What to Do If You Hate Your Attorney Job

Summary: Do you hate being an attorney? Find out what you should do if you can’t stand working as an attorney anymore.

1. It’s not a man-eating tree of Madagascar. It’s a job. You have the ultimate power: To leave.

You make compromises in every single aspect of your life. If your inner child tells you that you have to love every moment of your life, then spank your inner child. You’re a grown-up, and if you don’t know better, you’ll be miserable forever. You exercise so that you’ll improve the quality of your life as you get older. You eat right for the same reason. Anybody who tells you that “a munchy, crunchy celery stick is just as delicious as a Dorito” is shagged in the head. And when it comes to your work, you balance long-term goals with short-term rewards. What you’re doing right now and what you want to get out of it long-term have to balance what you sacrifice for them.

The problem is that it’s very easy to slide down the scale of sacrifice until you’re giving up way too much for what you’re getting in return. You don’t notice it because it happens so seductively. You take a job because the money is great or because it means security or because you’re worried you won’t get anything else. You do what you’re not crazy about for the promise of doing more interesting work later on. You work long hours figuring that at some point it’s got to get easier. Things aren’t quite right, but you don’t pay attention until ... when? It’s like the story about the frog in the bathtub. If you try to put a frog into a bathtub of boiling water, it’ll jump right out. But if you put a frog in a bathtub of warm water and slowly drip in boiling water, one drip at a time, the frog will boil to death without noticing it.

I’m not in the habit of quoting my own scripts. Which means, of course, that that’s exactly what I’m about to do. In one of my movie scripts, the main character has had an awful, dead-end job doing mindless work for the twenty years she’s been out of school. One of the other characters asks her, “How did you ever do this job for twenty years?” She responds, “I didn’t do it for twenty years. I just never did anything about it ... and it turned into twenty years.”

So it’s a delicate balance. You always have to make sacrifices. And at the beginning of your career, you do have to pay your proverbial “dues.” But what if you’re going overboard? The dues paying has to stop sometime—and sooner, rather than later! As lawyers at Markowitz Herbold point out, “You are in control of your future and when you realize that you aren’t happy, satisfied, and fulfilled, do something, anything, to make it better.” In this section, we’ll identify exactly what it is that’s really bugging you, and we’ll look at your alternatives. Maybe you can tweak things at work—or maybe you’ll have to quit. If you do leave, we’ll talk about doing it the right way.

See the following articles for more information:

www.lawcrossing.com
2. **Everybody hates something about their job. Let's identify what's bugging you!**

Sometimes I get e-mails from summer clerks and new lawyers, and they say things like, “I hate my job.” When I ask, “Why?” they’ll respond, “I just hate it. I hate everything about it.” Clearly that’s not true. There’s no job in the world that’s entirely despicable. (Well ... maybe.) By the same token, there’s no job in the world that’s entirely delightful in every way. In order to fix what’s broken, you’ve got to identify the offending parts. You can’t just say, ‘I just hate it.’ Otherwise, how do you fix it? You can go to your next employer and hate that, too! Think specifically about what it is that you hate. Maybe it’s not the entire thing. If you have a knee-jerk reaction to your employer, ‘This is awful, I never want to practice law again’—it may be that in a different practice area or at a different firm, you might be perfectly happy. It’s easy to get so stressed out that you jump at the first ‘out.’ The 40th time a head hunter calls, you give in. And why? ‘I hate my boss’? ‘I hate real estate’? ‘I hate the firm’? ‘I hate the practice of law in general’? You’ve got to figure it out before you make a move!

**a. Figuring out what it is that's sticking in your craw—if the source of your unhappiness isn't obvious.**

**Rate your activities like you'd rate a movie.**

I think this is a wonderful idea! It’s from an attorney in New Jersey. He says, “Don’t pull the ripcord too fast when you start feeling dissatisfied with your work. Figure out why first. When I was practicing law, and I started to get unhappy with it, I kept a daily journal. I rated everything I did like a movie. I gave four stars to what I loved, and one star to what I hated. I analyzed what was good and bad about every day. It helped me figure out what talents I wanted to use, and what it was I really disliked.”

**If you’ve only been at work for a few months, face the possibility that what you’re feeling is just ‘sophomore slump.’**

It’s entirely possible that you don’t hate your work. A former recruiting director at a large firm recounts, “New associates were pretty ebullient for the first six months. It was around February, after six months, that the reality would sink in. The first three to six-month mark—it suddenly hits you, the profound nature of your career commitment.” She attributes this to the fact that “It’s hard to break out of that ‘nine-month’ mode from school. There are no new semesters, no summer vacations. ‘Depression’ might be too strong a word, but it’s a sinking feeling. It can, and does, happen. Don’t worry about it—it will pass.” If you call some of your buddies from school, you’ll find that they’re suffering from much the same thing. And it feels good to commiserate with someone going through the same feelings you’re experiencing!

**Ignore your feelings immediately after a bad review.**

One career counselor I spoke with said that “There’s an amazing correlation between being told ‘You’re not progressing at the rate we expected’ and suddenly thinking that your life’s work is in civil rights instead of working at a corporate firm.” Discount what you think when you’re still stinging from a bad review. Maybe it did open your eyes to the fact that what you’re doing isn’t in line with your values. Or maybe you’re just hurt, and you’re striking back in the easiest way.

**See Why the Best Attorneys Are So Hard on Themselves and Others for more information.**

**Talk out what you think about work, out loud, to yourself.**

You’re smart! In your heart, you know what’s up. Listen to what you say!

**Go to an outside career counselor, or go back to your career services director at law school.**
When you graduate, it’s not a divorce. If you’re not enjoying yourself at work, give your career services director a call. Trust me, it’s not going to be the first “yikes” phone call she’s ever received! All career services folks are experienced in counseling people about jobs, and they’re an excellent sounding board when you’re not liking your job but you can’t figure out why. Alternatively, you can go to an outside career counselor. They’re all over the country, and you’ll find them in the phone book. The bottom line is, when you’re vaguely unhappy, it helps to talk it out with somebody else to figure out what’s up!

3. Solving the problems you can identify. Psst: It often means you don’t have to quit to get what you want.

Once you’ve identified what’s wrong, you’re most of the way home. We’ll see that different kinds of problems demand different kinds of solutions. As a rule of thumb, you can change the work; you can’t change the people; and you can maybe change the hours. Now—let’s be a little more specific!

a. Sometimes you have an epiphany.

Sometimes something at work will just make it painfully obvious that you’ve got to make a change. In a way, you’ve been given the gift of certainty. If you get hit over the head, you don’t have to question whether or not you’re doing the right thing in making a change. Here are three examples of attorneys that had epiphanies:

- Female associate at a large East Coast firm. She has three young children. Her husband works at home so she can devote herself to her job. She works very hard and travels frequently. In her eighth year with the firm, her mother becomes seriously ill. The associate offloads her work onto colleagues so she can go and see her mother. She sits by her bedside for the last week of her life. She returns to work, and has a review for potential partnership three months later. She is told: “Maybe next year you’ll make partner, but clearly your priorities are not in the right place.”

- Large firm. A big case comes up which will need heavy staffing for two years, with lots of travel. The firm brings together the second and third year associates, asking for volunteers. Nobody raises a hand. The senior partner says sternly, “If you’re single and you don’t have family obligations, we expect you to volunteer first.” A woman raises her hand and says, “How will we ever not be single if we take this assignment?”

- Large firm, junior associate working in the firm’s conference room with another junior associate and a senior partner. The phone rings. The other junior associate picks it up, and says, “Yeah. Yeah. Good. Yeah.” He hangs up, and says to the senior partner, “I’m sorry. I can get back to work now.” The senior partner asks, “What was that about?” And the other junior associate says, “It was my wife. She called with the results of her biopsy.” They go on working with no further comment.

- Jimmy Kim was a hard-charging investment banker. He worked 17-hour days. He had six cell phones constantly busy, and he put together billion-dollar deals for top-drawer clients like AT&T and General Motors. He was making $20 million a year. In an unheard-of move, he ceded some of his power so that he could spend more time with his family. As he told Newsweek Magazine, “In the power alleys of Wall Street and the East Coast, it’s not manly to admit that work/family is an issue. In fact, the manly thing is to say, ‘I don’t have a life and I’m proud of it. ’” But Lee had an epiphany one day when he was on a business trip to the West Coast and got an urgent phone call from his oldest daughter, a high school senior. Fearing the worst, he took the phone call. It turned out she was calling to say that she’d been accepted at his alma mater, Williams College. It suddenly hit him that he wasn’t there to hug her at an important moment in her life. He started thinking: “Where did the year go? ... I had not gone to one parent-teacher conference at her school. I didn’t know any of her teachers’ names. I just wasn’t involved.” He thought about his youngest daughter, and realized he didn’t even know what grade she was going into. That led him to ratchet back on his work.

b. Somebody made a comment, and it scared the living daylights out of you.

A lawyer at one firm said that when he was shown into his office for the first time, the managing partner gave him a catalog, and told him to pick out his desk. “Pick carefully,” he said, “because you’re going to be sitting behind it for thirty years.” At another firm, a senior associate commented to a new associate, “Well, it’s five o’clock. Only fifteen hours left until 8 a.m.”

In those situations, you may ask yourself: Geez, is he joking? Instead of pushing the panic button, go and talk
to someone you trust—a mentor, the recruiting coordinator, another junior associate—and ask them about what you heard. As one partner commented, “Sometimes people make stupid comments without expecting anybody to take them seriously. If you’re going to make a career decision over something somebody said, ask first to see if it’s true!”

c. You’re just working too hard.

In general, law is a pretty time-demanding profession. But there’s demanding—and then there’s demanding. If you’re working at a huge employer where you’re making big money, I’ve pointed out a million times that that means long hours. But there are other employers who demand some serious hours, too. No matter where you work, if you’re going to trial, you’re going to be burning the midnight oil. And some employers go over the edge and take the concept of long hours to a whole new dimension. One junior associate said that “When I came here, they sold me on the whole ‘family-friendly’ thing. What a stinking pile of pony loaf that turned out to be. You wouldn’t believe what goes on here. What they mean by ‘family firm’ is that if you’re in the hospital, it’s OK for a family member to answer the phone and take work notes for you. No joke. It really happened. A woman here was in the hospital the day her first child was born, and she’s lying there having just given birth when her partner calls to give her work, telling her to fax it back to the office when she’s done! And they mean that it’s suitable for you to take three days off when your mother dies. Your mother. Again, a true story.”

Even if your employer isn’t anywhere near that bad—gosh, I certainly hope it’s not!—long hours can wear you down. They can be suffocating. One lawyer commented about a friend who’s a junior associate at a very large firm. She said, “He makes tons of money, he just bought himself a new Jag. It’s beautiful, but the guy’s working all the time. I saw it, and I said, ‘It’s great. When are you going to drive it?’ It’s an expensive paperweight!”

See Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law for more information.

Beyond the hours themselves is their unpredictability, and the lack of control you might have over them. If you’re in a position where someone can walk into your office at five o’clock and say, “I need this by eight tomorrow morning,” that’s a blow to your autonomy that’s hard to put into perspective.

If you just don’t want to work the crazy hours, I can’t blame you. It’s your life. If the hours are killing you, here are a few ideas to consider:

1. Try to work from home for at least part of your hours.

It may be that with a laptop and telecommuting potential, you don’t have to be at the office all the time. If you have kids at home, that might be a possibility.

2. Squash big hours into fewer days.

You might consider working sick hours during the week in order to keep your weekends free. If your employer doesn’t have strict ‘face time’ on weekends, that might work for you.


A few firms will allow you to do this from the start—and at some, you can even be on the partnership track as a part-timer. At many firms, you’ve got to “prove your worth” before they’ll be flexible about it, and have at least a year or two under your belt going full-tilt. But it’s worth a try. Remember, as I’ve pointed out before, ‘part-time’ in law often means thirty-five to forty hours a week. So your part-time schedule will be what your non-professional friends consider full-time.

4. A staff attorney or contract attorney position.
You’ll work fewer hours, with less prestige, less dough, and projects that aren’t as sexy. If the hours are your problem—it’s a possibility to consider.

d. **You’re feeling incompetent.**

Welcome to the club. Every new lawyer feels incompetent. Heck, a lot of experienced lawyers feel incompetent, too—at least once in a while. This isn’t something to quit your job over. It’s something to live through as best you can, because it will go away—sooner rather than later. If you’re a lawyer, you’ve always been an overachiever; you’ve always had the answers. It’s hard to be a new lawyer and not know things. Staring up at the learning curve is hard! You feel out of place. You need to have the patience to hang in and develop confidence. Once you have some successes under your belt, you’ll enjoy it! It’s definitely a case of “This too shall pass.” Nothing is as bleak as it seems when revisited a day, a month, or a year later.

e. **Your employer has broken promises to you.**

Don’t quit. Talk to them about it first. When they let you down again, then quit. If you were promised assignments in a particular area and that promise doesn’t materialize, make the problem known to your assigning partner, mentor or associate committee chair. Bring it up in a tactful way. Say, “When I came here, you promised that I would get to do X and X. I want to be a good soldier and a team player, and I enjoy working here, but I really do want to do X. How can I go about it?”

Whatever you do, don’t put people on the spot in public! One lawyer told me about a meeting of all of the associates at his firm with the firm’s management committee. A lateral hire got up and said, “What about all the promises you made to us at X & X about the partnership track?” The lawyer says, “You could see the partners squirming. They were so angry. This guy should have dealt with the issue in private. He certainly didn’t foster any good will that way.”

f. **The work is at odds with your values.**

Doing work you believe in is one of the core elements of being happy with your job. If you’re an ardent right-to-lifer, you’re not going to be happy at the ACLU! If you believe you’re doing the right thing, just about every other problem fades into the background. Money, hours—they take a back seat to the satisfaction of doing something you believe in. I’ve talked to lots of attorneys at the Justice Department, and they all say that being able to get up and say their name, followed by “and I represent the United States of America” is a thrill they never get over.

Prosecutors in general believe in what they do. So do lawyers at legal aid and other public interest jobs. So do lots of lawyers in private firms. One health care lawyer I talked to said she felt great about helping people feel better through her work.

If you’re a new lawyer and your values don’t mesh with those of your employer, you’ve got a couple of options. You can take on pro bono projects to feed your soul if your day job doesn’t. If you’re truly at odds with the clients your employer represents—I mean, you’re not just neutral, you find them abhorrent—you’re probably going to have to vote with your feet. Regardless of why you took the job, the fact remains that you deserve a happy life. And if you took the job for the wrong reasons—well, you learned your lesson. You’ll never do that again!

In very isolated circumstances, you might be able to convince your firm to let you opt out of certain projects on a “conscientious objector” basis. As one lawyer put it, “You don’t want to seem morally superior to the person who brought in the client. Some attorneys won’t tolerate it. Others will take it seriously. But you have to have an excellent reason. It was a gun manufacturer and your mother was killed by a gun, something like that.” It’s a real political hot potato, but you might be able to get away with it. As a general rule, you’ve got to anticipate that if you just don’t agree with the clients (or causes) you represent, you’ll have to make the change—because they won’t.

g. **You’re bored.**
If you go to a prosecutor’s office or a judicial clerkship or legal aid, boredom isn’t a problem—stress is! But if you go to a law firm, you’re unlikely to find everything you do as a new attorney exceptionally stimulating. A number of senior attorneys told me that in the beginning, the work you do as a lawyer—particularly at a large firm—can be tedious. You get some good stuff, but there’s a fair amount of tedium. It’s part of the job.

There are several ways to solve this problem. Don’t just do the work that’s handed to you! Identify what you want to be doing, and seek it out! Even at the very largest employers, initiative is rewarded. Seek out the partners you want to work for, the projects you want to do, and volunteer!

Another option is to look at things you can do to supplement your work that are exciting. Community involvement, writing articles (if writing flips your switch), leadership in the local bar, public speaking—you can spice things up a lot if you look around.

If you really just find the subject matter boring, maybe you need to switch specialties. If you’re at a large employer, you’ve got to be subtle about it. I address this whole issue in a minute, under the heading “Switching specialties—Doing it right.” If you’re at a small firm, it might be more difficult—what you want to do might not come in the door! But it’s possible. One way to do it is to become an expert and start soliciting the work you want yourself! I’ve talked with more than one lawyer who took it on themselves to write articles, go to CLEs, develop an expertise, and start bringing in business of their own, doing what they want to do. It’s an excellent way to storm ahead in your career—and get work you don’t consider boring!

You heard somebody bragging about their job, or you read about somebody in a magazine article who seems to have it made.

As one lawyer commented, “You go out drinking Friday night, everybody you go drinking with is making six figures and you’re not. Suddenly, you hate your job. Or you listen to somebody talking about the exciting project they’re working on, and you think, ‘What am I? A loser?’” The fact is, when people are bragging about what they do or how much they make, you have precisely no idea what their job is really like. You only know what they’re saying. If you’re going to make a move, make it on the basis of intelligence that’s better than that. Call your career services director from law school and ask to talk to alums who do what this person does. Get a better picture of what it’s like, and what sacrifices you have to make to do that same job. I’m not saying that there’s no way it’s better than what you’ve got. But there’s a substantial possibility that the reality isn’t quite the same as the rosy picture people paint when they’re hanging out drinking beers. The later it gets, the rosier the picture gets. Check out the facts before you jump!

The closer you get to your initial goal, the more meaningless it seems.

When you start work, it may be that you look at the person way ahead of you—the district attorney, the partners, the general counsel—and you think, “That’s where I’m going, Baby.” And then the longer you’re there, you start thinking—hmm. I’m not so sure. I heard a wonderful quote about law firms that goes, “Becoming a partner in a law firm is like winning a pie-eating contest, where the prize is more pie.” If you look at what partners do at your law firm, and you don’t like it—well, then you’ve disqualified one long-term goal. If you don’t like the idea of generating business, partnership just isn’t for you. That doesn’t necessarily mean you should jump now—as I talk about in a minute, you’ve got to get some experience under your belt before you make a move—but it does tell you a lot about the direction in which you want your life to head.

You’re not making enough money.

If this is what’s getting to you, it may be that you’ve got a legitimate beef—or it may be that the headlines in the newspapers have left you feeling that everybody in the world is making a hundred fifty grand a year except for you. That’s just not true. Most people don’t work at firms that pay that kind of money, and that kind of salary demands a quart of blood in return. Nobody’s giving it away.

You also have to realize that, if you’re at a small firm, studies show that within five to six years out of school, you’re just about on par with your brethren at large firms. There is a pot of gold a little later on. Don’t be too short-sighted!

But in the meantime, if you work at a small-to-middling firm and you want to try to make more scratch
from the start, take a look at the following articles:

- How to Negotiate Your Way to a Better Salary
- A Guide for Attorney Salary Negotiation: How to Negotiate Your Salary Like a Pro
- How to Negotiate a Good Offer from a Law Firm

k. You hate your boss.

It happens. Not everybody is everybody else’s cup of tea. If you like the work, then it makes sense to try and find a way to deal with Supervisor Torquemada.

If you just can’t work things out, what you do depends on the size of your employer. If it’s a small employer, you’ve pretty much got to vote with your feet. It’s their gig. There are other jobs you’ll enjoy. If it’s a large firm, don’t flush the baby with the bathwater. It’s entirely possible that there are other people you’ll enjoy working for, and you should look into that. I go into that in some detail below, under the topic “Switching specialties—Doing it right.” It’s unfortunate how many associates jump from big firms just because they hate their particular boss or their particular specialty. One career services director told me about two phone calls she received one day, from two different associates working at the same large firm, on two different floors. One of them called and whispered, “You have to get me out of here. I hate it here. This is the worst.” The other called in later in the day, and said breezily, “I was just checking in. Thanks so much for turning me on to this place! It’s great. They’re wonderful here.” Same firm, different planets! Don’t write off the whole place because you happen to work for a jerk!

You’ve got family elsewhere, and you miss them.

I’m the wrong person to tell you to stay with a job that keeps you away from people you love. I put people first and work second. If you’re at a large employer with several offices, see if you can transfer. Your reason is one that anybody can understand. And if it’s a small shop—sayonara. They’ll understand. And if they don’t, it’s still a good reason to go.

4. “In-house” moves you can make to improve your life without quitting your job.

It may be that you don’t have to take the drastic step of quitting in order to get what you want. You need to see if you can’t tweak your current job—and you need to think about what else is out there!

a. Switching specialties—Doing it right.

If you’re at a large firm or a government agency, don’t quit without plumbing the idea of changing departments. Even if you’re at a firm that says you can’t change, on the down low people will tell you that you can. The fact is, they’ve got a big investment in you, and they’d rather switch you to something you like than lose you altogether—as long as you’re doing good work.

Be discreet about the way you go about switching, however. You don’t want to burn bridges with the people you’re working with now, and you don’t want to come off as a dilettante. One recruiting coordinator suggests that you “Talk to only one or two people whom you trust—people who don’t have big mouths—and say, ‘I’m not necessarily happy. I might want to change sections.’” Don’t go to your section head first—if they hear that you’re not happy, they’ll cut you off from good assignments! Go to someone else in the firm, outside your section. Then go to the most senior person in the firm you feel comfortable talking to. Say, ‘I want to change sections and ideally I’d like to change here.’ You have more leverage than you think you have, as long as you’re doing good work. They want to keep you happy!” Another senior partner agrees, saying that “If you thought you liked securities, and nine months out you decide you want to do communications, do it! They don’t want to pay a 25% headhunter fee. But be sensitive to the way you broach it! ‘I’d like to litigate, and I thought regulatory was that, but it’s not.’ Not ‘Joe’s an a****e.’ If he is, no one’s surprised. Confine your comments to the subject area. If someone works for me and wants to switch, I’m not happy about it, but I’m OK with it. It’s better than losing them!” Another partner at another firm adds “You can go to the partner you want to work with, and say, ‘I’d love to work with you, I’ve learned so much from you.’ Take the initiative. Don’t just leave the firm because you don’t like the partner you’re working for. Say ‘I think this is what I want.’ Take on small projects. You can’t say, ‘I’m really bored with what I’m doing and I want out,’ even if it’s true. If you seem negative, they’ll say, ‘Huh. What makes you
think I’d want you?’ Proactivity makes you feel better and stronger!”

b. See if you can add a dimension to your job that will make it more enjoyable.

The most obvious addition that comes to mind is doing pro bono work. If you can squeeze in the time, you might find that a pro bono project you believe in changes your whole attitude about your work in general. Also, see if you can’t help generate business that you’d like to work on. You’ll rocket your career forward if you do!

SMART HUMAN TRICK

Junior associate, starts her career with a firm, joins a department in which she has no interest. She wants to do Intellectual Property work, but the firm doesn’t get enough of that to give her a steady diet of it. She gets involved with the IP Law Committee of the local bar. She gets hooked up with programming, co-writes an article for someone, then starts bringing in clients. “It totally changed the direction of my career!” she comments.

c. Gently voice your discontent before you decide to leave.

This is risky. After all, it’s complaining, and with some employers, if you say you don’t like something, they’ll say, “There’s the door.” But much more often than not, they’d rather try to accommodate you than the prospect of losing you. As one lawyer put it, “It’s cheaper to retain than retrain.”

So instead of nailing down another job in secret, consider voicing your concerns—gently. “I was hoping that at this point I would be doing more of X and X with my work—are there prospects of that? How can I go about doing it?” One lawyer told me about a friend at the firm who hated what she was doing, and got another job without mentioning her discontent to her boss. When she walked in to quit, the managing partner said, “We had a new project coming in, and we were hoping to give it to you.” It was exactly the kind of work she’d wanted to do—and she lost out on it.

5. How long do you have to stay—before you can go?

I’m not talking here about situations where you’re facing harassment or ethical problems. Instead, we’re talking about situations where you’re just not liking the job all that much. How long do you have to stay?

You hear all different opinions about this. In theory, you can leave any time you want. The downside risk is having future employers question your judgment. It’s common sense. You can’t hop every three weeks or you’ll have no credibility. You can use a dating analogy. If you’re married and divorced in four months, good luck explaining it to your next date! You need a year or two to sound convincing to your next employer. A recruiting coordinator echoes that, saying, “If you’ve got four jobs in four years on your resume, that tells me everything I need to know about you. You make snap decisions. And maybe it’s not the workplace that’s the problem—maybe it’s you.” Another lawyer pointed out that “It takes at least a year to form enough of an impression on people at work that they’d say, ‘We’ll always take you back.’” A law school career services officer says that “As a rule of thumb, try to stay with your first job a couple of years. After a year and a half, head hunters will start coming after you.”

And of course the traditional mark is two years, and the reason for that, as Dennis Kennedy explains it, is that “It takes about two years of practice to feel as though you’re getting the hang of things!”

So where does that leave you? Using your own judgment based on how much you hate it—and on what other opportunity is waiting for you. As Georgetown’s Marilyn Tucker says, “If you’ve been there less than a year and you just hate it, you can’t stand the people and you don’t want the subject matter, cut your losses and the firm’s—they’re pouring resources into you for nothing. In the short term they’ll be annoyed but in the long term they don’t want to waste money for nothing in return.” Don’t wring your hands, figuring that you’ll never be happy. A change of environment can make a huge difference. Firms are different from each other. And firms in general are different from DA’s offices or government agencies or corporations. A slight
change can make a big difference in your life. Similarly, if you’ve got a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity staring you in the face, you can’t afford to wait the regulation two years. Whether it’s working for a baseball team and you love baseball, or it’s a dot-com and that’s your dream, sometimes you have to roll the dice and go!

6. Check and see whether the grass really is greener before you leave your job.

I’ve said before that every job comes with its sacrifices. It may be that the sacrifices associated with another job will suit you better than the ones you’re making right now. But for gosh sakes check that out before you make a move!

a. If it’s another kind of law you want ...

Go to CLEs on the other specialty. Talk with alums from your school (call your career services director to find them) and get an accurate snapshot of what practicing that kind of law would really be like—and how it would be different from what you’re doing now. If it’s a practice area that’s in your office, hang out with lawyers in that section and listen to them. Get an idea of what you’re in for before you make a switch, so that the move you make is an intelligent one.

b. Maybe you want to dump law all together.

It’s possible. As the partner at one firm points out, “You may find that the things you hate are everywhere in law. Maybe you’re just not a lawyer.” That’s a pretty grand assumption. Being a lawyer can be so different in different settings. A large firm versus a small firm versus a government agency versus a trade association versus a corporate legal department ... they’re all different. But if none of them flip your switch, then research another industry the way you’d research any job. Find people who do what you want to do, and talk to them. Call the alumni director of your college or university to find people whose brains you can pick. Go to trade industry functions. Subscribe to magazines in the area. Read profiles of people who do what you want. Go to seminars about it. People spend more time looking for a car than they do thinking and researching what they do with their lives! We make assumptions—what it’ll be like, based on what we think we knew in law school. People make that mistake all the time. It’s better to get a contact from your law school and talk to them for their perspective. “Sounds interesting” isn’t enough to make a life decision on!

7. Leaving—Don’t burn your bridges!

If you’ve made the decision to leave your employer, it might be tempting to pull a Dennis Miller and just say, “I’m outta here!” But of course, you shouldn’t do that. Here’s what you should do:

a. Keep your head in the game as long as you’re still at the office—and before you’ve found something else.

It’s easy to let your work falter when you’ve decided to leave. Don’t let that happen! It’s easier to find a job while you still have a job. It can spiral. Make sure you get the job done. It can take longer to transition than you think!

b. Keep your job search discreet.

Put “Please keep my inquiry confidential” in any letters you send out. And apply for online jobs from your home computer. Your employer will be really steamed if they hear about your job search because somebody called from another employer looking for you. Don’t use employer resources looking for a job.

As soon as you’re out, they’ll check your phone and Internet usage. It wouldn’t look seemly to have a lot of your job search calls made from the office, especially if you’re on billable time. Use a cell phone, and use your home computer for your job search. And—duh—no job-hunting letters on firm stationery.
c. Leave on good terms. You don’t know what the future holds!

Everybody I talked to stressed the importance of leaving bridges intact when you go. Number one, your firm may merge with your old firm. And number two, the grass may not really be greener—you may want to come back. We’ve had lawyers do that. You can’t do it if you’ve burned bridges! Another lawyer comments that “If you make a stink or you’re a cancer in the office before you leave, if you let your displeasure be known—it doesn’t serve you! It’s truly amazing how you can come full circle and be back in the same office or have to call on them for business. Handle it graciously!”

d. Mend any hard feelings before you leave.

If you’re jumping ship, now is the time to patch up relationships with people in the office. Shake hands. Get over it. Find something pleasant to say. Remember that the moment you leave the office is the last time people will see you. You want to be remembered as pleasantly as possible. You never know the circumstances under which you’ll see—or need—them again!

e. Be careful about what you say in your exit interview.

Leave on a good footing! Only communicate criticisms that can help the employer. Don’t say, ‘I work too hard’ or ‘I don’t like so-and-so’—that doesn’t help anyone. Probably the best thing to say is, ‘I’m not leaving. I’m just giving you a potential referral source.’

Note that the reason you’re leaving will have a lot to do with what you can say. If you’re leaving for a personal reason—your spouse got transferred, your family is far away—nobody’s going to take issue with that, and you can say, “Gee, I’d love to have stayed, but …” You’ll be an out-of-state referral source. Similarly, if you’re going in-house to one of the firm’s clients, they’ll be thrilled to have you on the “inside.” But if you’re going to the firm across the street—it’s a touchy situation. Be very diplomatic about it, and avoid saying anything disparaging—either to people at the office you’re in now, or at your new employer.

Don’t Do Something Like This Career Limiting Move:

Small firm, looking to expand, hires a guy coming from a very large firm in a nearby city. They have a series of interviews, and invite him to an office outing right before his start date. He comes to the outing and shakes hands with everybody, fits in well. The firm changes its letterhead in anticipation of his arrival. He shows up for work for his first week, and nothing’s wrong. He’s doing fine and he seems to be happy. The second week—he’s a no-show. The firm is frantic. They call home—no answer. They’re completely at a loss as to what happened. Finally, in desperation, they call his old firm to see if they’ve heard from him. The receptionist calmly says, “Oh, he’s here right now. I’ll put you through.” The guy casually comments, “Actually, I never quit this job. I thought I’d try it out to see if I liked it with you better. I didn’t. So I decided to stay here.”

8. After you leave, keep those bridges intact!

When you’ve left an employer, the temptation is to let down your guard. To tell people, “Well, here’s what really happened. We went out drinking one night, and Fred wound up in a French maid’s outfit.”

Don’t dish the dirt on your previous employer. As I’ve already pointed out, you have no idea when you’ll work with them again—or when you might be useful to each other. As the recruiting coordinator at one large firm says, “It perturbs me when I hear people badmouthing us after they leave. Just say, ‘It wasn’t a good fit.’ If you badmouth your old firm, the people you work with now will think, ‘Gee, what’s he going to say about us when he leaves here?’”

In addition, stay in touch with people you’ve worked with. You’re still part of a community, and it may be
that keeping up with developments at your old employer has an influence on your career.

Incidentally, now you’ve got the chance to see who your real friends are. Remember I told you that people you work with are your colleagues first and your friends second? Once you’ve left the office, you’re testing those friendships. You’ll find that there really are people you keep as friends throughout your life, and the rest? Well, there’s nothing wrong with having friendly colleagues while you work together.

9. What if leaving isn’t your idea? What to do if you’re asked to leave.

Getting canned really bites. Believe me, I know. I’ve been fired from every job I ever had. (Kind of makes you feel good, doesn’t it?) When they tell you to get lost, there’s no question that it hurts like hell. But hard as it seems to believe when it happens to you, the sun’s going to go on shining. You’ll find other jobs. As one law school career services officer puts it—and I just love this—”You’ve been released to the Universe!” It always happens for the best. There’s some reason, some perception that’s against you. If you stayed, something would have happened. You always wind up better off.

The key thing to do when you’ve been asked to leave is to go with your head held high. No disparaging comments, no foul language, nothing like that. I once saw a press conference with a guy who’d been released by the Green Bay Packers, and his only comment was, “Thanks for the opportunity to fulfill a dream.” Well, you might not be leaving a dream job, but you’ve got to have the same classy attitude. If you can’t think of any other good reason to do it, do it because it’ll have just the effect you want it to have on people. If you are nice, if you smile and seem remarkably unbothered, you’ll make them think, “Gee, I wonder if we did the right thing?” They’ll feel guilty for doing something so terrible to somebody so nice. If instead you whine and bitch and badmouth them, they’ll think, “Good riddance. Thank God she’s out of here!”

Here’s some advice from one attorney for handling a firing, lay-off, release to the Universe, or any other words you want to use for it:

a. If your employer has an EAP (Employer Assistance Plan), use it when you’re laid off.

You can get therapy through an EAP, and when you’re heartbroken about your job, it’s a great idea. You’ll quickly figure out exactly what happened so that you can ensure it doesn’t happen again. Afterwards, you see all the signs on the wall; it’s just that they’d been printed in invisible ink. See if the employer has outplacement or will pay for it. If they don’t, go to your career services office for advice.

b. Don’t sulk around the office before you leave.

Don’t do it. Be classy about it. It’s a small community, and you want a good reference.

c. Don’t leave e-mails and voice mail for everyone in the office saying “So-and-so is an idiot.”

Lean on friends from outside of work for support; don’t say anything negative to anybody in the office. Remember: this is the dividing line between friends and colleagues. You won’t be able to tell who your friends are until after you’ve left. While you’re still there—painful as it is—be discreet.

d. Don’t delete things from your computer. It’s theft. And it’s petty.

You’ll come back into contact with these people. There are too many chances they’ll impact your future employability.

e. As soon as you leave, go into lockdown mode.

Record a new voicemail to give yourself a chance to get yourself together. Send a simple e-mail to people
who try to contact you: “Thanks for your call, I’m getting myself together and I’ll be in touch.” Remember that when some people contact you, they want reassurance: “If they got rid of her I could be next.” You’ve got to think of yourself first right now.

**f. The hurt will pass.**

Remember, if you’re asked to leave your job—this too shall pass. If you’re lucky, being asked to leave a job is the worst thing that will ever happen to you. You’ll go on to your next job, you’ll do everything you’ve ever aspired to do, and you’ll be a smashing success. Keep your eye on that prize!

Please see the following articles for more information about nontraditional law jobs and alternative ways to use your law degree:

- 60 Nontraditional Jobs You Can Do with a Law Degree (and Should Strongly Consider Doing)
- Practicing Law Not the Only Option for Attorneys
- Life Outside the Law Firm: Non-Legal Jobs for Law School Grads
- When Being a Lawyer Is Not for You: How to Successfully Transition into the Job of Your Dreams!
- Why You Should Think Twice About Remaining in Law (or Going to Law School)
- Thinking about Becoming a Legal Search Consultant (a.k.a. a "Headhunter")? Here's the Inside Scoop.
- Twelve Sexy Things You Can Do with a Law Degree That (1) May Make You Famous and (2) Do Not Require Practicing Law
- 25 Reasons Most Attorneys Hate the Practice of Law and Go Crazy (and What to Do About it)
- Non-Traditional Job Settings: The Temporary or Telecommuting Lawyer-The Best of Both Worlds or a Big Mistake?
- Three Tips for Lawyers Unhappy with Their Jobs (What to Do If You Hate Being an Attorney and Your Attorney Job)
- The True Meaning of JD in the World of Legal Publishing.
- Jane Jones, Contract Attorney
- The Benefits of Avoiding the Large Law Firm