the COVID-19 pandemic began, and I turned to LinkedIn to continue growing my network. I stumbled upon a group of women who were just as career-focused and driven. We shared our career goals and offered each other support, connections, and opportunities. I had never participated in anything like it. Coming off the slap-in-the-face experience with the woman partner made the group that much more incredible.

My story is not unusual, and it's likely that someone reading this is having the realization that they are making the same missteps I made. It is to be expected, considering that when it comes to assigning merit, this profession is steeped in a "what have you done for me lately" mindset. It is only the benefit of hindsight that allows me the wisdom to recognize my mistake, and it is only the desire to help others free themselves from the same cycle that allows me to admit it out loud.

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Winter Wheeler is a mediator and arbitrator with **Miles Mediation & Arbitration** in Atlanta, Georgia. She is co-author of the upcoming book *#Networked*, which documents the experiences of twenty women who came together via LinkedIn to support each other's careers during the pandemic and beyond. Read more about Winter's journey and exactly how she used LinkedIn to change her life in *#Networked*. This article is the first in a three-part series from three of the co-authors.

## Networked

What do you do when your entire professional world is turned upside down in a matter of days? According to a group of twenty women lawyers who met on LinkedIn during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the solution is to stay resilient and get back to work—in all the new, creative ways that they can muster. Lucky for us, these women are not keeping their methods a secret, and we are delighted to hear about the profound impact that a DRI Women in the Law Committee (WITL) "**Opportunity Calling**" presentation had to help create this initiative, and the positive good that comes from our supportive committee.

With these inspired stories, WITL is pleased to offer all DRI members the chance to share in their success. The three-part series previews three DRI member-authors, who each contributed a chapter to the recently published book, *#Networked: How 20 Women Lawyers Overcame the Confines of Social Distancing to Create Connections, Cultivate Community, & Build Businesses in the Midst of a Global Pandemic* ([available from Amazon.com](#)). Each of these women share their struggles, celebrate their victories, and provide examples of how the pandemic has been not just a time of destruction and loss, but also a time for opportunity and growth.

WITL shares the first installment in *The Voice* this week, by DRI member Winter Wheeler. I hope you find these stories as encouraging and motivating as I do.

Marie Chafe, WITL Chair