

Business & Careers

A lateral move can help cure ills

Consider a change when feeling the ‘Sunday night blues’

GRANT CAMERON

It's Sunday night and that dreadful, sickening feeling is welling up again. The thought of going into the office to start another week at the same old law firm has your stomach in knots.

If you're a lawyer, it could be triggered by the fact you're not making enough money, your work-life balance is out of kilter, you have a conflict or just don't like your co-workers.

"I call it the Sunday night blues," says Warren Bongard, president and co-founder of ZSA Legal Recruitment in Toronto. "They think, 'Oh my God, I've got a whole week to go back at that place,' and they're just so unhappy that they don't want to go back to work."

If you're a lawyer, and you're in that position, Bongard says it might be time to change jobs — and consider a lateral career move.

While a lateral move might seem like a hassle at first, he says there are myriad good reasons for a lawyer to choose that route.

"It could be that you're feeling out of sorts or out of the core of the firm and you don't feel connected to the key people in the firm or management. You may be feeling a bit marginalized and perhaps the practice area that you're in is not an area of growth or intended growth for the firm. You need to find a situation where you can get a better fit."

Lawyers might also consider a lateral move if they're looking to go to a firm where they can charge lower rates, or they have a conflict with the direction the firm is taking, he says.

"If you're doing work for Pepsi and your firm's just got retained by Coke and they don't want you representing Pepsi anymore obviously you're going to have to move and find a firm that's more Pepsi-friendly. If the person is a pension lawyer and the firm has made the decision that they don't want a big pension practice, that might also be time to move."

Lawyer Mark MacNeill, a partner and head of the plaintiff personal injury litigation group at Brauti Thorning Zibarras (BTZ) in Toronto, says lawyers should think about making a lateral move if they've lost interest in their job or they're unhappy about their work.

"If you're unhappy about going to work because you're not seeing your kids or your wife or you're unhappy at work because they've got you doing the same thing and you have more to bring to the table, that's often a sign that you need to think about changing jobs."

But, he adds, there are other good reasons a lawyer might think about a lateral career move.

"When you're also plateauing with respect to work and therefore income, and if you're not getting responsibilities at the office, that's also probably a signal," he explains. "If you haven't figured it out, you're going to figure it out when the knock comes on the door."

Carrie Heller of The Heller Group says lawyers should think about a lateral move when they're no longer excited by the job.

"As a colleague of mine said, it's when you wake up every day and say, 'Do I want to fight this battle again today?' It's just as simple as that. You wake up and you're not excited to go to work or you're anxious about going to work or you start not winning certain pitches."

Lawyers might also be wise to think about a lateral change of scenery if the work environment doesn't feel right or their practice is stagnant, says Heller.

"You could just generally be frustrated in how the environment works and sometimes people just don't agree about the bureaucracy within a firm."

Or, she says, the lawyer might not like the way the firm is going about marketing the firm or their practice.

If an associate has been at a firm for a while and hasn't made partner, or has been told they won't make partner, that might also be time to consider a lateral move, she says.

While a lateral move can be a good idea, the experts recommend that lawyers think long and hard before pulling the plug because the grass is not always greener on the other side.

"I can't claim that every lateral move will be the right lateral move," says Heller. "Some can be very positive and others don't turn out to be what you expected."

Partners who make a lateral move could end up



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losing clients, she says, as those clients may want to stay, and lawyers will also have to prove themselves again if they move.

"You'll have a new group of colleagues and you'll no longer have the goodwill that you may have had in the other firm. It's a new landscape so you'll have to figure out the new environment and how you maneuver within it, how you get things done, and who's important."

Heller says that when lawyers do decide to leave a firm they should refrain from advertising their plans.

"Don't talk about it too much if you're about to make a move. You certainly don't want it getting back to the firm that you're leaving so you need to be discreet, you need to be professional and you don't want to play any games. You want to be honest and transparent throughout the process."

MacNeill of BTZ suggests that lawyers do some research on firms they're targeting for a new job before making a move.

"It never ceases to amaze me how many people go to a specific place and they have no real concept of the way a practice is structured."

"Law schools used to give you the impression that as long as you landed a good job and you put your head down and you worked real hard and did great work and billed lots of hours eventually somebody comes down the hallway and anoints you and you're suddenly a partner and your salary doubles and life is good and it is absolutely not that way."

When lawyers do leave a firm, MacNeill says they shouldn't burn their bridges because the legal community is relatively small and word tends to get around.

"Even if you're departing and things are not on the best of terms, you should strive to make them on the best terms possible and mum's the word. Everybody should go away with smiles."