

Finding Time to Assess Your Career

Q. I have been practicing law for seven years. Recently, I have become quite disillusioned with the practice of law. Because I put in such long hours at the office, I find that I have no time to explore my career options. Would it be a mistake to leave my current position before I even know what I want to do next?

A. The answer depends on a host of factors. First of all, can you afford to be without a job? Do you have savings set aside that could be used to cover your living expenses for nine months or a year? Without knowing what avenues you wish to pursue, you cannot predict how long it will take to find your next position.

But as a general rule, it takes longer to find new employment if the kind of work you are looking for is different than what you are now doing. Within several months you might find suitable employment with another firm practicing in the same area. If, instead, you discover that you no longer want to practice law, it will probably take much longer to find your new position because you must familiarize yourself with an entirely new industry and make the appropriate contacts.

In addition to the economic considerations, you don't want to overlook the emotional factors. How would you feel if you didn't have to go into the office every day? Before you say, "Yippee!" think about how you would function without a routine and without the professional contacts. Unfortunately, I have seen several attorneys who celebrated their departure from the work-a-day world, only to discover that they really missed the office after they had left. In some cases, it was the combination of being without a routine and a regular paycheck that deprived them of their sense of self-worth. The result was a lack of energy and enthusiasm that is critical to any successful career search.

Do you have a family? Remember that your decision will impact them. This can work both ways. A family can offer emotional support, but the demands of providing for a family may preclude extended periods of unemployment.

How is your performance at work? Do you spend time daydreaming when you should be working? Have clients started asking why you didn't get something done that you had promised? Have you missed any deadlines or filing dates? If your disillusionment is affecting your ability to represent your clients zealously, you may need to consider taking some immediate action. The practice of law is far too demanding to be able to do the job well when you are constantly distracted.

If you find yourself in this situation, consider the least drastic options first. Do you have vacation time coming? Would it be possible to go on part-time status for at

least a limited period of time? Most firms do not encourage part-time practices, but if the proposal is for a set period of time, it is more likely to be accepted. You probably do not want to explain that you need the additional time to contemplate your future, because at this point you don't know what direction you want to take.

The first step in any successful career search is a thoughtful self-assessment. Without knowing yourself -- your skills, talents, motivations, and values -- you cannot even begin to make a good career choice. And self-assessment takes time for personal reflection. By taking vacation time or working part-time, you will create some available time for this important first step.

If you are unsure whether you want to continue practicing law, you probably do not want to leave your current firm before doing at least some initial assessment of your options within the profession. If you decide that what you really need is just a change of environments, you would not want to leave your clients without knowing where you will land. After seven years in practice you probably have some loyal clients who would want to move with you to your new firm, if that is the direction you wish to take.

If, however, you determine that you do not want to continue the traditional practice of law, there is probably little harm done to your career by having a short gap in your employment. The old adage "It's easier to find a job, if you already have one" is less true today than it was five years ago. When asked by a prospective employer why you left, you would want to emphasize that the practice of law is very demanding and you could not do justice to your clients while pursuing a new career.

As you can see, there are no easy answers to your question. Before announcing your departure, you will want to evaluate the totality of your circumstances *very* carefully!

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