

Why I Became A Lawyer: A Circuitous Path To The Law

By **Joseph Maraia** (April 16, 2019, 4:59 PM EDT)

This article is part of a monthly series in which attorneys reflect on the formative life experiences that helped lay the groundwork for their careers in the legal profession. In this installment, Joseph Maraia, of Burns & Levinson LLP, recounts the roundabout career path that led him first to become a master electrician, then an electrical engineer, and finally an IP attorney.

My dad immigrated from Italy to the United States when he was five years old, and went on to become an electrician and eventually a teacher at a local area vocational high school. While teaching, he attended school at night, and was the first in his family to earn a college degree. As a sixth-grader, I used to sit with him and work through college algebra questions, and I thought I would be the next college graduate in the family. But real life intervened.

I started working with my dad on small electrical jobs when I was 12 years old, and continued doing so all the way through high school. I was working as an apprentice for a local electrical contractor the summer after I graduated from high school, and the owner convinced me — with a very lucrative offer — to stay on and become an electrician. I worked for the next 10 years earning my journeyman and master electrical licenses, which I continue to maintain today.

The economy was booming, and I joined International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 103 as a licensed electrician. I loved the work, but in the early 1990s, a major recession hit the Boston market, and put over 2,000 electricians out of work — including me. We were told it would be at least two years before we would get back to work, but there were other options, including traveling to Las Vegas to help with the rebuilding of the Strip.

I chose to stay local and do side jobs, while thinking seriously about whether being an electrician was really what I wanted to do for the rest of my working life. Doing jobs outside in the middle of winter and in steamy attics in the summer was hard, and I realized it wasn't what I wanted to be doing when I was 50 years old. I decided it was time to look at other career paths.

I started gathering information on different college degrees that would be synergistic with my experience as an electrician, and landed on electrical engineering as the ideal choice. Although I did well in high school, one local university suggested I take some math refresher courses at a community college



Joseph Maraia

prior to enrolling in an electrical engineering program. This was good advice, especially since I was paying for college myself.

I enrolled in North Shore Community College's engineering transfer program. It was a two-year program, which coincided with the amount of time I would be out of work with the local union. I figured if I didn't like the program, I could always go back to work as an electrician. Not only did I love the program, I was one of the top graduates, and had my choice of universities to attend. I chose Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and earned my bachelor's degree in electrical engineering.

While I was there, my dad invented a game, and called one of the invention hotline companies that advertise on television. He wanted to know if his idea was patentable, but all he got after paying the company \$5,000 was a bunch of marketing materials and the suggestion that he would be better off trying to sell the idea to a game manufacturer and letting them apply for a patent. My dad had me read everything through this process, which led me to taking an introductory course in intellectual property law at WPI. The thought of being an attorney had never crossed my mind before then, but the field of IP law fascinated me.

My mother worked for an attorney who also taught law classes at Suffolk University Law School, and he agreed to talk to me about a career in law. He thought my background would be a perfect fit for an IP attorney. I agreed, but decided to take a year off and work as an engineer so I could be around for my dad, who was diagnosed with cancer in my junior year of college.

Before my dad passed away, in the winter after I graduated from WPI, he wanted to know when I was going to attend law school. I told him I was taking the LSATs, and was hoping to start the following fall. I found out not too long after my dad's passing that I was accepted at Suffolk University Law School.

Now I had to make a decision: whether to attend law school full time during the day, or attend Suffolk's night program. I decided it would be better to work as an engineer during the day and attend law school at night — and as before, if law school wasn't right for me, I could fall back on my engineering position.

I was 33 years old when I started law school, and I can honestly say I have never had one day of doubt since then about my career choice. I have been practicing law now for 17 years, and love helping clients patent and protect their innovations. For example, for clients like Raytheon Co., my understanding of electrical circuits and computational systems has been integral to helping develop their patents. For EyeGate Pharmaceuticals Inc., I spent nine years developing their patent portfolio — including patenting their proprietary medical device drug delivery system, which uses ions and electrical current to deliver drugs to the eye — before the company went public in 2015.

Lumenpulse Group, a startup based in Montreal, Canada, hired me specifically because of my electrician credentials. I helped them get a patent on an innovative LED light invention that impresses a low-voltage signal onto a high-voltage signal, so new control wiring does not need to be run when converting legacy lighting systems to new, high-efficiency LED systems.



WHY
I BECAME
A LAWYER

Clients often tell me they have never met another attorney with my unique skill set. While my journey to the law may have taken a circuitous route, every twist and turn along the way has made me a better lawyer. I've had three careers, but none has been as satisfying or exciting as this one.

Joseph M. Maraia is a partner and co-chair of the intellectual property group at Burns & Levinson LLP.

The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the firm, its clients, or Portfolio Media Inc., or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.