

Business & Careers

Changing practice areas can revive your career



Gary Mitchell
The Coach

Good morning Lawyer X, this is your wake-up call. It's time to re-think your career. This is not a call you were hoping to get. But let's face the facts. Your practice is nearly dried up. Your market is flat. You are not bringing in any new clients, and you haven't for some time. And the bottom line is there are no new clients to get. To make matters even worse, the clients you do have are going away or have nothing for you to do. Yes, it's pretty bleak. But it's not your fault. Don't beat yourself up — do something about it.

At the time of writing this, we are in the compensation season. And as a result, I expect we are going to see a lot of layoffs and more de-capitalization in more than one market across the country in the coming months. A few practice areas are feeling this pain, and at many firms are basically on their last legs. It's been reported that some firms in general are on their last legs as a result of some of these weak practice areas draining their

profits. This has been a long, deep and painful cycle. Your firm is unlikely to hold your lifeline for much longer. And don't think it's any better across the street. No matter what firm you're at, the work has dried up. The way I see it, you are left with the following three choices:

- Leave the profession and find something else;
- Find an opportunity in-house; or
- Leverage your knowledge and experience and relationships and look for another practice area.

I can't be more serious about this. As a business development coach, I help my clients get more clients. But when there are no clients to get, you have to go in another direction. And before you give up and throw out your education, experience and knowledge, I would advise you to choose the third option — change practice areas, and right now. You know who you are.

So, what do you do?

Firstly, identify your core values and what's important to you. There is no sense leaping from the frying pan into the fire. Why do I suggest this? I've had years of experience working with lawyers who, for one reason or another, find themselves forced to re-tool, re-think, and re-direct their practice. In going deeper to find clues as to why they weren't succeeding, more often than not their own

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Gary Mitchell
On Trac Coach

values were not aligned with the people and companies they were serving. Time is of the essence, but you can do it. Here's how.

■ Identify the core practice areas your firm is focusing on. With things changing, make sure you're not left behind. Again, there's no sense picking another lost leader. Have a talk with management and find out where your firm is going to concentrate moving forward.

■ Clearly identify which of your skills can be transferable to another practice aligned with your firm's goals. Most of your skills are transferrable, to a large measure. You are knowledgeable, and can progress to an acceptable level of expertise within hours or days, not weeks or months. Remember that you distinguish yourself, regardless of practice group or area, by means other than the technical application of the law. It's how you do it, your common sense, your professionalism, your accommodation of clients and counsel...these are all universal skills which you have and can apply overnight to any practice area. Good and accomplished counsels, even when they are busy, haven't been afraid of change and taking on new types of matters and challenges. Look around — you know who they are. Go join them.

■ Speak to the leaders within those practice areas and articulate your interest and determination to join their group and contribute to its growth.

■ Take whatever CLE courses you need to get up to speed on this new area of law.

■ Reach out to all of your contacts that you've developed over the years, both inside the firm and externally. At the core of business development are your relationships, so leverage them.

Have coffee with them and let them know of your plans. Ask them for help, introductions and advice. This is not the time to be proud. You need help and you need it now.

■ Have a plan. Act on it. Your plan should consider competitive intelligence, market intelligence, goals, and use the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) model to audit yourself.

■ Ask for help. Look to internal resources to help you in marketing, professional development, and the like. There are people who can help you in this transition; all you need to do is ask.

■ Stay positive. This might seem obvious, but don't fear change, embrace it. This is an opportunity to re-focus your career. From my experience, this can actually work out in your favour.

Take action now. By doing so you might just buy yourself a little more time at your current firm. If not, then at least you are moving forward and might be able to find another opportunity at another firm.

One final word of encouragement here — you can do it. I've seen lawyers at various stages of their careers change practice areas and make amazing comebacks on the way to very successful careers. What are you waiting for? The sooner you get into action the better. It's time to take your career back.

Gary Mitchell works with lawyers and law firms helping them to attract more clients and grow their business. He is the author of "Raindance: The Business Development Guidebook for Lawyers," and can be reached at gary@ontraccoach.com or 604-669-5235.

Hire: Satisfaction can be top recruiting tool

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"I think at a smaller firm you really feel like a team and don't worry about getting out of your chair and going to a colleague's office or a partner's office and saying, 'I have this issue or this idea I want to bounce off you.' Would you listen to me for five minutes?"

At a smaller firm, she says, junior lawyers get more experience and there's also a greater sense of inclusiveness, as associates usually have more involvement when they're helping a partner with a file.

"You're not just completing work and not actually seeing the end product. You get experience in different areas and you get to choose work that you'd like to do and not like to do, and also have a say in clients the firm chooses to take on or doesn't take on."

Marchetti says the best way for small firms to attract talent is to make sure the employees are happy.

"The biggest marketing tool for the smaller firms is the other people who work at the firm. If there's very little turnover or employees have been there for a very long time and are happy, that's the biggest sort of advertisement for a firm and I think lawyers know that."

Ohnjec of Robert Half says developing a good reputation and word-of-mouth are the best ways for smaller firms to attract quality candidates.

"Word of mouth travels really quickly," he says.

If advertising in trade publications, Ohnjec says smaller firms would be wise to mention in the job description that they offer a good work-life balance.

When it comes to interviewing candidates, he says, managing partners at a small firm should also be sure to relay that information.

"It's a small world, so even when they relay that information to candidates in interviews the word will spread that way as well."

Heller says managing partners at small firms should talk to recruiters who are in touch with lawyers and develop an advertising plan that highlights the strengths of the firm such as the fact they may have lower billable targets or none at all.

Recruiters can be helpful, she says, because they're often in touch with candidates at larger law firms who may be looking for a change and who want to start building their own practice.

"In a lot of cases, we're very much the marketing piece. We can market a smaller firm and we do that all the time."

The golden rule, though, she says, is to create a good work environment.

"Everybody really just wants to be happy, so if you can give them those things, where they feel fulfilled about the actual work they're doing and can actually enjoy coming to work and dealing with their fellow colleagues, that's going to make a huge difference for anybody."

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