



The Practice of Law: To Stay or Go

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Should I stay or should I go? I found myself asking this very question at a very early stage in my **legal career**. If you are reading this, I assume you are also pondering whether or not you should stay in the **legal profession**. This is a serious question and you should research it as much as possible before making the decision. Approach the question as you would any legal issue: be objective and reserve judgment until after getting all the facts. Make sure to make a decision that honestly reflects your feelings, because it is most likely going to be a decision that will permanently affect the rest of your life.

For this decision process, you should consider a variety of factors, many of which will be discussed in this article. If you do decide to stick with the profession but believe your current situation is not ideal, I suggest using the **BCG job analysis tool** to figure out if something else might be a better fit.

Why I chose to take a "hiatus" from the profession?

Like all attorneys, I worked hard during law school in order to work for the best firm in my practice area. I succeeded and received an offer in my third year of law school to work with a top IP firm. A month into my career at the firm, I found out I passed the California Bar Exam on my first try and was even asked to be a grader for it. I felt invincible. I was working at a prestigious firm and, at age 25, I was making more money than both of my parents combined. In fact, I was making more money than most people supporting families do. I was the envy of my college (and even some law school) friends. Like most naïve starting attorneys, I thought I was set for life.

For various reasons, the firm was not a good fit and I started looking elsewhere. Unfortunately, my practice area was, and still is, very slow. Consequently, it was not feasible to find a comparable position in another firm because there simply were not any openings. In order to continue practicing as a lawyer, I found I would have had to change practice areas and I started applying to positions and firms that I would not normally have considered. As I interviewed, I realized more and more that I was pushing myself to do something that I did not have a passion for. I was too young to push myself into a career I did not want to go into with full force.

While I was still interviewing for positions as an attorney, I spoke to my recruiter at BCG and discussed my concerns about continuing with the profession. My recruiter, like most BCG recruiters, was a former attorney for a large firm and had the same concerns about the profession that I had. In response, my recruiter offered me a position with BCG, and at first I laughed at it. I thought it was a very sweet gesture, but surely I couldn't "downgrade" my profession after working so hard. Over the next couple of months, I thought about it and, as you can see, I took a chance and am now far happier than I ever would have been practicing as an attorney.



Before making the decision to jump ship and enter another profession, I considered the following:

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My motivation in going to law school

Like many who end up in law school, I went for some of the most absurd reasons. Essentially, the final decision was made by a process of elimination: I did not want to be in the medical profession, getting a PhD took too long, I had no interest in going to business school...What does that leave? Law school. Hey, why not? I liked philosophy and my dad told me I would meet a good husband in law school and it would open me to more opportunities. While the former didn't hold true, he was right about the latter. If it were not for law school, I would not have the opportunity to be working at BCG.

I've interviewed countless other attorneys and have found that those who had a legitimate reason for going to law school are much more likely to enjoy practicing law. If you were someone who: (1) went to law school wanting to be a lawyer, (2) has a close relative (usually a parent) who is a lawyer and knew what you were getting into, (3) has an interest in politics, and/or (4) wanted to change current law, then you are probably in the right profession. Of course, motivations can change after law school, but the overwhelming number of well-adjusted attorneys continue to find their work interesting and challenging because they have been working toward a goal for so long and still feel that they have more to accomplish in their field. If you started law school unsure of whether or not you wanted to accomplish anything as an attorney in the first place, the chances are low that the work will excite you.

What motivates me?

You need to be honest with yourself and find out what motivates you. While at work, see what stokes your fire. Is it money? Power? Prestige? Intellectually stimulating work? A desire to help people? Client contact? Giving back to society? Advancing the cause of justice? Persuasive writing?

I found that money did not motivate me, but then again, I only have to support myself. Of course, everyone needs money and I would only work if I could make a certain amount, but it wasn't my primary concern. More important to me was the need to feel independent and be respected by my peers and superiors, and I also need to be in a supportive environment.

If you are considering other professions, talk to people in those fields and determine what drives those people and keeps them going back to work every day. Compare these findings to what motivates you.

Do I identify with my professional peers?

Do you find that your personality and drive are similar to those that you work with? Are the people you work with the type of people you would like to associate yourself with? Attorneys in a firm environment have to be able to work with each other every day. Whether it is receiving work from a partner or consulting a fellow associate, if there is no sense of camaraderie in these interactions,



there is a low probability that they are something to look forward to everyday. This camaraderie usually stems from a shared sense of belonging and/or common goals, and not having anything in common can be a sign that maybe you are not cut out for the same kind of life as your professional peers.

Judging by the hours most firms require their attorneys to put in, it is safe to assume that the attorneys in your firm are going to be a significant part of your life as long as you work there. While it is not necessary to be best pals with everyone, being able to get along with your co-workers can be very important in determining whether or not you are happy in the workplace. While not having anything in common with them is a possible sign that you might consider another field, not being able to be civil with your co-workers may be a sign that you have to move firms. Firm cultures tend to run the gamut and the attitude of your current firm may not be the best fit for you. However, you should not necessarily take an unhappy situation to mean that you need to change careers.

What viable alternatives do I have?

If I did not get the opportunity to work with BCG, I likely would still be working as an attorney. I am very glad it worked out, though, because it has proven to be the right choice for me. Having an idea of what the next step could be if you do choose to leave law will be necessary for many people. The uncertainty that can arise from leaving something you have worked so hard to achieve for nothing in particular is a drastic step that may end up making you even unhappier. The remedy for that lies in finding a new career path that you believe will make you happier. This is really the one thing that should merit the most attention in this process. Without having something else in mind, there is more willingness to look back and regret - having something to look forward to changes that.

While there are not as many opportunities for working as an attorney outside of a law firm as there were a few years ago under the bull market, corporations have a continual need for in-house representation, and the larger corporations can staff dozens of attorneys. In-house corporate work may end up being a lot like a law firm, and if the actual work is what you are trying to get away from, this is probably not the best option. If, however, the law firm environment is what you find stifling, in-house work tends to mean less hours and a less cut-throat atmosphere, but also can mean less compensation.

Law school may be in your rear-view mirror, but, if the thought is not too painful, it is always possible to go back and teach. A strong mind for legal theory and a desire to mold the legal minds of tomorrow are what make a strong candidate for a professor. Excellent academic credentials certainly do not hurt, either. Summers off, less stress, and more time and resources available for research and publication are what make these positions so highly sought after. Similarly, working in the public sector for the government or a public interest group may seem like a step down in terms of prestige, but it can mean more interesting work and a lot less stress.

Careers that have absolutely nothing to do with the law are also a possibility, as a law degree is a lot more versatile than you might think. A legal education is welcome in almost any field, as it shows



strong training in the ability to think analytically and it hones writing skills. Putting that training to use for something other than the law may seem abnormal, but there are thousands of working Americans with law degrees that have chosen other fields.

Is it financially feasible to move professions?

This is the biggest question when it comes to switching careers. Sure less stress, more fun, and less time spent at work all sound wonderful, but these things come at a cost and that cost can run up to 100K per year. Firms are traditionally some of the best compensating organizations in the world and very few other professions are going to pay six figures to start. Are you willing to sacrifice a very large chunk of your annual income for an opportunity to get away from it all?

This question essentially comes down to what matters most to you. If you are truly unhappy working in a law firm, then there is plenty of incentive to take a pay cut. As another type of professional with a good education, you will most likely be able to make as much as you need, although that is always relative. Someone like me, who does not have a family counting on a large check from me, can take the plunge with very little concern for the money. Others must consider salary first and foremost because of familial or other financial obligations. The age old question of whether to choose happiness or money will not be decided here, but both come with pros and cons, and it is up to you to decide which takes precedence.

Do I need to be in a stable profession? How risk-averse am I?

Some people are going to dive off a cliff as soon as the opportunity arises and others are afraid to walk out the front door without checking and double checking if they locked the bathroom window. In general, the legal industry is filled with people who are more likely to go back to the window for a second look than cliff dive. It is a common joke that the majority of graduates of the top law school ended up there because they had nothing better to do, but there is actually a bit of truth to it - many lawyers got into the profession simply because it is safe and respectable. These are the people that are the least likely to enjoy the work and probably the most in need of a change, yet the least willing to actually make one because it requires risk.

I was able to jump off the cliff, but only because I had a net at the bottom. Leaving the legal industry would be a risk no matter what you are leaving it for, but having something to fall back on is comforting. With many of the top law firms closing their doors during this recession and firm stability becoming more abnormal, the legal industry is not the safe haven it used to be, so leaving the profession now may not be as impractical as it once was.

What environment am I most comfortable in?

I took a personality test to determine this. While the questions on those tests are usually leading (e.g. The question "Do you like work to come in at a slow pace or a busy pace?" is able to miraculously decipher whether you like to work in a relaxed or hectic atmosphere), they more or less



get you to think about the questions that you might not otherwise consider in your job search. If you are unwilling to put your career in the hands of some internet technology, then feel free to consult us.

My advice to attorneys in a slow practice area

If you are in any of the following practice areas, you are an attorney in a slow practice area: corporate, M&A, IPO's, project finance/capital markets, "soft" IP such as trademark and licensing, healthcare, environmental, telecommunications and some regions of commercial real estate. Because there is not much work in these practice areas, attorneys who would like to continue in the profession need to be flexible with the areas of law they practice in.

If you are a corporate attorney who does not have any work, you need to think of alternatives to solidify your position within a firm. Many corporate attorneys are looking for positions as commercial litigators. This does not have to be a long term career change, but you must do it if you would like to continue in the profession. Nothing is forever and most careers take some strange turns. Who knows, it may benefit you in the end. Perhaps you will meet a contact that you would not have met as a corporate attorney and voila! You've got yourself a client. If your long term career goal is to be a partner for a major law firm, then you must stick out the downturn in the economy.

For those who need to make a change in their practice area, I refer you to the [BCG Candidate Resource Center](#). There you will find an article about changing your practice area. Please read this and feel free to contact one of BCG's recruiters about whether it's wise to change your practice area.

Do your homework

- Talk to your peers (law school classmates and/or co-workers), mentors, [law school career counselors](#) - anyone who can help shape your perspective and push you in the right direction. And of course, feel free to contact a BCG recruiter. It's our job to offer you advice about your career.
- Read about career changes and other ways to use a law degree - your law school career center or its bookstore likely has books on this subject.
- Make a list of pros and cons for both staying and leaving the profession. Discuss this list with all who will be affected by your decision: your significant other, family, friends and whomever else you feel may be affected.

When the decision is made, question it before you act on it

One more thing you may want to take into consideration when making your decision is whether or not you are likely to second-guess yourself and choose to go back to working in a law firm. If you think that you might, then you almost definitely should not leave. For starters, in a down economy, law firms are not going to be all that sad to shed some excess attorneys and a firm that you unexpectedly left will not be thrilled to see you again two months later if you have a change of heart. Additionally,



firms interested in hiring associates want to ensure that they are committed to practicing law, and if you have already proven you are not by leaving for something else, you will undoubtedly be seen as a question mark in a profession that is used to periods. Ultimately, though, if you can see yourself actually going back to firm practice, then you probably are not as fundamentally unhappy with the law as you might feel at the moment. Perhaps you just need a change of scenery within your current career and not an actual career change - or maybe all you need is a month in Paris. Questioning your decision now will prevent you from having to question it later, when there is a lot less you can do about it.