

Have You Gone For Your Annual Career Checkup?

If you practice in a law firm (and in particular, at a large law firm), you know that finding the right balance between your professional and personal life is no easy task. Getting the right balance requires a good understanding of your own preferences and values.

Granted, along the way you will need to pay your dues; but even when you get to a place in your career where things seem to be going well, you owe it to yourself to periodically evaluate whether there is anything you can improve upon.

If you take the time for self-reflection on a regular basis, you will be less likely to hit a career crisis and you will have time to initiate change gradually when the early signs of dissatisfaction begin to show.

Put another way, [achieving career satisfaction takes ongoing work](#). For one, your needs and interests will evolve as you move through different phases in life.

In your late 20s, your focus may be proving yourself at work, while in your late 30s, you may be trying to balance work with the needs of a young family.

Furthermore, in the economy of the 21st century, expect the unexpected. What is working well today may not exist tomorrow. The law firm environment you have come to appreciate may be merged out of existence. The clients you enjoy working with may run out of cash. Partners you like may leave. Your practice area may experience a significant slowdown.

There are many ways to be reflective. To get you started, I have devised a simple list of questions that you can get through with minimal effort; however, getting out of your office and speaking with more seasoned attorneys is an important next step.

Thinking you would like to pursue a new practice area may be a well-reasoned conclusion. But it is a good idea to do a reality check and find out more from those who practice in this area (i.e., to see if your perceptions about the new practice area are correct and to gauge whether or not the new area holds some promise).

20 Questions To Help Evaluate Your Potential Need For Change

1. Does your work provide you with enough intellectual challenge? Too much?
2. Do you enjoy your work?

In a law firm, even the most senior partner has to put up with things he does not like doing. But it is reasonable to want to enjoy what you do 75 percent of the time.

3. Do you find your work meaningful?
4. Is your work consistent with your values?

Do you value a quality work product? Bottom line results for clients? How employees are treated? Is integrity high on your list of values? How about serving the needs of others? Being part of a mission protecting the environment, providing legal services to the poor, promoting civil rights, etc.? Efficiency? Getting paid top dollar for your skills? Having a lot of free time available for personal interests/family? How does your current job measure up against these values? (e.g., If producing a high-quality work product is an important value to you, you will probably be unhappy in a work environment where you are rewarded for moving a high volume of cases as quickly as possible.)

5. Is work that is more consistent with your interests available at your firm? Have you asked for it?

6. If you have asked for more challenging, enjoyable or meaningful work and you have not been given this work, is the work likely to get more challenging, interesting or meaningful as you get more senior? Can you tolerate the you are doing until this happens?
7. Can you find more meaning in your work by supplementing your regular caseload with pro bono work or work from fee-paying clients who cannot afford the regular firm rate? Can you spend some of your time on marketing so that down the road you will have the kind of work/clients you want?
8. If the work is not likely to improve, is your current position worth sticking with because it is a stepping stone to the job that you do want?
9. Is the job worth sticking with because the salary you are earning will help pay off your debt and give you more career flexibility in a shorter period of time?
10. If you do not have time for volunteer/pro bono work, can you get satisfaction by providing financial support to the causes that interest you?
1. Are you satisfied with the hours that you work? With the predictability of these hours?
2. Does the firm allow you to work part time and/or telecommute? Have other associates or partners in your department had a positive experience working in this capacity?
3. Are you happy with the level of collegiality in your firm? Do you like the partners and associates with whom you work? Is it possible to avoid the partners you do not like working with?
4. Do you receive constructive criticism on your work and sufficient career guidance from colleagues? Can you ask for more?
5. Are you given ample opportunity to attend internal and/or external CLE programs?
6. Are you happy with the level of professionalism in your organization?
7. Would you have more career satisfaction doing the same work in a different environment? Does such a workplace exist?
8. Would you be happy if you could do the same work for fewer hours? Is it possible to do this kind of work in fewer hours?
9. Do you like the firm's clients? Can you avoid working with the clients whom you do not like?
10. Are you satisfied with your compensation? Could you find a comparable work situation that pays more?

There is some overlap in the questions that have been posed and there are many other questions that you can ask yourself. If you are in a career crisis, you may want to consider getting some [career counseling](#) with a trained specialist.

Just don't expect miraculous epiphanies or instant results, though. Real career happiness takes a lot of work to achieve and continuous work to maintain. But the payoff with respect to your emotional health is large.