

Managing your Career in Challenging Times

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Sometimes we think of career management as something to do when times are flush and people are moving from one opportunity to another. We look around, see friends seeming to cash in on growth, and think we should 'manage' our own career. Or, if you are new to practice, everyone is advising you that *you* are the only person who can manage your career, and you best figure out how that is done. But when times are tough, fewer people (or organizations) seem to make this a priority. Instead, people are advised to put their heads down and work, and long term future planning seems to get put on the back burner. The trouble with this notion is that career management is really a lifelong pursuit – in good times and those that are more challenging. And the same truth applies in both kinds of markets; no one other than you will manage your career.

Getting Out

How do you handle the competing demands of “sticking to business” and billing as many hours as are available to you – and managing your career by making sure you stay in touch with other people who can assist you in your career?

One of the ways you can do this is to make it a priority. Each of us wastes plenty of time every day. This is certainly no indictment. One of the ways in which you refresh yourself during a long day of work is by taking occasional breaks and by visiting with colleagues, which has very important career implications. But make sure as well that at least one day a week you make time to meet with a colleague, mentor, or industry member outside of the office. If taking a lunch steals too much billable time in a day, meet for coffee. When the weather breaks, meet someone for a brief walk. If this person is a trusted colleague or mentor, plan your meeting by bringing real world issues to discuss keeping in mind the issues of professional confidentiality. If you are a member of a firm that has a mentoring program, seek the input of your mentor. He or she is likely to have worked through an economic slowdown, and is surely more advanced in his or her career. What thoughts do they have about what you should be doing now? And how did they make it through the work maze to achieve a level of success? You obviously do not need a mentoring program to have a mentor, so seek out your trusted more senior advisors for their suggestions on managing your career effectively.

Pick your Education Wisely

Every year some lawyers find they have put off gathering the requisite CLE hours until close to the end of the bar calendar. Resolve not to be one of those people. There are outstanding CLE opportunities offered throughout the year. Pay attention to the offerings that you encounter throughout the year and attend programs where you will enhance your skills, and/or meet colleagues and potential contacts. While you may also find offerings in exotic locations that you can pair with vacation, make sure you can justify the content as well. They call it continuing education for a reason. Don't waste the time – use it for your betterment. Ask your colleagues for their input as well. Senior people may have more information about who the best instructors are in your line of work and they will appreciate being asked for their recommendations.

In addition to formal CLE programs, spend time getting more education about your own field. Again, senior attorneys may have recommendations about periodicals or industry

journals that can assist you in your development, as well as information about new cases and changes in the law. In addition, invest some time reading general business periodicals to learn more about how to develop as a business professional. There are lots of materials available in the 'self management' arena that can help you become savvier in your work interactions.

Now is not the time to scrimp on additional educational, conference or seminar attendance. Although it may seem counterintuitive in this downturn to spend on discretionary activities; consider these an investment in your career.

Look for Opportunities in the Community

Everyone knows that in this economic climate people are hurting. Just like individuals, not for profit organizations are experiencing a downturn of their investments, and a drop in donations from individuals and corporations. Your decision to volunteer in the community can positively impact organizations and people in need, and be a good career move. We all suffer from the tendency to socialize with the same people, spend our discretionary time doing the same things, and getting stuck in routine. Investing some time in the community can refresh your spirit, teach you new skills, expose you to others in the professions, and do something good for others at the same time. Often when people think about networking they look at it as a way to get something for themselves. Remember that networking is a two way street. If you think to give first – you are likely to be rewarded with a greater return than if you think about what you will get. You will develop new relationships, and your legal background will make you an additional asset to your organization. Again, those around you at work are both a resource for referral to organizations and need, and advisors for where you will likely to gain both satisfaction and experience. When looking for community experience it always makes sense to pursue organizations whose issues and clients are close to your heart. You will be more committed.

Create your own Top 10 list

One of the problems that even the most glib lawyer may encounter when asked the question of, 'well what do you want to do'; or 'what's your dream job?' is suddenly being at a loss for words. And if you have a very specific answer you may worry that you are shutting out potential opportunities.

When was the last time you spent some time compiling your personal list of most enjoyed work activities? Even if you are doing the same thing repetitively, you can typically find several experiences that were different than the others, and more enjoyable. You may also find that a one-off assignment, atypical to your ongoing practice, was of particular interest. Look for opportunities to repeat that experience or learn more about the particular kind of transaction.

The next thing you must be able to do is to articulate those top interests in a way that will mean something to the person with whom you are speaking. It is part of the reason that you need more than two or three things. Your response to the question of 'What are you good at?' or "What do you like to do?" may vary with your audience. Remember as well that if there is something that you want to do which is different than your current practice, the input of those working in that field is very helpful. If people do not know what you are looking for that opportunity it is unlikely they will refer you to such work if it becomes available.

Ask for Feedback

There is no more important time to ask for feedback than hard times. The last thing you want to be doing is perpetuating a bad habit, or annoying a senior member of your organization. While many employees complain (and often correctly) that they don't get enough feedback about their work – the reality is that very few employees *ask* for feedback. If your career depends upon your successful completion of assignments, and the good will and approval of your boss; you really should know where you stand. The number of people who indicate – once let go – that they had a notion there was a problem is legion. The numbers who intervene on their own behalf is very limited. Do not wait for the oft postponed annual or semi-annual performance review to find out how you are doing. Take the initiative and ask for feedback after each assignment. If you have areas of concern about your work, ask specifically for how you did in those areas and seek opportunities to work on more projects that will up your skills. Ask as well for input on what you did well. You need to know your strengths probably to a greater extent than where you need to improve.

Calculating?

Some people believe that this kind of introspection and self reflection is a bit over the top. Who has the time to think about categorizing their past work assignments or planning every coffee meeting? But remember that you are going to be spending time no matter whether you think about what you are doing or not. These are tough times. Focus. It's your career.

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