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Sharon Segev's Principles for Taking the Scenic Route in Your Legal Career

Skills and Professional Development



Someone once described a traditional legal career as a predictable, well-known path that generations of lawyers take. A deviation from it is frowned upon and can be legal career suicide. Thus, many lawyers miss all the scenic routes! This unfortunate dedication to tradition becomes especially apparent when one talks to a lawyer who obtained a J.D. degree outside of the United States, even if the lawyer has an L.L.M. from the United States. Naturally, the subject of the foreign-trained lawyer not "fitting the box" and expectations of hiring managers — independent of the lawyer's skills and abilities — surfaces in the first five sentences of a conversation.



Sharon Segev, general counsel, Elo Touch Solutions

I became inspired when I met Sharon Segev, an Israeli-educated attorney who does not have a United States degree and currently serves as the general counsel of Elo Touch Solutions, Inc., a US-based company that manufactures touch solutions for various industries. In the past Segev also served as the vice president, associate general counsel at Cadence Design Systems.

In our conversation, Segev shared that on a few occasions she toyed with the idea of earning her L.L.M. from the United States because people around her wanted to see a US law school listed on her resume. She ultimately didn't pursue it because she realized that to earn a degree in the United States, she would have to stop her career for a few years. "It just seemed like too big of a distraction from my desired course of action just to make someone happy to check a box they decided is critical," Segev shared. Segev instead embraced a scenic route for her legal career, and in the process learned the following lessons in grit and perseverance.

Grab unusual opportunities when they knock. A few years into her practice in Israel's leading firm Herzog, Fox & Neeman, Segev was asked by the managing partner to accept a year-long temporary attorney exchange assignment with Gibson Dunn in the United States. After applying the art of nagging to her less than enthusiastic husband they moved to the United States, where a year at Gibson Dunn became two, three, and eventually five years. Embracing this unusual assignment was definitely a defining moment, followed by a series of critical steps — taking the bar, excelling on high profile projects and forming relationships. After five years at Gibson Dunn, she joined Cadence Design, who was one of her corporate and M&A clients, and later Elo Touch Solutions. Segev encourages everyone to "grab odd opportunities when they knock. Be proactive about your journey, embrace challenge and pave your own path. These opportunities are there for a reason and you need to take a risk and grab them to progress in life."

Every time you have an opportunity that makes you feel uneasy – take it! It's your defining moment.

Hire the best people, even if they do not fit into the box. Boxes are meant to be broken! In less than two years after Segev joined Cadence Design as senior counsel, Segev became associate general counsel for the company. Less than two years later, she became a vice president for the next four years, in charge of the most complex legal projects and building a great team. Besides her hard work, business mind and dedication, Segev attributes her success and quick advancement to Cadence Design's former general counsel and then the current general counsel, both of whom never believed in boundaries and checking boxes. They, like most successful people, believed in hiring the best people and didn't care where they were raised, where they went to school, or who they know. According to Segev, "the recipe is tenaciously identifying those people who appreciate great talent regardless of the flavor in which it comes and connecting with them to advance your career." Generally, Segev believes that lawyers often miss having the right conversations about prospective hires' qualifications. They often rule people out based on reasons that do not correlate with one's success and potential as a lawyer or ability to benefit the organization. Many of these folks are ruled out since their stories do not follow the beaten path, and are therefore never heard and their potentials are not adequately considered. In her own hiring, Segev likes to identify people with talent and passion for the tasks on hand. "Talent and passion always comes first." Those "outside of the box" hires into her team proved to be some of the best she had done and definitely paid off.

Success is within our core. Don't expect it to land at your feet — go get it! Segev often talks to lawyers who do not fit the mold and are repeatedly discouraged, despite a great track record elsewhere. She likes to tell them stories of success despite numerous odds, because along the way she has learned that successful lawyers don't always fit the box. Great lawyers and leaders don't come in one shape or one flavor. They don't always graduate from the top 20 law schools, or have experience at a prestigious national firm. She has worked with and supervised many qualified, yet overlooked, lawyers who succeeded despite other's low expectations based on a shallow review of "credentials." According to Segev, "success is something within our human core and does not always directly correlate to expected external factors such where one went to law school or who one knows." As the saying says — don't judge a book by its cover.

Ignore negative voices. Throughout her practice in the United States, Segev was reminded by some prospective employers, recruiters, and peers that she "didn't go to school here" and that succeeding as a lawyer in the United States would be hard, if not impossible. These voices may still

be there. She just learned to tune them off. Unfortunately, law is a bit more conservative than other professions. Many of the brightest and most successful CEOs or engineers did not go to school in the United States and were raised in other countries. One could say that they are successful because they don't believe in boxes. There are people who believe in boxes and molds, but we should look beyond the norm. Therefore, we should also look for good and smart people who will support us in our quest to find more "outside of the box" thinkers. According to Segev, "Not everyone thinks in boxes. Many executives recognize talent when they see it. Lawyers who don't 'fit the mold' but instead bring passion, creativity and wit to the table should never give up. You have to take control of your own path and not expect others to do it for you."

Also, Segev emphasizes the strength of identifying groups like Leading Women in Technology, a group Segev is heavily involved with as a sponsor, mentor and speaker, and benefiting from experiences and advice of others.

Every few years, ask yourself where you are and where you are going. One strategy to progress in your career is to periodically pause and re-assess whether one's life is generally going in the right direction. Asking yourself "where am I?" and "where am I going?" forces you to live your vision of your life, not someone else's. For example, during her transition from Cadence Design to Elo Touch Solutions, Segev grappled with this question. In the end she decided that leaving Cadence Design was a right choice for her. It gave her the opportunity to build a legal team, infrastructure, and systems from scratch, run the department and have a seat at the executive table. She jokes that "it took a lot of work, more grey hair, and scars, but the journey was well worth it."

You only need one "yes". So, ignore one thousand "no's". Segev recommends "proving those naysayers wrong." It is very satisfying! Working hard, grabbing opportunities and showing results, building relationships, and networking are the way to get there. Segev recommends that all professionals, including lawyers, invest in relationships. All professionals need to get out of the office and develop personal relationships with their internal or external stakeholders — with real people in real time. As you advance in your career working hard and doing a good job, though absolutely necessary, is just not enough to get to the next phase. It is helpful to keep in mind that one only needs one "yes" to change one's circumstances. As Segev put it, "It only takes one 'yes' to get on the dream career path. So don't give up! That one 'yes' could be around the corner."

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Mack is also an award-winning (such as the prestigious ACC 2018 Top 10 30-Somethings and ABA 2022 Women of Legal Tech) general counsel, operations professional, startup advisor, public speaker, adjunct professor, and entrepreneur. She co-founded SunLaw, an organization dedicated to preparing women in-house attorneys to become general counsels and legal leaders, and WISE to help female law firm partners become rainmakers.

She has authored numerous books, including *Get on Board: Earning Your Ticket to a Corporate Board Seat*, *Fundamentals of Smart Contract Security and Blockchain Value: Transforming Business Models, Society, and Communities*. She is working on her next books: *Visual IQ for Lawyers* (ABA 2024), *The Rise of Product Lawyers: An Analytical Framework to Systematically Advise Your Clients Throughout the Product Lifecycle* (Globe Law and Business 2024), and *Legal Operations in the Age of AI and Data* (Globe Law and Business 2024).