

Refashioning My Career with Community in Mind

Leaving Law School with Inspiration from 60 Minutes



Elizabeth Hart is founder and executive director of Tailored for Success.

Experts in personal productivity always encourage people to make goals and have a “five-year plan.” Having worked my way up the career ladder from legal secretary to paralegal, I had as my plan to go to law school, become a lawyer, and give back to the community through *pro bono* work. However, my plans changed quite unexpectedly one Sunday night.

During my first year of law school, on an unusual, not-in-the-library evening, I was home watching tele-

vision. When the news program *60 Minutes* came on, it immediately caught my attention. It featured a woman who, while in law school, started an organization to help low-income women in New York return to the workforce. The organization was called Dress for Success.

Dress for Success’s clients were making the transition off welfare and trying to secure employment, yet they lacked the financial resources to purchase business attire. The women had no idea how to dress professionally or handle themselves

on job interviews. Volunteers at Dress for Success helped the women choose suits, coached them in interviewing techniques, and encouraged them to believe in their ability to succeed. At first, the clients were skeptical about wearing suits and the difference they could make in their appearance – but donning office attire, the women quickly changed their minds. They began to carry themselves with dignity, and you could tell from the expressions on their faces that their self-esteem was improving.

After watching the segment on Dress for Success, I realized I wanted to work directly with low-income women on an everyday basis, rather than do occasional *pro bono* work as an attorney. Changing my law career plan took deep introspection, but fortunately I had good role models and mentors in my life who encouraged my ambitions.

My first step was self-education. I contacted Dress for Success to learn as much as possible about its work. Having limited experience in the nonprofit sector, I took a class on how to start and run a nonprofit organization. As my passion for my work grew, I enrolled in Cambridge College, where I received a master’s degree in management with a concentration in nonprofit management. Although I was passionate, I was also realistic. I knew I would need more than passion to pay the bills, so I decided to keep my “day job” while I launched the agency.

Second, I laid the groundwork for my organization. I made contact with a variety of welfare-to-work, job training, and domestic violence centers in the North Shore and Boston areas

that could prescreen and refer clients to me. All the while, I collected business suits, crafted a marketing plan, recruited volunteers, and searched for affordable office space.

At last I was ready for business. In July of 2000, I opened Tailored for Success in Malden, Mass., a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping economically disadvantaged women find and keep employment. My typical client is a single mother between the ages of 18 and 55 with one to two children. She may come from a situation where she became pregnant and was unable to finish high school, or she may have finished high school but did not pursue college. In some instances, she cannot speak English very well, which makes her entry into the workforce even more difficult. The women referred to Tailored for Success represent diverse races and ethnicities – but they are all trained with necessary job skills, and they all share a motivation to succeed.

Despite being motivated, our clients are constantly struggling to make a better life for themselves and their families. Obstacles such as not knowing how to interview effectively, having low self-esteem, and having to fight the “welfare mother” stereotype can be truly overwhelming. These impediments, combined with the work-related issues of high daycare costs, transportation difficulties, and low-paying jobs, can make remaining on welfare more attractive than working. My agency helps women challenge these stereotypes and obstacles on their way back to the workplace.

Until I started Tailored for Success, I, like many people, held false assumptions about the transition from welfare to work. I assumed that a woman leaves the welfare rolls by completing a job training program, interviewing, and getting a job. Once she secures employment, I naively assumed she would know automatically how to move up in the workplace and understand its unwritten rules. These false assumptions create an overly simplistic view of what women in transition must go through to secure employment. If someone has been out of the workforce for an extended period of time, or if this is her first “real job,” she

won’t instinctively know how to interview; the unwritten rules of the workplace will be foreign to her.

And, even if a woman is trained to do a certain job, she still faces a Catch 22: You need a job to buy business attire, but in order to get the job, you first must be dressed appropriately. Our clients do not have the financial resources to buy suits, nor do they have anything in their closets that vaguely resembles proper business attire. Dressing the part is crucial, however, because people make appearance-based judgments within the first five to ten seconds of meeting someone. If women trying

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to shift off welfare don’t look appropriate, regardless of their training or skills, employers will unfairly judge them as incapable.

With many companies downsizing and closing, Tailored for Success’s services are especially critical. My clients compete with individuals who have more education, experience, and training than they, so making a good impression takes on even greater importance. Clients come to my agency on an appointment-only basis and are seen in a boutique-like setting. Each client receives two suits for interviewing and, once she secures employment, is entitled to receive a full week’s work of clothing for a confident start in the workplace.

Beyond providing business attire, Tailored for Success teaches business-appropriate make-up application, gives each client individualized interview coaching, and offers career development workshops on business etiquette, workplace ethics, and pay-raise negotiations, because these are vital skills women need in their new careers. To date, Tailored for Success has served 100 women – most of whom, I am proud to say, have successfully returned to the workforce.

Over the past two years, I have learned many things. For one, being the founder and executive director of a grassroots nonprofit organization is very demanding, but very rewarding. Serving as executive director is similar to being a chief executive officer in private industry – but with fewer resources and staff. The roles I fill range from spokesperson to recruiter of volunteers – and the agency’s success depends on my ability to secure clothing donations and financial support. Thankfully, I can rely on a dedicated group of volunteers to help sort clothes, work with clients, and raise funds.

Although running a nonprofit while working full time is challenging, it has enabled me to grow professionally while making a difference. Like many people, I always thought that in order to get ahead you needed to set goals, make plans, and pursue them. I still believe this is true, but what I’ve learned is that you also have to be flexible enough to adapt to unexpected situations. So although I originally made plans to become a lawyer, now my goals and plans revolve around the agency’s continued growth and success – similar to the plans my clients have for a brighter future for themselves and their children. ~

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