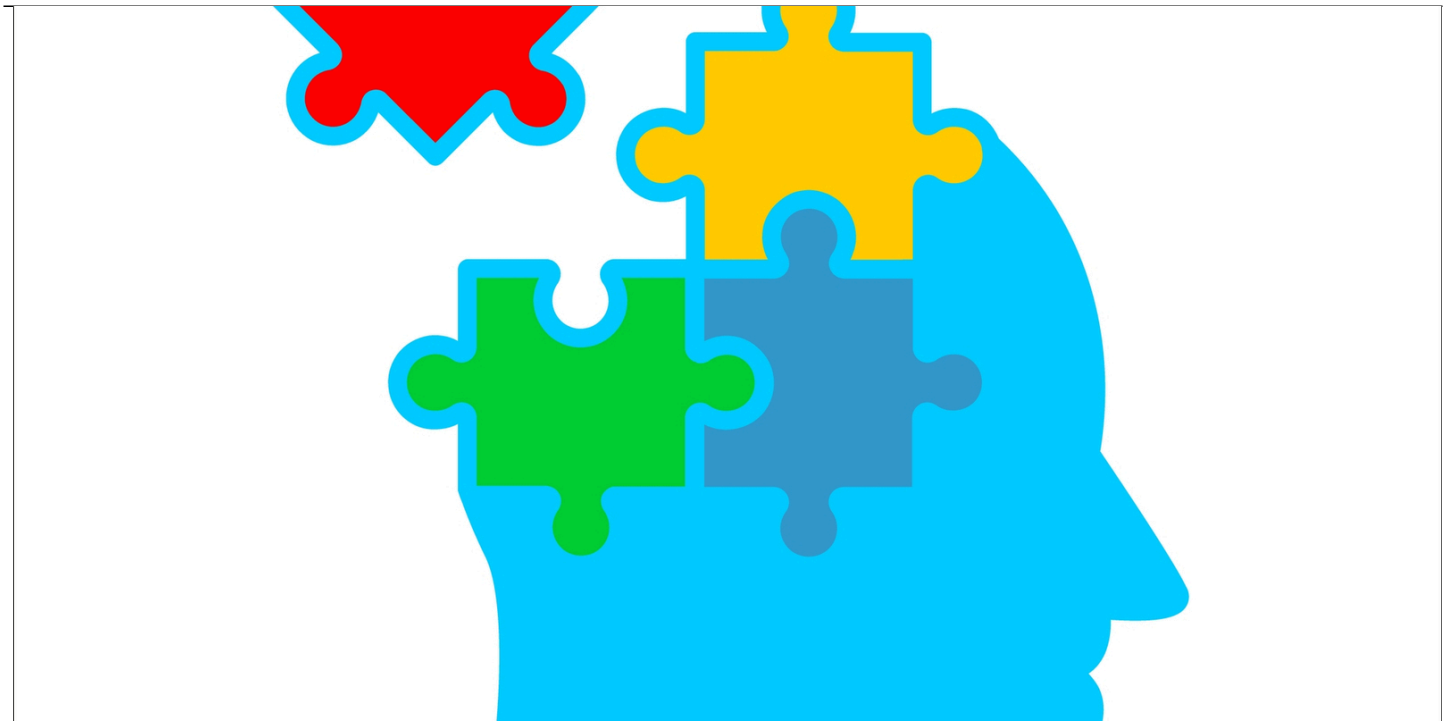
Career Path: Identifying Problems Worth Working On

Law Department Management

Career Development



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Let me start with a fundamental truth that experienced employees know all too well: Identifying problems is easy. New employees are typically astounded at how many problems they quickly identify when starting a new job.

Guess what? You are not the first person or the only person to detect things that aren't working perfectly. I tell new hires that identifying problems is the easiest thing for an employee to do.

If you stop at merely identifying problems, you won’t be much use to your colleagues or your company. Employees who go on to add real value become just as adept at proposing solutions to the problems they identify. But, as we’ll discuss in Career Path: Identifying Solutions That Will Work, it turns out proposing solutions is also not the hard part.

Driving change

The hard part in driving change is as follows: Identifying which problems are worth focusing on, and which solutions are worth pursuing among many possible approaches. Doing so requires a blend of strategic thinking and real-world pragmatism that most people only gain through experience. Let me explain why this is so.

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We typically have a rich buffet of problems always laid out before us. Faced with this abundance, many people choose to address problems they feel are manageable. That is, smaller problems with

relatively quick solutions. Is someone requesting your input via email? That's easy. Take a few minutes and respond to them. This type of problem-solving can be quite satisfying. You are checking items off your list and making visible progress.

The typical workday also requires us to deal with mundane topics. Few people can avoid the many minor interactions that make up modern work. Hence, the abundance of advice we see on how to work more efficiently. If we are going to spend a fair amount of time dealing with little problems, it is useful for us to learn how to solve them quickly and well.

The expedient path to problem solving is nonetheless a risky path. Notice first how the number of small problems never diminishes. Each task we accomplish provides a fleeting burst of pleasure but is rewarded by two more tasks. Next notice how often we spend our entire day in a succession of what we thought would be brief moments of quick answers. The many little things we chase after mindlessly eat up the day.

Focus on what can make the greatest difference

If you are purposeful, you may have carefully thought about your important priorities. These are the strategic things that you believe will have the greatest influence. Ask yourself how much overlap there is between the small daily problems you usually spend time on and your strategic priorities. If you are like most people I know, the answer is not much.

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Another risk is that the further you advance in your career, the more you will find people looking for you to help solve *their* urgent problems. This is only natural, but you must be aware of this key fact: Other people's problems are not necessarily your problems. And helping solve other people's problems is often not the best use of your time.

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If solving other people’s problems is not the best use of your time, do you have a clear sense of what is? Take a moment and write down what you think are among your greatest potential contributions to your company. How do you (or can you) add value?

Your greatest value may be that you helped avoid problems

Especially for lawyers, keep in mind that your greatest contribution may be avoiding negative outcomes. People overweight additive initiatives, like acquisitions, introducing new products, or entering new territories. But, often, tremendous value hides in helping ensure your company and colleagues do not, pardon the phrase, f— things up. We know there is great value in strong governance and effective compliance. But our business colleagues do not default to preventive measures unless prompted.

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In sum, problems large and small always clamor for our attention. The things we spend time on by default may be a necessary part of our day, but they are unlikely to be the most important problems. It is helpful to for us to carefully consider the ways in which we add value because this helps us identify potential problems worth focusing on.

I recommend taking the process in separate stages. That is, first devote quality time to identifying a long list of problems that your team or your company are facing. At this stage, just identify problems. Try hard not to consider how easy each problem would be to solve, but rather rank them according to how valuable it would be if they were solved.

Then put your list of problems aside and consider the ways in which you add value. What can you do that no one else will do, or do as well? Your contribution may be in the form of focusing on things others do not, being willing to devote more time to a project, or in the special skills and abilities you possess or can nurture.

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Now you are ready to take your short list of potentially strategic problems and match it up against your list of your unique value propositions. If you're lucky, this will reveal a few overlaps where you would be well-positioned to focus your efforts.

Be well.

Want more? Come aboard.

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James Bellerjeau

Lecturer

University of Zurich

James Bellerjeau is a lecturer in the LLM program of the University of Zürich and for the Europa Institut of the University of Zürich.

Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.