

After a 20-year legal career at Norton Rose, Shearman & Sterling and Hogan & Hartson, and having worked on some high profile deals like the sale of Manchester United to Malcolm Glazer or the sale of Jaguar and Land Rover to Tata, Jon Coppin decided to retire from the profession at the age of 44. After a couple of years working as a psychotherapist in the NHS he has now set up his own practice aimed at helping people working in the City.



Mathieu Chaze: Jon, how did you become a lawyer?

Jon Coppin: I decided I wanted to become a lawyer towards the end of my undergraduate degree in psychology, when I looked at the career opportunities as a psychologist. I hadn't really thought about a career when I picked the degree and when I did look, I couldn't see one that really appealed. The idea of law took seed from a throwaway remark from a friend of my parents.

MC: So, was it more or less by accident?

JC: We don't end up in jobs by accident. I imagine people were suggesting all sorts of careers to me at the time and law was the one that stuck. I

believe there is a reason for that. Aspects of my personality drew me towards the law, my education and family background made one of the professions a fairly natural choice.

MC: What would you say to a young person who does not really know which path or which career to choose? I think it is a very tall order when you are just 18 years old with very little experience to decide on what you are going to do for the rest of your life...

JC: We do a lot of thinking and decision-making without knowing it. I think you have to follow your instinct and not overthink it. When the right path shows up, aspects of your personality will respond positively to it. Even if somebody who is 18 might not be able to articulate what they want to do very clearly, their mind will be working on it. It can be terrifying but most of the time it turns out better than one might think.

MC: Did you have a mentor in the law?

JC: Not before I started. But once I started my career in M&A, I started to have role models which is very helpful. You need people that impress you and make you think that you want to be like them.

MC: Were these relationships tacit (mentor / mentee) or did it just develop naturally?

JC: A bit of both. Initially I just looked up to a few people but as these relationships developed I made it clear that I wanted to work with them. This was especially true with my first boss. She was amazing and it was a defining moment in my career.

MC: What are the qualities required to be a good lawyer and how long did it take you to become good at it?

JC: Like most jobs I think there's probably a number of different ways of being a good lawyer but one essential quality is the desire to get to the bottom of things. You are often dealing with very complicated situations and very detailed documentation. A smoking gun can be buried away anywhere.

I think I was becoming quite useful when I was about two years qualified. I'd always had that self-driven quality that doesn't let you cut corners but it takes a couple of years to get on top of things and start making the material your own.

I think if you like winging it, or getting away with things, law probably isn't the career for you.

Life is about discovering things, finding out. That's what makes life interesting ...

MC: What key principle do you live by and which has helped you becoming successful?

JC: I would say the fact that I don't like bullshit. I like to try to get to the bottom of things. I think that in life, one has to try to be true and find out what your reality is and present that to people. For me, these days, life is about discovering things, finding out. That's what makes life interesting and that's what matters to me. But it's really not easy to know what you want, what matters to you, especially when you start.

There are probably endless things I worried about that weren't worth it

MC: What has law taught you in particular which has been useful for you in life?

JC: I think one of the great lessons in law is that sometimes there's no substitute for just thinking very hard about something. There's a real intellectual discipline involved. The only rule is what works. You can't go with an idea just because you like it. Successful lawyers tend to be very clear thinkers.

The flip side of the intellectual discipline is worry. In hindsight, there are probably endless things I worried about that weren't worth it. There's a paranoiac function to law. You're paid to worry about what can go wrong so other people don't have to.

MC: What are the things which you wish you knew when you were 25?

JC: I guess I wish I'd had a better sense of what was important to me and known that things that seemed exciting at 25 might feel different after 20 years. My focus was too narrow. I was too focused on becoming successful in narrow terms: working hard, getting promoted, making money, doing great deals etc... I did not have a good enough understanding of what made me happy. I didn't know what to value in life and how to balance these things with the rest.

As a result, I think I didn't enjoy enough the things which I liked. It is easy to do. You can sleep walk through the things you like and take them for granted. I think people in general don't stop enough and think "this is it, this is great!"

At the end of the day the appreciation of your experiences in life is what makes the difference.

MC: This is why I like meditation. It trains you to live in the present and helps you appreciate what you have more. A lot of people have more than they need and that can be part of the problem. Too much distraction from the important things...

JC: That's right. I will give you an example. Two guys are bringing their children to the playground and they do exactly the same thing. They love their children equally etc... One of them is going to come away thinking "yes, I had quite a nice afternoon" and the other one will come away thinking "that was great, it does not get any better than that ... I spent time with the people I care the most for, the weather was great, I felt good etc... this is the top of my life!" Totally different perception of the same experience. At the end of the day the appreciation of your experiences in life is what makes the difference.

MC: Right. But as an M&A lawyer, I am sure that you worked very long hours. How do you reconcile this with appreciating your experiences in life?

JC: I'm afraid I'm not sure there is much that you can do about the work-life balance in the law. It varies with the kind of law you do, but law is client-led and is about providing services to a very high standard. In the end you are at your client's disposal and they call the shots. At times that will intrude into other aspects of your life.

But if you can't change that, you can change the way you think about it and the way it feels to you. The deal you do with yourself and your firm and the client in your head; you have to be clear as to why it works for you and how to keep making sure it does still feel like that. Part of that is likely to be some practical measures to make sure unavoidable intrusions are kept to a minimum and down time is properly valued and protected. It goes back to how you perceive your experiences. You can make it a positive experience or it can be very painful, it is up to you. I am not saying it is easy, but it is possible.

MC: Can you describe the thought process which led you to stop practicing at the age of 45?

JC: It was a plan I hatched early on. Law in a large commercial firm is pretty much a binary career path: partner/non partner. If you want to be a partner you tend not to think about too much else on the way. I became a partner quite quickly so by my early 30's those blinkers were off. And nothing much changes once you make partner. I could see a long vista stretching ahead that could be filled with more or less the same stuff. I was enjoying myself but it wasn't leaving much room for other things in life and I knew I didn't want to wake up at 65 and realise that I just did M&A deals for 40 years. I felt I was too busy to think sensibly about what else I might want to do at some point so I decided to carry on till my mid 40's, get out and figure it out then.

MC: If you could start over, would you do the same thing again?

JC: I think I probably would do the same again. It's worked pretty well for me and I haven't been able to think of a better idea. It's given me a lot of flexibility and I feel lucky to have worked in two such different fields.

MC: Why did you decide to become a psychotherapist?

JC: I knew I was still interested in psychology and I didn't need a career in the way I had 20 years earlier. The most difficult thing was opening up to the possibility of other ways of thinking about things. That's a bit of a challenge for people working with the focus you need in M&A. And lawyers tend to be quite hung up on the idea of right and wrong (lawful/unlawful).

MC: What were your biggest doubts during your reconversion?

JC: My biggest doubts were about what could be achieved when I was working with severely disturbed patients on the NHS. Some of my colleagues get a lot out of working in the most difficult situations even though they can often feel pretty hopeless. I don't and, although I admire these people, I had to find another field. What I enjoy about my client base is that they're robust thinkers and they are very motivated. There's a tremendous sense of potential for people to change the way they feel and see the world.

MC: Which of your qualities helped you during your training?

JC: Aside from tenacity, I think my legal background helped on the theoretical side of things. A lot of psychological theory, particularly psychoanalysis, is pretty arcane. A lawyer's ability to cut through is useful. I did well academically.

But at the same time, the thing I had to change most was opening up to subjectivity – *“there are other ways of seeing this, and the way it feels will change. I can't chop it up and nail it in a perfectly turned sentence”*.

MC: It seems to me that leaving behind a high status position like the one you had to start again as a student require a great deal of humility. How did you deal with that?

JC: It is true that it was really uncomfortable at times. Life is a lot about role. I was the head of a corporate department in a big international law firm. As a result of that when I produced a piece of work; people responded in a certain way and thought it was great (or at least they said it was). It is quite difficult to distinguish at some point the difference between what the role is carrying and the rest. Having had that for a number of years it is true that going back to studying was a challenge.

Success is about the quality of your experience of your life, how your time feels to you

MC: How do you define success generally?

JC: I think success is about the quality of your experience of your life, how your time feels to you. Nothing we do or create will last long. And so what if

it does? Forget sonnet 18, I don't think Shakespeare is getting a great deal of satisfaction from the fact that we're still watching his plays. And the thing that makes the most difference to our experience is the quality of our relationships. When we feel right about the people who are important to us, the ones we love and depend upon for emotional security, it's like having a jewel in our head. Nothing in life, no form of material success will ever be so powerful and feel so good.

On the other hand, if we feel that we are at cross purposes with people we are really close to, and if we're filled with resentment and grievance towards these people, it is a horrible feeling, it's like having a turd in your mouth. You can't really enjoy anything if you are feeling like this, you are screwed. Many rich people can live like that, and this is no form of success at all. There are lots of plumbers who've had more successful lives than Steve Jobs according to that definition.

Human beings are complicated and there are always going to be positive and negative feelings towards the people we love. It is always going to be a bumpy ride.

MC: I agree but how do you reconcile prioritising the quality of your relationship with a demanding career for instance?

JC: Human beings are complicated and there are always going to be positive and negative feelings towards the people we love. It is always going to be a bumpy ride. But when you are stuck in a state of resentment and grievance that is when people get depressed. It is very common; some reports say 1 in 4 adults in the UK experience depression in a year, sometime without knowing it is depression.

If somebody works very very hard in a household, that can cause some difficulties. They are very likely at some point to experience some sort of resentment towards their family. "*Look at everything I am doing for you guys, why aren't you appreciative enough?*". It can create tension in the house because this person will come home tired and complaining etc...

On the other hand, there is a positive feeling of knowing that you are providing for your family and of being free from financial worries. Those who have a much better work life balance and spend less time at work might worry all the time about money and that's very hard too.

So nobody gets out of this easy! It's tough on everybody and it is one of the big challenges in life. But I am not kidding when I say that the most important thing is the quality of your relationship with those you love because they are in your head all the time, and if you are thinking shitty things about them, you are in trouble.

Achievement is often driven by a sense of dissatisfaction with the self.

MC: How does success and happiness relate to each other? Do you need one to have the other?

JC: On my terms, yes, success and happiness absolutely relate to each other. In more mainstream notions of success, I suspect they're often inimical. Success is usually based on some form of achievement: wealth, fame, power. Achievement is often driven by a sense of dissatisfaction with the self.

But if a degree of needling discontent is a useful spur to achievement, achievement can be a great platform for happiness. It can offer self-esteem, social status, freedom and opportunity and the resources to provide for the people you care for.

MC: Who come to mind when you hear the word successful?

JC: They are friends of mine but I wouldn't like to embarrass them by mentioning them here. They're successful in my eyes because they are holding everything together very well. They're successful in the work sense, they have good jobs, they're good family people and they act as decent individuals as well. They've taken care of the important things.

MC: As a psychotherapist, where do your patients need you the most?

JC: When patients call me, it tends to be about stress related issues. They can feel overwhelmed by the pressures they're under, which can be immense and corrosive. They can feel trapped, like they've lost themselves and they have no real choices.

MC: So how do you help them?

JC: It tends to be about re-appraising, getting back a sense of control, of living life on their own terms. It might involve making changes in what they do or how they do it but often it's a matter of changing how you see something, how it feels. Personality is really just perspective; change the way you see something and you change your personality. The way you experience the world, and the way others experience you, will start to change. Once that starts, the train has left the station, nothing will be the same.

MC: Do you attach any importance to routines? If so, could you describe what routines work or have worked for you in the past?

JC: Yes I do although I don't think I use routine as much as some people. It can provide a sense of stability and order that's easy to undervalue till it's gone. Routines provide security. We are intensely anxious creatures and routine is a good way of responding to that.

For me, exercise is important. I'm a runner and I tend to go out at the same times during the week and miss it if I don't. But too much routine can be stifling. I remember switching firms at one point and thinking that maybe just the idea of having a different set of lift banks to stand at the bottom of would be good

MC: To finish on a positive note, there are plenty of things which could be cause for concern in today's world, but what in your view are the main reasons to be optimistic about the future?

JC: The main reason to be hopeful is to look back at all the times in the past when it's seemed we might be on the edge of chaos and threatened on all sides – which is in fact pretty much always – and it's been Ok.

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