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Should I Stay or Should I Go? Making a Career Transition

October 13, 2015 | Erin C. Cowling

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Career transitions can be difficult (let's be honest, more like downright terrifying). I knew a career shift was on the horizon when I returned from my second maternity leave to my job as a senior litigation associate at a large law firm. Something was "off". I no longer felt energized when I walked into the office. Instead of looking forward to work, I counted down the minutes to when I could leave. I wasn't sure if this was because of my time at home, the expectations of the job, the files, the clients, the firm, or a bit or all of the above. I just knew something had to change, but didn't know where to begin. I had only worked at the one law firm. I thought: "What else could there possibly be? A 'Big Law' job was what everyone strived for wasn't it?" I had blinders on. I felt stuck.

When an opportunity came along to join an estate litigation boutique I jumped at it without hesitation. I was a seventh year associate without a book of business; I thought it was unlikely that I could find another opportunity like it.

But I quickly realized I had made a mistake. I jumped into a career transition without thinking it through. I was not suited for estate litigation. I am an emotional sponge and I absorbed all of the hurt, anger, sadness, and grief that my clients brought to me on a daily basis. Once again I was facing a difficult career decision. I was pregnant with my third child and I was dealing with an unhealthy amount of stress being in a job that was clearly not right for me. Even though it was unlikely that I could find another job while pregnant I knew I had to quit. Thanks to a supportive spouse I was able to, but going from a two income family to one was not without its challenges.

Once again I was back at square one, and feeling like a complete failure. I was eager to start a new chapter in my legal career, but I didn't know how or where. After the birth of my daughter I applied to random jobs, but I would always get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that the job just wasn't right for me. This time I listened to that feeling.

I knew I didn't want to leave the legal profession but was there a place for me within it? I started to reflect on what I liked about the law. I really enjoyed the research and writing aspect of being a litigator, so I asked my lawyer friends if they knew anyone who needed some part time assistance with writing legal research memos, pleadings, case comments, client newsletters, or legal articles. Soon a lawyer asked if I could assist her with a conference paper she was writing. Then another lawyer friend asked for help with a client newsletter. After hearing about the work I was doing, yet another lawyer asked if I could write a blog post for his website.

I decided to stop my job search. I put up a website, changed my LinkedIn profile, printed some business cards and started pounding the pavement looking for lawyer clients. Suddenly I felt re-energized. I now look forward to going to work. Mondays are no longer dreaded. I love being a freelance lawyer (sometimes called a project/contract lawyer) and assisting other sole practitioners and law firms with their legal research and writing, legal content marketing, and litigation support. Will this be my final career transition? I'm not sure, but if I need to transition again, this time I have a better idea of how to do it.

MY THREE TAKEAWAYS ON CAREER TRANSITIONS:

1. **Think Before You Leap:** Before you even think about leaving, is there anything you can change within your current position? Before I left the large firm I approached my superiors with suggested changes that I thought would make work fulfilling for me again. The firm decided to not implement the changes, but you never know if you don't ask.
2. **Don't Jump at the First Opportunity:** Before you accept a new job offer sleep on it. Ask yourself, what will be different at this new job? Am I taking this job because I am afraid I won't find another one? Have you discussed the new job with your partner, friends, parents etc.? Do they think it is right for you?
3. **'Failure' Should Not be Feared:** I know as lawyers this is easier said than done, but if you do make the wrong career choice, try not to see it as a failure. It is a learning experience. A little stumble may simply be a way to correct your course and send you in the right direction.

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Erin, thank you for sharing your experience and afterthoughts. No doubt your thoughtful analysis of the process of finding a different career in law will help others who are looking for a new way to practise law.