

Go Ahead, Cross the Road

Career Change as Manageable Risk

By Wendy Werner

After many years of working with lawyers and law students, a pattern began to emerge. Every time I suggested to a lawyer that he or she consider another career option, be it a simple change to a different firm doing the same work, or something as radical as leaving the practice for an alternative career field, or moving to another city, I met with a great deal of resistance. This seemed strange, because these attorneys all initiated the conversation indicating that their current employment was dissatisfying. After years of the same response it finally dawned on me. Lawyers are risk avoidant.

People from all walks of life may be prone to avoiding undue risk. But lawyers are a breed apart. What makes them so? The very nature of their expertise, and skill in their chosen career makes it extremely difficult to face change without great trepidation. Where does this risk avoidance come from? An early and significant contributing factor is law school itself. What is the study of case law if not a study of risk gone bad! Each day for three (or more) years, the law student studies the negative outcomes that have been foisted upon those clients memorialized in case law who dared to a) cross the road into the oncoming truck b) buy that piece of toxic laced property or c) have that operation that resulted in permanent injury. Lawyers spend much of their time either assisting their clients in the avoidance of undue risk or in mopping up the damage after risk has caused some terrible result. Lawyers are taught to always consider the worst-case scenario. They are taught to consider all of the possible available consequences and to take the road least likely to cause exposure. This is their job. Unfortunately, it is likely that this learned risk avoidance will spill over into other areas of their lives where such a tendency may not be in their personal best interest.

How does this risk avoidant behavior impact career development? When dealing with law students, it was always interesting to hear first year students talk about their lofty career goals and long-term plans. But by third year, it often appears that horizons have narrowed. Perhaps some of this is due to the practical reality of loan payments and potential options – but it always seems that choices have narrowed beyond necessity.

In my experience, the same behavior surfaces with many attorneys considering lateral choices. First, many attorneys seem to dismiss opportunities for options out of hand. And others seem to believe that the first best choice is to stay put, to not put themselves in what might be perceived to be harm's way.

The good news in the legal profession is that career opportunities and change are more prevalent than ever. Twenty years ago it would have been highly unusual for a partner to move to a different firm. Attorneys who were in an initial position for less than two years were considered to be 'job hoppers' and labeled as potentially unstable or difficult employees. Now partners may make several firm changes, and attorneys move in and out of private practice to corporate, the public sector or back to firms on a routine basis.

Instead of thinking about the potential downside of change, it is worthwhile to consider what people give up when not considering opportunities for *manageable risk through change*.

The question is this: What are the risks of staying versus leaving a job? And the answer is, as they say, 'it depends'. What are you looking for on a short term and long term basis? What are your goals, your values, your life circumstances, your constraints, your freedoms? These are elements against which you can measure choices. For one thing, there is never any harm in checking out opportunities that might be on the horizon, or closer to one's back yard. Too many attorneys pass up too many opportunities to check out new options.

Many lawyers that I talk with regularly automatically reject phone calls from headhunters or from colleagues out of hand. There is certainly no cost to talking to these people, and it is a great way to get information about markets and opportunities. It is almost always wise to take at least a few minutes to learn more. The information

could be worth a great deal in terms of intelligence about the market, and that knowledge might help someone improve their standing in a position in which they would like to stay. Everyone wants someone that someone else wants. Many attorneys say they are simply too busy to investigate when they believe they are content; but there is less of a cost than ever under these circumstances and most people appear much more appealing as candidates when they're not looking. No one ever knows when their current circumstance may change and there will be a need or a desire to explore other options. Those who have developed a reputation for considering all opportunities are more likely to be sought out later on.

[Back to Top](#) 

How to make risk more manageable.

- **Stay current with professional associations.**

Individuals not looking for new opportunities may fail to stay current with bar groups and activities. The time to be most current with these groups is when your current work is sailing smoothly. Volunteer time for committees and stay in touch with other members.

- **Always have an up to date resume.**

When someone contacts you, even if you're not sure of your long-term interest, you want to be able to respond immediately. It is much easier to prepare a resume when you're not under stress. Make sure it is up to date and includes your accomplishments as well as your responsibilities.

- **Make sure you know what your dream job would be.**

It is hard to accept your dream job if you don't know what it is. Indulge yourself. Make sure you know what it is that you really would like to do, so that if it comes along; or a step to it comes along you would be ready to move forward.

- **Determine bottom line needs for security.**

This might include what financial cushion you would need in order to make a change, and the knowledge of what risks are real or imagined.

- **Assess past risk taking and its outcome.**

Everyone has points and times in their lives when they have taken some kind of risk. The past can be key in determining how much risk has really been a part of your decision making. When you took a risk in the past, what did you do to minimize the negative possibility of such risk? What factors may have changed in your life since you last took these risks? What was the most negative outcome that you ever experienced in your career as a result of risk? When you look at these circumstances on paper, you are likely to learn that there hasn't been that much down side to risk in your past.

- **Consider the positive.**

While this may be difficult to do in advance, consider what might be gained by taking this risk. What might it mean in a positive

way to either head directly to an area that you have always thought about pursuing, or by taking intermediate steps to get there?

- **What elements would need to be in place to move forward?**

Sometimes people never pursue their dreams or long term interests because there are barriers (real or imagined) in the way of doing so. What might these barriers be and how can you keep them from being continuing factors? This might mean carving out time to pursue a specific career option, getting some amount of additional education, or taking a reconnaissance trip to another city.

- **When you look back, could this be a 'what if' situation?**

A question that I often ask clients is this, "What would you do if you were guaranteed that you could not fail?" At first this thought might be difficult for many people to imagine. But inevitably, after the first few minutes of stopping to think, a myriad of ideas pour forth. Once having narrowed those choices to the more realistic side, you can create a path and steps to reach positions that you might have thought possible.

We are headed toward the holidays. It is a time when we stop and consider the things that are most important to each of us. Certainly a work life that is fulfilling, enjoyable and which you would look forward to most days would be something to be thankful for. Maybe, if you look carefully in both directions, it's time to cross the street.

[Back to Top](#) 

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