

What If You're the Unproductive Partner?

Your firm makes you a partner based on potential—a belief that everything the partners have observed indicates you have the characteristics to be successful. You've got what it takes!

But making partner is one thing. Staying partner is quite another.

By now you know the metrics required for continued success in your firm (or if you don't, you should). You know what impacts profitability in your unique practice area. You know what partners expect of each other in terms of revenue, effort, service to the firm, and service to the community and the profession. They are all contributions that owners make in the business on an ongoing basis.



by Karen MacKay, MBA, CHRP
President

But What If You're Not Cutting It?

You are the first to know when you are struggling. You know well ahead of those holding you accountable when you are trending toward "unproductive partner" status. So what do you do? You have three choices.

- **Option One: Attempt creative avoidance.** This strategy is destined to get your name on the management committee's discussion agenda.
- **Option Two: Wait until the managing partner stops by for a chat.** This approach is firmly planted in denial. You could, of course, complain about the firm, the leadership or its strategy—an offensive move perhaps, and a clear duck-and-run that is also destined to fail.
- **Option Three: Take corrective action.** In exercising this choice, you re-assess your skills, your strengths and your practice and create a proactive plan for your future. And remember, you didn't get here overnight—this evolved over time. Consider your current state of physical and emotional well-being. If you need medical, spiritual or emotional help, then reach out and get it.

Yes, your future may involve your current firm—or it may evolve into something else. Before choosing what to do next, take a good long look in the mirror.

Consider How You Got Here—And How You'll Move Forward

There are typically three routes to the land of the unproductive partner: business development, practice management or people management. Following are some ideas for you to consider.

- **Business development.** There are many ways to build a practice. Honestly, though, many lawyers inherit one—or, they have good skills combined with being in the right place at the right time. If you have never honed the skills necessary to take what you've inherited and grow it, you need to focus on learning business development skills. Networking is at the core. Beyond that you should play to your strengths. If you like to write, do that to build your profile. If you like to speak, get to the podium. Get out of your comfort zone and take on the challenge of building and applying a winning set of business development skills.
- **Practice management.** In today's law firms, there is no room for poor practice management. Clients demand efficiency and effectiveness, project management and regular reporting. If you are disorganized, get help with that and make room for new and better work. If you are not capturing time, billing and collecting regularly and in ways your clients want, get help with that. Enlist the help of an appropriate person or two in the firm—either give them nagging rights or the authority to manage this for you.
- **People management.** You may have lots of clients and fairly high revenue, but if you burn through staff and associates, you are unproductive. You are eroding profits, negatively impacting culture and losing respect. Stanford professor Robert Sutton wrote a book called *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*. In it, he provides a **24-item self-rating test** that answers the question, "Are You a Certified Asshole?" It might help you to find out, in the quiet of your own office if, according to this research, you are a jerk. There are other clues, of course, but if most people avoid having a difficult conversation with you, your bully behavior can go on unchecked for years. Fortunately, everyone is capable of change. So if you value your firm, your capital account and your colleagues, you should take some steps to change your own behavior starting now.

Go Ahead, Take the Reins

No one aspires to be unproductive. If your law practice is eroding—whether for the above or other reasons—get out in front of it. Avoidance and denial are not effective. Meet preemptively with your managing partner to talk about your concerns and discuss how you will turn things around. Invest in yourself. Hire a coach—someone who knows your world and whom you respect. Develop a plan and work on incremental change. Own your issues and move forward. Assemble your own team to help you reach your potential and get back in the game.



Other **Partner & Leadership Articles.**

This article originally appeared in the August 1, 2012, edition of the magazine **attorneyatwork** in the Careers section.

[pdf version](#)