



## CHANGE CAN REFRESH YOUR CAREER

It was after one of his clients brought a knife to a divorce settlement conference that Patric L. decided something had to change. The client said she didn't want to hurt anyone, but she did hope to facilitate the equitable split of assets with her husband.

Patric, a sole practitioner, says the incident pushed him to the brink of sanity. He didn't want to give up the practice of law, but he knew he couldn't continue at the same frantic pace and he didn't want to continue to accept cases that were not a good fit for him. He realized that he was "a generalist," and as a result he felt that everything he read or heard about was important to his cases. He realized he could never keep up and that he should make a change that would improve his practice and his life – for his sake and for the sake of his clients.

So Patric decided to make a single change in the way he practiced law. Single, yet profound.

### FROM FRUSTRATION TO ELATION

Instead of accepting every client who walked through his office door, he decided to limit his practice to plaintiffs' personal injury cases. Without the change, Patric says, his law practice would have continued to be nothing more than an exercise in frustration. With it, he says he is a different person.

The predicament Patric found himself in is not uncommon. Many lawyers who feel dissatisfied with their practices think leaving the practice of law is their only option but, as Patric and others have found, sometimes making just one change can bring happiness back into a lawyer's professional life.

Lawyer-turned-career-counselor Cheryl Heisler of Chicago-based Lawternatives says many of her clients – attorneys who are dissatisfied with their careers – happen upon this realization only after prob-

ing to find what is truly troubling them about their practices. She recommends a self-assessment that includes evaluating what the attorney likes about the practice and what he or she does well, what kinds of clients the attorney likes to work with, and what kind of workload the attorney prefers.

### FIRM CULTURES VARY

Lawyers who work in firms have the additional challenge of sorting out the impact of the firm itself. Heisler says many lawyers don't realize the impact a firm's culture has on their happiness. She notes: "Just because you are not happy in your firm does not mean that you can't borrow elements from another firm's culture or consider going to another place where the values are more in sync with your own."

Sometimes the problem is not a clash of values but one of ideals. Laura T. found herself at a crossroads when, despite the success of her practice, she knew she could not continue to practice the way she had for the past five years. She had been working nearly 80 hours a week and was considering hiring another lawyer to help keep up with the work.

"I knew I needed to make a decision. I looked around at other sole practitioners who were working all the time, who never saw their families," she says. "I realized that I needed some balance."

But Laura was not sure how to find that balance. She liked her litigation work best but knew she could not be a trial lawyer and have the balanced life she was seeking. After assessing what attracted her to litigation, she concluded that it was the research and writing – and not the thrill of the courtroom or the pace of the practice – that she enjoyed. So she took a gamble and began limiting herself to appellate work. Doing work she likes within a predictable schedule has finally brought her personal and professional satisfaction.

### **EXHAUST ALL POSSIBILITIES**

Though not everyone can find happiness in law practice by making a change, Heisler says she still believes it's worth a try before leaving law completely. She suggests that lawyers cast the net as widely as possible by looking at extra-legal and quasi-legal options, as well as options in the law. If a lawyer has tried a couple of firms and government positions and gone in-house and still has the same complaints job after job, then she suggests that there is something more going on than just bad bosses or culture clashes. "Then it is time to consider changing careers." However, since lawyers put a lot into going to law school, it is worthwhile to explore all the other options first.

Jill Schachner Chanen

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