The right to reinvent yourself

About

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With a PhD in Law, Jonathan Bory divides his time between his activities as a lawyer, an entrepreneur, and a lecturer. How he organises these different roles has evolved over time, as a reflection of his changing interests and the opportunity to redefine his priorities.

**The freedom to satisfy your intellectual curiosity**

It was after he had completed his internship in Law in Bern, and had worked for several years in a prestigious law practice in Geneva, that Jonathan decided to embark on a doctorate. The time had come for him to make a change in his career path:
“I really enjoyed my work at the legal practice, but it was very fast-paced. I didn’t have enough time to read and delve into research that was different from what I was doing for our clients. I wanted to be more driven by my curiosity and interests. The doctorate was the obvious choice at the time.”

He saw his doctorate as an opportunity to regain some freedom and satisfy his intellectual curiosity before a return to practice. Having obtained a post as a doctoral assistant at the University of Lausanne, he began his new activity:

“I was a little optimistic, and a little naïve. I thought I’d write up my dissertation in two years. But after six months, I realised that the subject that had tempted me in at the beginning wasn’t what interested me. So, I changed my thesis topic and sought out a new thesis director. In the end, I completed my thesis on contractual freedom in six years, and I took another break before publishing it.”

During his doctorate, Jonathan was able to spend one year at the University of Columbia in New York with an SNSF grant:

“It was an absolutely fantastic experience, and very lively. There were lots of debates with other researchers on a wide variety of subjects. I discovered that you can be a lawyer and be interested in Psychology, or be a lawyer and use arguments from Sociology or Political Philosophy. It was a discovery that influenced the main argument of my thesis, which is based on an interdisciplinary approach and applies the discoveries of the behavioural sciences to the world of law, and to the question of consent.

It was also during this stay that Jonathan discovered the world of entrepreneurship – as the co-founder of a crowdlending start-up. This experience encouraged him, on his return to Switzerland, to launch an independent practice as a lawyer, rather than go back to his role as an assistant at the University. In parallel, Jonathan was also working regularly as a conciliation judge at the industrial tribunal, and was taking a course in mediation. The demands of these different activities put a serious drag on the completion of his thesis, until one day Jonathan decided to do everything in his power to finish it:

“I hired a student to assist me in my legal practice and I spent six months at the University of Zurich as a visiting researcher. I holed up in the law library, without my mobile phone to distract me, and in six months, I had just about finished.”
With his doctorate completed, Jonathan focused back on his legal practice and developed new entrepreneurial projects. Teaching also greatly appealed to him, and when the University of Neuchâtel advertised two teaching posts in law aligned with his interests, he applied:

“I was very interested in the idea of teaching in parallel with my practice as a lawyer. What attracted me was the ability to engage with the theory as much as with the practice, and to explore the synergy between the two.”

This new activity pushed him to redefine how he worked:

“When I knew that I was going to teach at Neuchâtel, I decided to reorganise myself at the legal practice: to delegate more and limit the number of mandates. This freed up the time to devote to the University.”

Projects for the future

Today, Jonathan intends to maintain in parallel his activities as a lawyer, entrepreneur, and lecturer, while ensuring that they are enhanced by new perspectives:

“I’m planning to write a book for my course on negotiation. I’m also interested in adding a slightly more creative, visual dimension. Traditional academic articles are one way to transmit information and to communicate. But there are other media that interest me. I’m thinking of podcasts, videos, and newsletters. There aren’t that many in the academic world.”

Above all, from his past as much as in his future, Jonathan suggests that we dare to reinvent ourselves:

The added value of a doctorate

A title that opens doors

The PhD allowed me to teach at a university. It gave me credibility as an applicant, and to get a job [as lecturer] that I love. It gives me a certain legitimacy when I speak at conferences, and, perhaps, a certain credibility with more demanding clients.

The rigour of intellectual honesty

The rigour required to complete a doctorate plays an important role in many other projects where you need people who are reliable, who keep their commitments, and who demonstrate intellectual honesty. Doing a PhD is not just about developing expertise in a particular field, it’s also about demonstrating your ability to take on a project over the long term. That requires intellectual rigour, which today makes me very wary of people who make assertions without verifying them. As a researcher, I think you develop a kind of anti-bullshit radar.

A phase of personal development

I learnt how to write long texts. It’s hard. You write, you revise, and finally you get there. I also found my own writing style. I really admire authors who dare to do certain things. And it’s primarily by mimicking such authors that we construct ourselves. The fact that others have already done so has in a way allowed me to think outside the box. Lawyers who have taken an interdisciplinary approach have been my role models.
“One piece of advice that I like is to engage in activities that are at the intersection of what you’re passionate about, what you’re good at, and what you can earn an income from. But beyond that, you shouldn’t put too many barriers in your way – you have the right to evolve and to reinvent yourself.”

And if you had to do it all again?

Jonathan has learnt two lessons from his doctorate. The first is to know when to give up on certain projects in order to stay on track:

“I pursued my activities as a lawyer and entrepreneur in parallel with my doctorate. Today, I would focus completely on the doctorate and finish it before launching my independent legal practice. Basically, a doctorate is a project that you have to be very focused on. If you want to get to the end, you need to be able to say no to certain projects. And at the time, I said yes to too many things.”

The second lesson is to better structure his work, for example through a thesis by articles:

“If I was to do it all again, I’d love to do a thesis by articles. What I found complicated during the doctorate was the lack of deadlines. One way of dealing with this and keeping up the pace would be to do a thesis based on articles. In terms of productivity and schedule, if I’d have had a conference paper to do on a topic, I’d have written the article and delivered it by the agreed date. That would have been the first part of my thesis, and then a second and a third. Now that I see students writing their master’s theses, I can see just how much I was left to my own devices throughout the doctorate, which wasn’t always easy to manage.”

Lausanne, May 16, 2023.