Change agents: How my former career made me a great real estate agent

Real estate is a specialized field of work, and not every agent takes the most direct path to find their niche. Here, three agents share their stories from before they became luxury real estate experts, and describe how these unique trajectories have helped them serve their clients with confidence.

A high-flying attorney lands in a rewarding new career

Golden Gate Sotheby’s International Realty

Colm Glass

Colm Glass, Broker Associate at Golden Gate Sotheby's International Realty, started his professional life as an attorney working on a product much more mobile than the average home. Glass specialized in the financing and leasing of commercial airliners—a job that started in London, continued in New York, and took him all around the world as a trusted negotiator and intermediary.

"During my induction week at a London law firm, we were asked by the senior partner, 'Who is the most important person in the firm?'" recounts Glass. "The answer, of course, was the client. To this day, my real estate clients always have my full attention and support."

Eventually, Glass chose to settle in San Francisco, even if it meant moving far away from his former career. Yet having worked with leases and mortgages that often spanned more than 200 pages, as well as a global network of affluent clients, he had everything he needed to succeed in the world of luxury real estate.

"For my typical client, selling or buying a home may be a matter of several million dollars, instead of $350 million for a 777 airplane—but to them, the purchase is much more important and personal," he says. "Anticipating problems, being responsive, and having answers is critical, because their home purchases are life-changing, and the right investment is crucial."

An architect makes the move to residential sales

Sotheby’s International Realty – Carmel Rancho Brokerage

Scott O’Brien

Scott O’Brien, Broker Associate with Sotheby’s International Realty – Carmel Rancho Brokerage, describes his childhood self as something of a “Kid MacGyver.”

“I always wanted to be an architect,” he recounts. “After graduating from college, my first job was working for an architectural firm with a strong interior design division. This is where I learned to appreciate and understand the critical relationship between a building’s exterior and interior.”

For several years, O’Brien worked in the architecture and interior design industry—and by the time he was ready for a change of scenery, he was the managing partner at his firm. From there, he made the move to a large commercial office complex where he worked closely with the commercial real estate leasing team to plan and construct offices for tenants.

“I had an ability to communicate conceptual ideas to people,” he explains. “The success of the projects caused the head of the real estate team to offer me a position, which launched my career in this field.”

O’Brien discovered his passion for residential real estate—though the two businesses were notably different. “While commercial real estate is predominantly driven by economics, residential real estate is much more emotional and tangible,” he says. “But my experience overseeing commercial projects has proven valuable when helping clients buy, sell, or remodel homes.”

A travel advisor helps clients find permanent paradise

Island Sotheby’s International Realty

Teresa M. Nelle

Before becoming an agent, Teresa M. Nelle of Island Sotheby's International Realty was a travel advisor specializing in bespoke South Pacific holidays. "I truly enjoyed matching my clients to the island that was perfect for them," she says. "If we decided Maui was their fit, then I would meet them when they first arrived, map in hand, and give them an overview of the island, what to do, and where to dine."

This likely sounds familiar: agents don't just sell luxury properties, but the luxury lifestyle, and clients often rely on them for all the best-kept secrets when they arrive in a new area.

"I also learned the importance of really listening to my clients and focusing on their wants and needs," she says. "As a trusted advisor, I let them know that I always had their best interests in mind."

When Nelle chose to transition to a field that would let her interact with more clients face-to-face, a close friend who worked in real estate told her she would be a natural fit. Rather than selling the dream vacation, she'd be selling the dream vacation home—a holiday that her clients and their families could enjoy indefinitely. She switched jobs and never looked back.

"If I met a new agent, or anyone considering a career change, I would assure them that real estate is a great choice," she says. "There are so many types of buyers in the marketplace. If you're patient and are open to listening, you'll find your niche. I'm very happy I made the move."

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