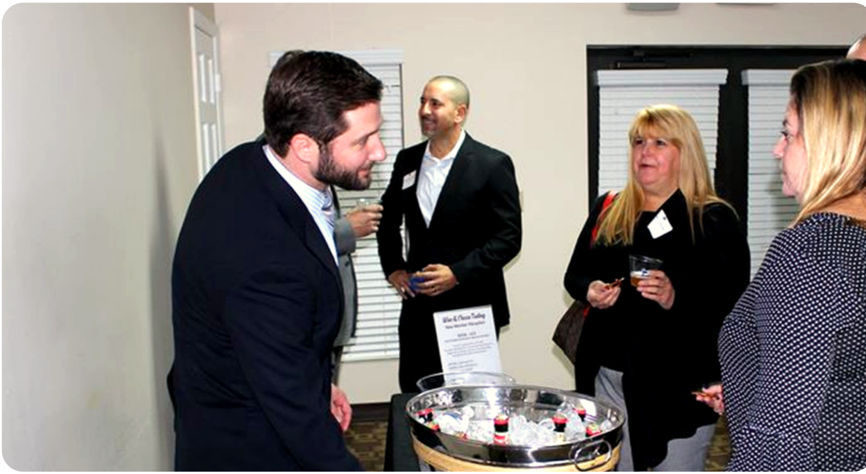

Networking at a wine and cheese event. Every room like this one is full of people whose experiences, if you let them, will make yours more valuable.

The Compound ...

Professional

Joseph S. Van d...

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Published Apr 29, 2026

I did not plan this career. I do not mean that in the self-deprecating way people sometimes say it, as a humblebrag dressed up as surprise. I mean that if you had asked me at any point in my first decade of practice where I would be in ten years, I would not have described anything close to what actually happened. Private practice to government to higher education. Litigation to election law to institutional governance. Each transition felt like a departure at the time. Looking back, I can see that it was all the same project.

Over the past several weeks, I have written about teaching as a practitioner, bringing your network into the classroom, staying a student, serving on boards, what people who actually make institutions run.

Each of those articles was about a specific practice, a thing you can do, starting now, to broaden your professional life. But this article is about what happens when you do all of them. Not sequentially. Simultaneously. Over years.

What happens is compounding.

What Compounding Looks Like in a Career

In finance, compounding is the process by which returns generate their own returns. A dollar invested today does not just earn interest; it earns interest on the interest. The math is simple. The results, over time, are not.

Careers work the same way, but we rarely talk about them in these terms. We talk about career paths and ladders, metaphors that imply linearity, as though the only way to advance is to climb the same wall, rung by rung. But the most effective professionals I have encountered, the ones who seem to operate on a different level, who can see around corners that others cannot, did not climb a single ladder. They built across multiple dimensions. They taught. They mentored. They served in government or on boards. They wrote. They built networks that spanned institutions and sectors. And each of those activities made every other one more valuable.

That is what I mean by the compound professional. Not a person who has done a lot of things, but a person whose experiences interact with each other in ways that multiply their effectiveness.

The Interactions Are the Point

I want to be specific, because this can sound abstract.

When I was in private practice, I litigated complex cases. That work taught me how to build an argument, manage risk, and operate under pressure. Useful skills. But they were useful in one context.

When I moved to the Department of State, those litigation skills did not disappear. They transformed. I was no longer building arguments for a client; I was building policy frameworks for an institution. The analytical rigor was the same, but the stakes were different, the audiences were different, and the definition of "winning" was entirely different. Government taught me systems thinking, the lesson I wrote about earlier in this series. It taught me that the best solution is not always the one that wins the argument but the one that builds a system capable of producing good outcomes repeatedly, even when the people running it change.

When I moved to FAU, both of those

skill sets compounded again. Higher education governance requires the litigation instincts of private practice and the systems thinking of government, layered on top of a mission-driven institutional culture that operates on longer time horizons than either. The ability to see a legal problem through all three lenses of private risk, public policy, and institutional mission is not something I could have developed in any single sector. It required moving through all of them.

And that is just the day job. The

teaching, which is where this series began, has made me a better communicator and a sharper thinker, because explaining complex material to students forces you to understand it at a level that merely practicing it does not. Bringing my professional network into the classroom, as I wrote about in the second article, created connections between my students and working professionals that enriched the course in ways a textbook never could. The mentoring has kept me connected to the next generation of professionals in ways that inform how I lead and manage today. The board service taught me how interpersonal dynamics, preparation, and knowing when to speak shape outcomes more than subject matter expertise alone. The cross-sector networking, investing in relationships with the people who actually do the work rather than just the principals, has given me a contact at nearly every level of government, higher education, and private practice in this state. And the reading groups and continuing education I wrote about, the discipline of keeping on being a student, have kept my thinking from calcifying, forcing me to engage with ideas outside my immediate professional silo.

None of these things are impressive in isolation. Plenty of people litigate. Plenty of people work in government. Plenty of people teach or mentor or serve on boards. The compound effect emerges when you do enough of them, over enough time, that they start to reinforce each other. The whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts, and it becomes greater at an accelerating rate.

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Why Most Professionals Do Not Compound

If compounding is so powerful, why do so few professionals pursue it? I think the answer is that compounding requires doing things that feel inefficient in the short term.

Teaching a class does not directly advance your legal career. Mentoring a young professional does not generate billable hours. Serving on a board takes time away from the work that your employer explicitly hired you to do. Joining a weekly reading group when your calendar is already full sounds like a luxury. Networking with government staff when you work in higher education, or with academics when you work in government, can feel like a diversion from your core responsibilities.

Each of these activities, viewed in isolation, looks like a distraction. And in any given quarter or any given year, they might be. The returns are not immediate. They are not linear. They do not show up on a performance review.

But over five years, over ten years, over a career, they compound. The attorney who has taught, mentored, served on boards, worked in government, and built cross-sector relationships is not just a more experienced attorney. They are a different kind of professional, one who can see problems from multiple angles, connect people across institutional boundaries, and bring judgment to complex situations that no amount of single-sector experience can replicate.

The Series as a Case Study

I did not set out to write a series about compounding. I set out to write about individual things I have done that I believe other professionals should consider: teaching, opening the classroom to your network, engaging with universities as a community, staying a student, serving on boards, moving across sectors, mentoring, and building networks that span institutions. But as I wrote each article, the connections between them became impossible to ignore. Each practice I described was not just valuable on its own; it was valuable because of how it interacted with everything else.

Every thread connected to every other thread. That is the compound effect in action.

Start Where You Are

The most encouraging thing about compounding is that it is available to anyone. You do not need to follow my specific path. You do not need to work in government or in higher education. You need to be willing to do more than one thing, to invest in activities that broaden your perspective even when they do not have an immediate payoff, and to sustain those investments over time.

If you have read this far in the series, you have already thought about which of these ideas might apply to you. Maybe you have considered guest lecturing. Maybe you have thought about reaching out to a younger professional who could use your guidance.

Any one of those is a starting point. The compound effect does not require you to do everything at once. It requires you to start doing something beyond your primary lane, and then, over time, to add another thing, and another. The interactions will emerge on their own.

I had already moved from private practice to government to higher education before I took my first step beyond my primary lane. Eight months into my role at FAU, I started teaching. I did not know then that it would reshape how I thought about everything else I do. The career moves gave me the positions. But the things I did beyond the day job, the teaching, the mentoring, the board service, the reading groups, gave me the perspective. I could not have predicted any of it. But I can see now that each step made the next one possible, and each one made every previous step more valuable in retrospect.

That is how compounding works. You do not see it happening in real time. You see it when you look back.

What is the one thing outside your primary lane that you have been meaning to try? What is stopping you from starting this week?

Leyza B. Florin 1mo

Excellent article! I wholeheartedly agree.

Like · Reply

Jeff Weiner 1mo

It was a pleasure meeting you earlier this week.

Like · Reply | 2 Reactions

Lauren King 1mo

This is so great! As someone new to the field, I've been soul searching for "what else," in the sense that just doing the job doesn't move the needle forward. In other words -- how can I compound my past and present experiences as leverage to develop my future. Now, you've help me put a word to it!

Like · Reply | 1 Reaction

Wendi Marie Gabriel 1mo

Well said Joseph

Like · Reply | 1 Reaction

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