



THINKING OF LEAVING YOUR LAW FIRM? **DON'T JUMP TOO FAST**

By Terrie S. Wheeler, MBC

When I was the marketing director at a large law firm, we surveyed how many law firms the partners had practiced in prior to joining this firm. The average was around 3.5 firms over the course of a career of 20-25 years. Bottom line? Lawyers are prone to thinking the grass is greener on the other side. It might be an opportunity to start your own firm, join a friend at a “better” firm, go in-house with a client, or pursue other opportunities where a law degree matters. If you didn’t get the bonus you were expecting, or are unhappy with your overall compensation, workload, practice area, colleagues, or any other symptom of

unhappiness, it’s time to step back and thoughtfully consider your options at this point in your career.

Personally, I think too many lawyers leave firms for the wrong reasons, like promises of having more work-life balance, or because their name will now be on the door. Not that these aren’t legitimate reasons to make the leap. You may decide to leave. But before you jump to a new firm, consider the following tips.

STEP 1: WEIGHING YOUR OPTIONS

Frustrated? Write It Down. It can be cathartic to think about why you are

unhappy and write it down. Categorize your concerns: compensation, firm politics, relationships, quality of your work, flexibility, partnership issues, credit for marketing results, unrealistic expectations, and others. Then, reflect on this list and ask yourself if these things can be fixed.

Can This Relationship Be Saved? As you review your list of frustrations, determine if there is any action you or others could take to fix the problems. What would it take for you to change your mind and want to stay at the firm? If you feel comfortable, talk to someone at your firm who is in a position to listen to your concerns, and take action on your behalf.

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Focus on Your Clients. While you are going through the process above, don't let it distract you away from providing exceptional service and the highest quality of work to your clients. If you *do* decide to leave in the future, it's likely the majority of your clients will follow you.

Don't Jump Too Quickly. Many times, frustrations can seem insur-

mountable – “This firm isn't going to change, therefore I need to leave.” Leaving is a big decision; one you want complete control over. Regardless of what you're going through, it's important not to just react to the situation you are facing. Rather, be proactive about determining if this is your forever firm, or not.

Talk to Your Trusted Advisers. We all have people in our lives we trust and rely on to tell it like it is. Talk to your inner circle of confidants and share your frustrations with them, as well as solutions you have developed. Get their opinion and be open to their ideas. They will be your advocates and will give you candid, honest feedback about your situation. Take their thoughts to heart and incorporate their suggestions into your stay/go decision.

Consider a Career Counselor. What if you simply don't want to be a lawyer in private practice anymore? There are SO many positions in the marketplace that value your law degree. The key is allowing yourself to consider other careers beyond the practice of law. A trained career counselor can help you on this path.

What are your Strengths? It's a good time to do some self-reflection. Find out what your personality preferences say by taking an online (free) version of the Meyers Briggs-Type Indicator at www.16personalities.com. You can then purchase a book called, “Do What You Are” by Paul D. Tieger, which will show you what others with your personality preferences are doing in their careers.

If after careful deliberation you decide leaving your firm is the right move, consider the following ideas as you prepare to leave.

STEP 2: TAKING THE PLUNGE

Review Your Employment Contract or Partnership Agreement. Read the fine print of your employment agree-

ment. Talk to a plaintiff's employment lawyer about how best to end your relationship with your law firm.

Pull Your Billing and Revenue History Together. The first thing a prospective law firm is going to ask about is your annual billings, fees received, and accounts receivable. Get your finances in order by creating a summary of your fee receipts for the past three years. Any firm will want three to five years of “proof” of your annual billings and collections.

How Do You Want to Practice? Do you want to move to a similar-sized firm, a boutique firm, a small firm, a large mega-firm, go in-house with a client, move into a government position? It's important to know what type of practice will better meet your career requirements and put all your effort into landing the type of position you want.

Beef Up Your Marketing Tools. Now is the time to make sure your website biography is up to date and includes recent presentations, awards, articles written, volunteer commitments, pro bono work, blog posts you have written, and any other information that shows the type of lawyer you are.

Update Your LinkedIn Profile and Engage. You own your personal LinkedIn profile. As you beef up your website biography, also make changes and updates to your LinkedIn profile. Prospective employers will look at both.

NEVER BURN BRIDGES

The legal industry is a relationship business, and the legal community is generally a pretty tightly knit group. Remember, lawyers talk about other lawyers. Your reputation is the most important asset you have. Regardless of personality differences you may have with certain lawyers, don't burn any bridges. Don't disparage your current firm or any of its attorneys. Take the high road if you choose to move on, because today's nemesis could become your ally.



Terrie S. Wheeler, MBC, is a regular contributor to Attorney at Law Magazine, and is president of Professional Services Marketing LLC, www.psm-marketing.com, a 35-person firm that does business development coaching for attorneys and provides outsourced marketing departments for smaller and mid-sized firms. Reach out to Terrie at Terrie@psm-marketing.com.