MANAGE YOUR CAREER IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

By Kathleen Brady

If the current economic climate has taught us anything, it has taught us the importance of anticipating transition points and preparing for unexpected events. It has reinforced the idea that by building an adjustable portfolio of skills and a strong professional reputation, you can design a focused but flexible career plan to weather any storm along your career path.

Career/life planning is like solving a business problem. Every successful business venture begins with a comprehensive business plan, updated annually, outlining goals and objectives. Such plans are designed to be flexible in order to accommodate unexpected market changes and opportunities. Effective career planning prepares you for the continuous process of choices and adjustments that will enable you to react to the changing circumstances that are inevitable throughout the course of your professional life.

Self-knowledge is the most reliable tool to ensure career success and satisfaction. You must be aware of your abilities, skills, strengths, passions, preferred work style, long term goals, values and ideals, interest areas, temperament, accomplishments, special knowledges and motivations if you hope to navigate the changing landscape.

The basic questions in every career are:

What needs to be done?
What can you do?
What do you want to do?

Your challenge is to showcase these skills along with those tangible and intangible characteristics that make you unique. Your understanding of these elements of your professional self will enable you to demonstrate the added value you bring to every situation throughout your career. Always consider what you want people to think about you. That will enable you to focus on the content of what you say and how you say it in addition to the actions you take to present a consistent, positive message showcasing your unique brand. That requires you to periodically pause and take stock.

In tough economic times, associates dismiss the importance of goal setting, viewing it as a luxury that must be sacrificed. But remember, managing your career is comparable to managing a business. It requires a comprehensive plan, updated annually, outlining goals and objectives designed to be flexible enough to accommodate unexpected market changes. Without a plan, your career will suffer.

Start by listing at least twenty-five things you want to accomplish during your lifetime. Think about what you want to have; what you want to be; what you want to do and what impact you want to have. Consider all areas of your life career/financial; social/cultural; spiritual; family/home; education;
health/fitness. Write down your goals. Written goals give your dreams structure. They create a long term perspective and enable you to prioritize so that you can manage conflicting goals and deal with unexpected transitions. Once you see everything on paper, you can begin to prioritize your goals in the context of current market forces.

Maintain your own personnel file that contains information about your long term and short term goals as well as significant assignments and accomplishments, CLEs attended, professional and community activities, etc. Update this document quarterly. Use this information to prepare an “Annual Report” prior to your annual performance appraisal. As you prepare this document, also ask yourself the following questions and be prepared to discuss them during the performance review:

- Am I receiving a sufficient variety of assignments to enable me to grow as a lawyer? If not, what can I do to address the issue?
- Have I received and acted on supervisors’ suggestions for improving my work?
- Am I satisfied with my development as a lawyer within the Firm? If not, in what areas would I like to improve?
- What are my goals for the next year? In what areas would I like to improve and what is my action plan to accomplish this?

External realities play a role in shaping your life and helping you define your career objectives. Pay attention to economic forces and world events. Monitor the rumor mill but do not accept everything you hear at face value. Consult with trusted advisors to test the validity of the information you receive and to help you understand the impact it might have on your career plan. Today’s business world is changing constantly and smart attorneys are both up-to-date in their practice area and in the world around them and use their pre-established goals to serve as a road map to navigate market changes in order to reach their objectives.

Remember, no one cares more about your career development then you do. Take the lead and avail yourself of every resource available to you.

Your professional relationships can help you with this. You should be concerned with the process of building and using networks as a permanent aspect of your career to broaden your field of vision in order to make informed, smart decisions. More senior attorneys are the single most valuable resource in your career development. They have current, detailed and accurate information about what is happening in the world of work, about upcoming assignments and projects, pro bono opportunities, shifts in business practices and industry trends, etc. It is imperative to establish strong mentor relationships from the start of your career. Who you know is important but who knows you is the key to solidifying your professional brand.
Participate in formalized mentor programs; however, do not rely solely on such programs or simply hope people will notice you and offer to take you under their wings. It isn’t enough. Solid mentor relationships evolve naturally, not through administration. Certainly participate in formal programs, but do more. Create a support system or Board of Advisors. Establishing a network of mentors will allow you to learn from different styles, develop a range of skills and consider various perspectives of an issue. Think of these people as resources to help you develop your brand, plan and execute your career goals and help you navigate difficult situations.

Mentor relationships are the primary stepping stone to building professional networks. They can introduce you to people within the Firm that you need to know. You rely on your skills and experience to impact what work gets done. But knowing how work gets done within an organization depends upon the network of relationships that exist. Network internally to increase the chances of making an impression on decision makers, monitor the rumor mill and learn about practice groups beyond your own. Volunteer for committee assignments; attend firm events; eat lunch with more senior lawyers. Strive to be visible in the Firm.

Develop, use and nurture these internal relationships continuously. And begin to plant seeds to expand your relationships beyond the Firm. Keep in touch with people you meet throughout your career; don’t wait until you “need” something from them. Establish a reputation for being helpful. Pass along useful information; introduce contacts to people in your network who might be helpful to them. Always look for ways to build bridges. People will remember your thoughtfulness and will be likely to return the favor.

Managing your career development is an on-going process that includes planning and strategizing based on information about yourself and the world of work, the match between them and the actions you take. In good economic times and bad, you must make a lifelong commitment to actively manage your career and learn to adapt to the inevitable transitions you are destined to encounter.

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