

# The Washington Post

## What It Takes: 'You should be in the career you want'

By Avis Thomas-Lester  
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[Jack Garson](#) grew up knowing that if he was going to be successful, he would have to work very hard. He worked his way through the University of Maryland at College Park and George Washington University Law School. At 27, only two years into his law career, he was made a partner at Stein Sperling in Rockville. Later, he founded his own law firm in Bethesda, [Garson Claxton](#), which today employs 10 attorneys and 10 support personnel and services clients ranging from small start-ups to [BAE Systems](#), the world's second-largest defense contractor. Last year, Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) tapped him as a director of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, where he is aiding in the search for a new president and chief executive and helping to oversee construction of the massive Silver Line project. In March, his book, "[How to Build a Business and Sell it for Millions](#)," was published. Garson, 49, lives in Potomac with his wife, Marcy, the chief executive of his firm.



Attorney and author Jack Garson at his law firm in Bethesda. He recently published a book titled, "How to Build a Business and Sell it for Millions." (Jeffrey MacMillan - For The Washington Post)

### *WHY HE'S SUCCESSFUL*

"I would say having a plan and being very dedicated to that plan. I am one of those people that if I say I'm going to do something, I do it, even if it kills me ... I also wanted to make my parents proud. I noticed from a very young age when I'd bring home a report card with six A's and one B and my dad would say, 'What happened?' I wanted it to be straight A's. I wanted his complete approval. That was big driver for me, and I think that's a driver for a lot of people ... especially people like me who didn't start with a lot, wanting to prove to people that they could do it, that

they were capable ... More than the trappings of success, the money and the power, etc., it was wanting people to know 'I am a good person. I can make this happen.' "

### *OBSTACLES HE OVERCAME*

Having to work so hard. "Starting in an environment, like a lot of people, that didn't have any built-in breaks for me ... When I was a little kid, it was completely clear to me from the hand-me-downs I was wearing to the day-old bread I was eating that there was no money for college. And if I was going to make it, I needed great grades and I needed to work at a very young age ... From [age] 15 to 25, I could not flinch."

### *FIRST JOB*

"When I was 5 years old, I polished my dad's shoes ... once a week for 25 cents. I took tremendous pride in doing a good job. He was very pleased with the quality of my work, and I was very proud that he trusted me to do it. It instilled in me the concept of work hard, get approval, make money. I think I've done that ever since. Later, I had three jobs in the neighborhood, delivering newspapers, shoveling snow and cutting lawns."

### *BEST JOB*

"The one I have today and that's because I have so much control over our ability to achieve our clients' objectives."

### *A GOOD LESSON*

After earning a degree in English and economics at Maryland, he enrolled in law school and worked for a judge, a lobbying law firm and a regular firm to gain experience. "I made money working at a movie theater, sweeping up popcorn, scraping up gum and tearing tickets. I worked at a theater in the neighborhood where I grew up, and my peers were always coming in on their big date nights ... with their dates, driving their Camaros ... I felt like wearing a sign that said, 'I'm not going to be doing this forever! This is just part of my plan!' "

### *BIGGEST MISSTEP*

After 10 years as a partner at Stein Sperling, Garson felt he had maxed out and took a job as in-house general counsel for a former client. "I loved the people, but I didn't love the work. I was in meetings for eight hours a day. I missed practicing law so much that I used to bring court cases to the meetings and read them during these long meetings."

### *SMARTEST MOVE*

"I was driving to work one day. I had this weird pit in my stomach. I said ... 'I haven't had this pit in my stomach since junior high when I was afraid of getting beaten up on the way to school.' And I realized I didn't like my job. I went home and talked to my wife and said, 'Honey, remember that part about for better or for worse? This is the for-worse part.' She became my first

employee ... I'd work all day, then starting at 6:30 in the evening, I'd be planning for the new law firm," which he opened in 1998.

### *ADVICE TO THE ASPIRING*

"Get exposure to the world. Learn what the world is all about. Learn what you want to do. Don't let the path of least resistance or coincidence take you where you want to go ... It's really hard to get to the career that you want, but you should be in the career you want. You should commit yourself to that volunteer internship if that's what it takes to get the experience. Talk to people, plead with people to give you five minutes of their time for career advice. And create a plan that will eventually get you where you want to go."