

Four Months' Notice: What Next?

It's March and spring is just around the corner at long last. That also means it is "review" season in many law firms across Canada. The budget is done, the plan for the year is underway and in some firms, the partner compensation process has been completed — phew!

Most firms, particularly the larger ones, provide formal feedback to associates twice a year. Though, typically, the spring review is the most intense.

But what happens when a review proves unfavourable for a colleague in the firm? Terminating a fellow lawyer is arguably one of the most difficult decisions a legal manager can undertake.

As a result, this decision causes stress and loss of sleep for every managing partner, practice group leader and professional talent director involved in the process.



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Making the decision and delivering the message is one thing, but receiving the message is quite another.

If the title of this article caught your eye, you may have been involved in one of those difficult meetings. Believe me: whether you are the giver of the message, or on the receiving end, it is a stressful time.

The purpose of this commentary is to give the recently terminated reader who does not have the benefit of transition support, some ideas as to a starting point and guidance with the process.

Get Connected with Your Own Priorities

My friend and colleague David Maister told his MBA graduates in 1982 that

“you can't decide what you want from a job until
you're clear on what you want from life.”

So, how do you figure out what you want and need in your next job, which we all know consumes a big part of your life?

This is a time to take a step back and give yourself permission to contemplate your own priorities. In our experience, if you do not take the time to get your priorities on the table, discuss them honestly and candidly with those who know and love you, and understand how and why they are important to you, then you may run the risk of repeating a career mistake.

Inspired by the work done by Mary Lindley Burton and Richard A. Wedermeyer of the Harvard Business School Club of New York's Career Management Seminar series, our company has developed a list of priorities. These include:

- Working in a team
- Contribution to society
- Compensation
- Partnership/possibility of partnership
- Mentoring and training
- Leadership
- Future earning potential
- Geographic location
- Strategic direction of the firm
- Influence and power
- Intrinsic nature of the work
- Time for a personal life
- Prestige and status
- Professional growth
- Security
- Firm culture
- Spouse or partner

You should organize these priorities into three groups, the "deal breakers", the "nice-to-haves" and the "trade offs".

An old gentleman once told me that "the human is the only animal on the planet who will step in the same hole twice." This is an opportunity to be honest with yourself about what is important in your career. If you don't take the right course of action now, you might end up right back where you started.

Let's consider an example of a priority: law firm culture.

Not long ago virtually every firm brochure I read claimed that the firm in question was a "fullservice" firm. In the mid-1990s, those fullservice firms began describing themselves as "entrepreneurial". But what does entrepreneurial mean? Well, in some firms, the term best describes the client base. Those firms work for small to mid-sized-owner managed businesses where the client is the entrepreneur who started the company. Notwithstanding the description, some of these firms have a fairly bureaucratic structure.

In other firms, entrepreneurial describes an environment where ideas are welcomed and fostered, where professionals can identify and pursue a business development opportunity because the firm's leaders welcome initiative and will support people, despite their hunch that the individual may ultimately fail.

Leaders of those firms are confident in the benefits of both learning and experience. Those firms want the professionals to be entrepreneurial and keep the rules to a minimum.

Ask yourself: where would you feel more comfortable? Where would you flourish as a

lawyer?

Another example of a priority is geographic location. To one person the ideal geographic location is the city in which he or she is currently situated. Whether it is Vancouver or Halifax, it may be critically important to find a job in the city he or she calls home. Why? Perhaps due to a spouse or partner's job, or because of extended family or possibly even due to having teenage children whom you simply cannot wrench away from their friends.

Another lawyer may define geographic location as London or New York. Once again, why? Well, maybe due to the exposure to huge transactions in two of the most important financial markets on the planet.

For whatever reason, there can be as many different definitions of each of the priorities as there are people to explore them.

For some, compensation, prestige and status and opportunities for partnership are among the deal breakers. For others, it's the time, intrinsic nature of the work and contribution to society that are paramount.

Figure Out What You Want

I cannot stress the importance of this aspect of the transition process enough. I recall a story about a lawyer who, after four years of corporate practice, claimed that his bank account was full but his soul was empty.

After evaluating and clearly understanding his priorities, he moved out of private practice and into a not-for-profit organization. He now has a workload that would bring a mere mortal to his knees but an inner happiness that is immeasurable because of the considerable contribution he is making to society.

You will be unable to figure out what you want to do merely by going to interviews. If anything, you will become more confused than you may be now. Take some time, step back, gain a perspective and do your homework.

Figure out what you want and then go after it with single-minded determination. Nothing impresses other professionals more than someone who knows exactly what she wants from her life.

Luck is when Preparation Meets Opportunity

"So you are telling me that I'm going to work really hard at this and then by luck I'll find myself a new opportunity" said a client. "Yes, that's exactly right" was my response.

Opportunities come to people who prepare for them, listen for them and act upon them. Whether you are finding a new opportunity or whether you are developing a business, a plan comes together when you are prepared and when you have the initiative to act on an opportunity.

If you are in private practice and your plan is to change firms, be prepared to:

- talk about your numbers (time, fees, collections — those types of things)
- thoroughly research your target firms. Determine everything you can about their client base, their culture, their strategy and direction. Look for practice groups with gaps around your year of call. And finally, look for firms that might need you as much as you need them.
- develop a plan for yourself, your practice and the ways in which you might contribute to your target firm.

Be Honest with Yourself

There are many reasons for being “*in transition*”. In our experience, the individuals who are the most successful at moving on with their careers and their lives are those who honestly take ownership for their part in the decision.

A clear understanding of your strengths and an even better understanding of your weaknesses will help you to seek out opportunities that accentuate your positives and diminish your negatives.

If, for example, you have amazing organizational skills, an unbelievable memory and terrific interpersonal skills, but your drafting is weak, you might find an opportunity where you are managing a portfolio of litigation matters in a legal department. The document preparation is often completed by outside counsel, which means your drafting requirements will be reduced, but your organizational and communication skills will shine as you handle the job with ease, confidence and aplomb.

Become a Valued Alumnus

As you work through your notice period and then walk out the door of your current firm, you will be welcomed to its alumni. Firms are now recognizing that everyone who experiences a part of his or her professional career within a firm may become a referral source or even a client.

From the individual’s perspective, you never know when you will need some advice, be conflicted out or be the recipient of a referral when the firm you are leaving is in the same situation. Do not burn your bridges.

Keep your friends — retain those relationships and give them constant care, even as you make your plans to move on to the “next big thing”.

Our paths cross over and over, especially in the legal community. First you may be colleagues; then you are across from each other on a deal; at some point later you become a client and then you may be back to being colleagues again on a not-for-profit board.

When faced with a transition, you will rise in the opinion of your colleagues if you handle your situation with grace,



dignity and professionalism.

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