



IS YOUR CAREER Terminal?

By Timothy D. Batdorf

Perhaps you've had a turning point in your life, a time when you knew you had to honestly look at your career. You knew you wanted something more. You wanted to work with people, not just bill hours. Are you ready for something new?

To answer that question, take the following test. Consider the test a variation of your bar examination, but rather than determining whether you are *competent* to practice law, the test determines whether you are *content* to practice law as you currently do.

T	F	ARE YOU CONTENT?
		I have worked for several different law firms and have not particularly enjoyed working at any of them.
		I never seem to bill enough hours or satisfy my boss or clients.
		I'm not really sure who I help in the world.
		My life primarily involves working and watching TV.
		I always feel as if I should be working.
		The law is a business, pure and simple.
		Most lawyers are self-interested, arrogant jerks. I'm sick of them.
		I would leave the firm, but I have a real sense of loyalty to it.
		I envy other lawyers. I wish I could practice in a different area of law.
		Law was my second choice. I always wanted to do something else.
		I like to have a couple of drinks after work at least a couple of times per week. I need some stress relief.
		I'm walking on eggshells all the time. I don't like what I do, yet I'm too scared to do anything about it. I don't want to be fired.
		I have too many bills and other obligations to seriously consider making any major changes, although I'd love to make a change.
		I complain about my job to my friends, family, and colleagues.
		I feel anxious, angry, or sad most of the time when I'm at work, or I've become so numb I don't feel anything at all.
		This test is stupid. Most lawyers will check "true" for each answer.

Relax. If you checked “true” for any statement, your bar license will not be revoked, but it may mean your career is not as satisfying for you as it could be. If your career is unsatisfying, consider the possibilities.

“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s mind there are few.”

—Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Master

We are all “experts” on our lives. We think we know everything there is to know about ourselves. Unfortunately, we each have limiting beliefs that tell us what we can’t do. Some of those limiting beliefs may be absolutely correct (I’ll never be an NBA star, for example), but many of our limiting beliefs are way off target. Interestingly, most of us assume that *all* of our limiting beliefs are true, so we settle for unfulfilling careers. We endure years of low-grade misery rather than begin the simple process of examining our lives to create greater career satisfaction.

If you are like many lawyers, you may be a cynical “expert,” believing no options are available for you. You may point to your student loans and mortgage and your children’s education fund and say, “There’s nothing I can do. I’m stuck.”

FAST FACTS

We each have limiting beliefs that tell us what we can’t do.

As lawyers, many choices exist for us to create satisfying and meaningful careers.

We must be willing to overcome our limiting beliefs and be proactive in making the choices that work for us if we want more from our careers.

Not so. Here are six key options to consider—from the lowest possible risk to high risk:

OPTION 1: Do nothing.

Presumably, you’re making a living and things are going okay. So the good news is that you don’t have to do anything. There is no shame in maintaining the status quo. You can always stay where you are and try to learn to enjoy what you do and how you do it.

But remember, there are always risks associated with staying in a miserable job. If you don’t like what you do, you’re not as likely to perform as well as those who are passionate about what they do. You’re not as likely to stay current on the law as someone who actually cares about that area of law. You may not be as enthusiastic at the office, or in court, or with your clients. You may discover that your job misery translates into poor job performance or perhaps lack of self-confidence. You then run the risk of being fired or becoming extremely depressed, neither one of which sounds too appealing.

For most of us, when our misery exceeds our fear, we take action. We are forced to change our patterns.

Misery > Fear = Change

OPTION 2: Ask for what you want.

If you know you must take some form of action (and assuming you are currently employed at a law firm), your next best option may be to simply ask for what you want from your employer.

You can *always* ask for what you want, no matter how outrageous your request may seem. All you have to do is figure out what you want, ask for it, and be ready to accept (and deal with) whatever answer you receive.

For example, if you don’t like working for the lawyer down the hall, ask for another supervising attorney. If you don’t like your practice area, ask to transfer to another practice area or create your own practice area. If you don’t like your billable hour requirements, ask to work less. If you don’t like your salary, ask for more money.

But asking for what you want can be frightening. What if your firm says no? What if your boss gets angry that you asked? What if you’re fired on the spot because you had the gall to ask for something?

Well, here’s something that may completely surprise you. Most law firms want to hire confident lawyers, the type of lawyers who know how to ask for things. In fact, very few law firms, if any, are going out of their way to hire lawyers who eat paste

and passively take whatever is handed to them. You're highly unlikely to read this ad:

WANTED

Extremely Passive Lawyer. We are looking for a 100% pure milquetoast lawyer who is so bland and agreeable that we are guaranteed to lose every client and case. Please submit references.

Consider this: if a law firm is filled with a bunch of passive lawyers who don't know how to ask for things, that firm will be out of business in the very near future.

Get over your fear of asking for what you want. If you don't, I'll guarantee you will never, ever, in a million years, get what you want. But here's a word to the wise: be reasonable in your requests, and be prepared to give your rationale for the requests you make.

You might also consider devising a backup strategy. That way, no matter what your firm says or does, you can go to your backup plan, which might mean transitioning to another firm or starting your own practice.

Here's a true story from my own career. At one point, I kept getting satisfactory annual reviews, but at the end of each review, my supervising attorney said, "Tim, we'd like to see you be more confident. You're a good lawyer, but you don't seem to believe in yourself."

After one review, I decided to stretch my comfort zone and do more of what I wanted to do at the firm. I started working fewer hours. I didn't show up at the office at the crack of dawn because I thought I *should* be in the office. I left the office early. I stopped doing things for appearances. I started being more of who I was.

Believe it or not, my next review was phenomenal. My supervising attorney couldn't believe the change in me: "Tim, your confidence is amazing! I don't know what you've done, but you are doing a tremendous job."

Here's the frosting on the cake: I received a significant pay increase despite the fact that my billable hours declined.

OPTION 3: Transition to another firm.

A close friend of mine is a therapist (and non-practicing lawyer) who has counseled many attorneys from all walks of life over the past few years. He sees the same patterns over and over.

An attorney works for a firm and hates the work environment. Over time, the attorney, believing the grass is greener at some other firm, quits and moves to "greener pastures."

For a while, there is a "honeymoon" period. The new firm loves its newly hired lawyer, and the newly hired lawyer loves the new firm.

Eventually, however, the same old patterns emerge. Billable hours are too high. Expectations are too high. Too much politics and BS.

If you want to switch firms, make sure you know *exactly* what you don't like about your current job situation. Then interview as many firms as possible, learning as much as you can in the process. Your primary objective is to avoid the same problems in your next job.

But remember: don't burn your bridges. You might discover you want to return to your original employer.

One final thought about firm transition. Some attorneys are scared to death of sending résumés to other firms or hiring a headhunter. Consider other options, such as networking with people you trust and seeking "informational" interviews rather than "job" interviews.

OPTION 4: Transition to another practice area.

Some lawyers are green with envy. They wish they could practice in a different area of the law—the practice area of the lawyer down the hall.

But if you want to change your practice area, you'll face difficult challenges. For one thing, the lawyers in your firm probably see you as one type of lawyer and one type of lawyer only: *the exact type of lawyer you are right now.*

Or, perhaps your firm does not serve the types of clients you want to serve, or your firm already has enough lawyers practicing in that practice area, or you may not have the credentials or experience for your chosen field.

Early in my career, I switched from being a trial attorney to being a transactional attorney. I went back to school, to a tax program, to make that change. When I graduated from the tax program, I found a job with a good law firm. Yet, after several months, I realized I was still unhappy. What I discovered was that I enjoyed my new practice area, but I did not enjoy working in a law firm environment. At that point, I knew I had to leave the firm and start my own law practice.

Moral of the story: changing practice areas did not solve all of my career woes, but it made a significant improvement in my life and brought me closer to where I needed to go.



OPTION 5: Fly solo.

In starting a solo practice, you should do two things: (1) minimize expenses as much as possible, and (2) get 12 months of savings in the bank even if it means taking out a loan. Knowing you have time to develop your practice will be a huge relief.

You should also anticipate resistance from family and friends. Loved ones are often concerned about the implications for the future when a business is started. You may want to carefully consider how you discuss your new venture with them. Having a strong business plan will ease concerns.

Most importantly, your family and friends will make all sorts of promises about hiring you. Remember, it will take them several months (and even years) to do so. Your timeline for doing their legal work will differ from theirs!

If you're like most solo lawyers, your biggest challenge will be developing a solid book of business. If that's your situation, I recommend reading C. J. Hayden's book, *Get Clients Now! A 28-Day Marketing Program for Professionals and Consultants*. This book was tremendously helpful for me in creating a marketing plan that was fun and easy to follow.

Starting a solo practice isn't easy—at least it wasn't for me. But I can honestly say this: *my worst day as a solo lawyer is better than my best day working at a law firm.*

OPTION 6: Quit the law.

Perhaps you simply hate being a lawyer. Maybe you never wanted to be a lawyer in the first place and chose the legal profession because it was a "safe career choice."

Know this: your story is not new or unique.

Lots of lawyers chose the law for the wrong reasons. Some chose the profession to please their parents, family, or friends. Others became lawyers solely to gain money, status, and prestige. Still others chose the law because they didn't really know what else to do. There are probably as many bad reasons to become a lawyer as there are bad lawyers.

The law is a "second choice" profession for many lawyers, too. I've known lawyers who wished they had done something else, like become a chef, a writer, or a mountain or rock climber, a therapist, artist, social activist, world traveler, marine biologist, actor/actress, journalist, rock star, or even a river boat captain. Ahoy, matie!

Perhaps right now you're saying to yourself, "I never wanted to be a lawyer in the first place. It's time for me to quit. I *have* to do it now and can't wait any longer. Let the chips fall where they may." If that's where you are, I have some simple advice for you: Slow down. Consider your options. Consider the possibilities. Don't be rash.

There are many ways to do what you want to do without entirely giving up the law and risking the possibility of throwing away your career.

Before you make any significant move, consider whether you are running *to* something you know you'll love, or running *from* something you think you hate. If you're running from something,

We are all "experts" on our lives. We think we know everything there is to know about ourselves. Unfortunately, we each have limiting beliefs that tell us what we can't do. Some of those limiting beliefs may be absolutely correct (I'll never be an NBA star, for example), but many of our limiting beliefs are way off target.

perhaps you can add little things to your work day to make your life more enjoyable.

Personally, I've discovered I can pursue many different career interests at the same time. I am a lawyer *and* an author *and* a group trainer *and* a career coach. Instead of changing jobs, I changed perspectives. Instead of viewing my career from an "either/or" mentality ("I either have to be a lawyer *or* a writer"), I adopted a "both/and" mentality ("I can be both a lawyer *and* a writer").

How do I find the time to do these things? The answer is simple. When I do things I enjoy, I have more energy and enthusiasm for everything I do.

My invitation is to follow your inspiration as much as possible while working towards filling more and more of your day with inspired work.

See what happens. You might be surprised. ■

Editor's Note: This article is from Chapters 2 and 4 of Mr. Batdorf's book, The Lawyer's Guide to Being Human: How to Bring Who You Are to What You Do © 2007, Tim Batdorf. The original work has been edited and adapted to meet requirements of the Michigan Bar Journal.

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