

When the Going Gets Tough

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Last October a major conference was held in London entitled “Legal Lives: Retaining talent through a balanced culture”. Delegates gathered to hear the findings of an innovative piece of research into work-life balance in the legal sector. Thirteen leading law firms participated in the research which identified what needed to happen to facilitate change in the legal profession. The report produced highlighted successful work-life policies and set out clear, practical and attainable recommendations for how the legal sector can more fully embrace the opportunities offered by flexible working.

In the report’s introduction the senior partner of Addleshaw Goddard, the sponsor of the event, admitted that the bulk of the research had been done before firms began feeling the constraints of a tighter economy. He emphasised that the qualities required to achieve a work-life balance, namely flexibility and nimbleness, were also essential to sustain the health of the legal sector during these uncertain times. He also acknowledged that, should the economy shrink further, there was a real risk that the issues covered in the report would slip down the agenda.

Fast forward only six months and we find ourselves in a deep, worldwide recession that has swept across the globe at a speed no one ever anticipated. Law firms are fighting for their very survival. By the beginning of April 2009 close to 3000 lawyers in the UK had been made redundant, with many more to come. There is a suggestion that the work-life balance is tipping in work’s favour as lawyers desperately try to hold on to their jobs. Against this backdrop, what can women lawyers in particular do to flourish in the present climate? What skills do they need to develop and what strategies should they adopt? And while this article is aimed at women lawyers, many suggestions I make are equally applicable to male lawyers.

1. Be flexible

Before you do anything else you need to make a calculation as to how much you are prepared to compromise—professionally, financially, and personally—in order to stay employed. Law firms don’t want to fire people en masse if they can help it, because it doesn’t make them look good and when the recession starts to lift they will need lawyers. So many are looking at creative ways to cut costs but keep as many staff as they can. These are just a few options that you might consider and that have been adopted by firms in the UK:

- Do a job share
- Work a four-day week
- Take a sabbatical (anywhere from 3 months to a year)
- Transfer to another practice group
- Work in a support role (PSL, business development, HR, CRM)

It may be a good strategy to volunteer to take any of these options, rather than to wait to see what is offered. A regional firm in the UK, Mills and Reeve, was recently praised by the legal press for its approach to the slow-down. Lawyers and support staff in their private client and corporate group volunteered to work a four-day week to avoid seeing any colleagues lose their jobs. The initiative was self-managed and prompted other departments in the firm to do the same. About 25 full time jobs were saved by encouraging staff to take four-day weeks, sabbaticals or internal secondments. This came as no surprise to many in the profession. Mills and Reeve has a reputation for having a strong sense of collegiality and has consistently been voted, year after year, as one of the best companies to work for in a Sunday Times survey. The proof in the pudding is not when things are great, but rather when times are tough.

2. Be visible and creative

Many female lawyers, particularly those with children, adopt the strategy of working hard, keeping their heads down and not making waves. Now may be the time to abandon such a strategy. You need to show the firm that you represent added value to them above and beyond fee-earning. You might, for example, volunteer to re-vamp the marketing materials, produce a new brochure or page for the website, or give a talk to clients. If you are shy about giving presentations, think about being part of a panel during the question-and-answer session of a seminar. Or simply design a training module for clients and get someone else to present it. Draw upon your creative and empathetic side. Put yourself in your clients' shoes and think about what they want and then help to deliver it. You don't have to work harder. Just work smarter!

3. Be confident

This applies both to those in a job and those looking for one. It is hard to stay confident in such troubled and gloomy times. Even in the best of times, a lot of professional women can be self-deprecating and unwilling to blow their own trumpets. I am amazed to listen to some of my coaching clients, women (and many men) who have reached the top of their profession in law, medicine, journalism and business, and yet still suffer from what is commonly called the "imposter syndrome". They have a sense that if they are not careful someone will find out that they really aren't as talented as they think they are. This nagging sense of self-doubt shows itself particularly during times of stress or uncertainty, and does not necessarily diminish with seniority. It may be that seeing someone like a coach will help shore up your confidence. If you don't truly believe in yourself neither will your current or a prospective employer.

4. Jump before you are pushed

Put simply, it is always easier to find a job when you are in employment instead of when you are unemployed. If you think your job is at risk, you need to calculate whether you would prefer to take redundancy and any associated

payment or whether you should start looking elsewhere while you still have a job. It's a matter for you. You may find that being made redundant is just what you need to take a break and re-evaluate your career.

5. Use this time wisely

Take advantage of these difficult times by doing your own SWOT analysis on yourself. Look at your strengths, your weaknesses, opportunities that might present themselves and threats to your current position. Talk to people in similar situations. Use your contacts. If you are looking for a job, you are just as likely to find one through networking as via a recruitment agent. Keep your hat in the ring. Finding the right position for you can be as much about timing and luck as anything else. You may even find that to truly flourish you are better off finding a job outside the law. And take time for yourself. Read, take a class, knit, plant a garden, take a road trip, get to know your children. Do whatever nurtures your soul, assuming you still have one left and your work hasn't sucked it out of you!

6. Be optimistic

You are not alone and this is not going to last forever. A glass-half-full attitude is far more likely to serve you well than being pessimistic. On those days when nothing seems to be going right, it can be really tough to see the silver lining among all those clouds. However, it's during these times when the ability to see the good in even the worst situations is so important. An optimistic attitude benefits not only your mental health, but your physical well-being as well.

Conclusion

Times are tough and things are changing fast. It is very unsettling, but it can also be exhilarating. If you want to flourish, this may be the just chance you have been waiting for, either within or outside the law. You may not see these days of professional and emotional upheaval as a great opportunity, but give it time. Many of my clients who have had to adapt to different roles or careers say that they have never been happier, but would never have made the move unless it had been forced upon them through circumstances. To quote M. Scott Peck, the author of the bestselling book *The Road Less Travelled*, "The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."