

NCW 2007: The Many Faces of Chemistry

Career Profile: Patent Attorney

by Alan Ehrlich

Describe your present position.

I am currently Of Counsel, part-time, for the patent law firm, Stein, McEwen & Bui, LLP, Washington, DC. I retired as Patent Counsel of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) at the end of 2004.

Did you get to your present position because of your background in chemistry and area of specialization or did life experience(s) take you there? Describe the personal skills that have played an essential role in your present position.

As a child, I was always interested in the sciences and learning how things work. My father was a chemist, but I didn't focus on chemistry as a career until I took chemistry courses as an undergraduate. In graduate school, I had no specific life career interest in a particular research area. As a result, I was not innovative and did not focus well on defining research projects or planning and carrying them out. But I came to this realization after I had finished all my courses and exams, so with the guidance of my professors, I picked research projects and completed my theses (M.S. and Ph.D.).

I therefore chose applied research jobs in industry, but decided immediately to train for something else. I enrolled in an MBA course part-time. Although I never fully used my MBA, it showed I had the balance to be attractive to the government in regulatory analysis, regulatory development, and risk assessment.

In government agencies I began to develop an emotional and cultural interest in law. I had talents in finding information sources, pawing through written materials, learning fast, and understanding the essence of issues quickly. Furthermore, I sensed I had a unique ability to discern what people meant but were not saying. I could communicate and teach well—in writing and orally—and could think quickly on my feet. So the idea of yet another career grew on me. I entered law school, also part-time, while working for the government.

Toward the end of law school, I looked for jobs in two areas. As a regulatory scientist at the EPA, I was interested in environmental law, and I also had a long-time interest in patent law and intellectual property law. I was able to unite the two by moving from EPA's Office of Research and Development to its Office of General Counsel, first as the junior patent attorney, and then as patent counsel. When I neared retirement and was interested in part-time work, I became attractive to private law firms.

In what areas of chemistry did you specialize?

My chemical focus changed over the course of my career. I first specialized in nuclear and radiochemistry, used radiochemical techniques in an oceanographic thesis, and segued to water quality research. My scientific work in government was multi-

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Listen to them.



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Alan Ehrlich, chemist and patent attorney.

disciplinary, with much chemistry, environmental sciences, and toxicology, but also significant work on engineering and mechanical issues. Similarly, as a patent attorney, I work not only on chemical issues but electrical and mechanical ones as well.

Do you use chemistry on a daily basis? Describe what you do on a day-to-day basis.

Currently, in my law firm, I write and prosecute patent applications. My firm specializes in taking Pacific Rim country patent applications first filed in their native country and language, editing and formatting rough translations for U.S. filing, and then prosecuting them through the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (PTO). This is a fascinating area because I jump from one technology area to another frequently and quickly.

What advice do you have for those who wish to pursue this or some other nontraditional career path? How and where can readers learn more about this type of career?

For those interested in nontraditional careers, I have three suggestions. First, read up on the skills necessary for a particular type of job, especially jobs that unite your chemistry background with the path you are considering. Second, talk to people who have made those switches. Finally, take a job where you can learn what your candidate profession is all about. For example, there are chemist or scientist jobs in government, businesses that are affected by government actions, law firms that need internal scientific analysis and advice, and consulting firms that contract with government agencies, businesses, and law firms. Specifically in the patent area, the PTO always needs examiners. Patent law firms also employ law clerks who are technically trained and often work, under supervision, on the same issues as patent lawyers.

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Are there other thoughts or lessons learned that you would like to share with our readers?

Don't be afraid of change. Never stop learning. Most of all, *follow your dreams*. Your mind and heart are telling you something. Listen to them.

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Related Resources

1. Williams, Kathryn R. Recent Chemical Patents or What Else Is New? *J. Chem. Educ.* **2006**, *83*, 687.
2. Kovac, Jeffrey. Review of *Make Your Mark in Science. Creativity, Presenting, Publishing, and Patents. A Guide for Young Scientists* by Claus Ascheron and Angela Kickuth. *J. Chem. Educ.* **2005**, *82*, 1313.