

Tech Toolbox: Creative Career Management

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



Traditional approaches to career management were often limited to basic considerations like job location and title, employer financial health and culture, the type of work, office situation, etc. Career development meant either getting an entry level job in a corporate law department that offered on-the-job training, or after that, developing expertise in some area of law that was marketable. Furthermore, people often assumed their careers would be doing the same job with the same company for many years.

This was certainly true for me. As a young lawyer, although I tended to approach each new job opportunity with the idea that I might be with that firm for the rest of my career, I was usually grateful to be able to change jobs, if not always companies, every four to five years or so, simply to avoid feelings of stagnation.

These traditional expectations around career management were embedded in what was the then existing worldwide corporate culture. They developed during a time after the (even) more static job environment of the 1960s–1990s, but before the current era of more fluid work arrangements that are increasingly finding their ways into the business world today.

But the changes wrought by technology and globalization have been accelerating for years, to the point where they have already had a massive impact on the way we work and, consequently, the ways employers and employees interact.

More businesses are relying on temporary or leased employees from overseas. More businesses are replacing certain outside with inside counsel, and replacing certain job functions using AI. Especially after the pandemic, more businesses will permit or even encourage remote work arrangements, reducing their current real estate footprints in favor of "hoteling" arrangements. These and many other trends are certain to impact most inside counsels' careers over the next several decades. This in turn may create the opportunity for more creative career management opportunities than we have

had in the past.

So, what does this mean for your own approach to career management? Here are some thoughts on the things you might want to take into account.

Location, location, location.

Traditionally, we have come to expect that we might have to relocate to wherever the jobs we wanted were located. Although we would try to find jobs in places we desired to live, if none were available there (or if the compensation was sufficiently alluring elsewhere), we might have to move to locations we didn't actually like all that much.

That may be changing. The pandemic has taught many employers and employees some of the benefits of remote work arrangements. Some employers may be slower to adopt such arrangements, but many will not. As more companies incorporate such arrangements, it may be possible for corporate lawyers to locate almost anywhere (so long as internet service is adequate, which is steadily becoming true in more places). So, if you have found a location you love, you may have a much better chance than did prior generations to find a job working from that location, even if your employer isn't based there. Bottom line — make location selection part of your job selection criteria.

Become technologically competent.

Thirty years ago a lawyer's proficiency with computers was rarely if ever regarded as a job criterion by most employers. Now it should be. A lawyer who is skilled with modern technology will not only be a better remote worker but will also be able to develop personal knowledge management systems and operating efficiencies and other personal productivity skills that will make them much more effective workers in general. Here is what JDSupra had to say about it earlier this year:

> In 2018, Gartner observed that 81 percent of legal departments were unprepared for digitalization. Now, especially as the pandemic has forced lawyers to embrace more technology faster than ever before, the gap in lawyers' understanding of — and ability to harness the advantages of — technology has been exposed…
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> Technological competence is imperative for all lawyers, but it's an especially valuable skill for in-house lawyers, who must continuously find new ways to make their work more efficient. In-house counsel should keep tabs on the latest technological tools and consider ways they could streamline workflows and improve outcomes for their client.

So, take some time to study the tech tools you know you will be using, like MS Office or Google Workspace. Find tips and tricks videos and podcasts that will help you to refine your existing skills. Dive into tutorials so you can master more than just the fundamentals. You might even want to write or teach about the things you've learned, because doing that will further enhance your own skill level. Even if many employers aren't smart enough (yet!) to analyze your tech skills, knowing how to use your tech will make you far more attractive and competitive than you might have thought.

Develop a futurist mindset.

Change is accelerating. *Very* quickly. As the pucks move faster, it becomes even harder to stay in the game if you can't anticipate where your particular pucks are heading. This applies to everything from technology to privacy regulations to climate change to the general skills that make a good corporate counsel.

It is easy to get caught up in the illusion that most things don't change and don't need to; but in fact, change happens continuously and affects every facet of our lives. So if you can, teach yourself to read the various tea leaves that will help you identify emerging patterns and trends and, most importantly, develop a network of experts in various fields to act as sounding boards and help you better understand these trends and patterns, because you will be enormously more successful in your career and more valuable to prospective employers. You will also have turned yourself into a futurist, a practitioner of futurology.

Futures studies, **futures research** or **futurology** is the systematic, interdisciplinary and holistic study of social and technological advancement, and other environmental trends, often for the purpose of exploring how people will live and work in the future.

You may be asking, "But, how can anyone learn to do that?"

First and foremost, it involves developing the right attitude. If you can make a habit of routinely and systematically thinking about how the future is likely to pan out in various work-related contexts, you will be amazed at how quickly you will start to develop the ability to notice the signals that indicate those trends.

> "The best way to predict the future is to invent it."
>
> Alan Kay

Furthermore, your own creative thinking about a future you want may help you to create that future. If you can develop the ability to notice opportunities for change that you believe are likely to occur in your business environment — and then figure out how to implement some of those ideas through process improvements or other changes — you may be able to create innovative designs of your own to accomplish your or your company's goals.

For example, one of the most famous futurists was Alan Toffler, author of the 1970s bestseller *Future Shock*. Many of the trends he discussed in that book seemed like such fantastic concepts that those very ideas launched entire industries such as employee leasing, and he also predicted the immense impact of the internet and how it would facilitate remote workers. Developing a futurist mindset will open your mind to creative opportunities that might otherwise never occur to you.

> "Because it makes you think. It opens up the questions of what's possible. Not necessarily what will be, but what's possible."
>
> Alan Toffler

Make work/life balance a true priority.

Speaking of our futures, isn't it time we gave more thought to managing our careers so we can achieve something many of us desire but to which most employers have only given lip service for several decades? Although employers will talk about work/life balance during the "honeymoon" phase of recruitment, they will rarely try to ensure that existing employees will be able to set appropriate boundaries to prevent overwork and burnout, which is becoming an increasingly greater health hazard.

However, it is now becoming more possible for individual employees to better maintain those boundaries, and smart employees will begin to actively manage their careers around achieving a healthier and more satisfying work/life balance (WLB). I spoke with several very senior HR professionals from different companies, and they gave me the following tips.

1. Decide what it means and how important it is to you and reevaluate your job satisfaction in that regard on a regular basis. If you have concluded that you can only achieve success by trading away WLB, think again. More and more, I believe and my HR friends concur, it will be possible to achieve both.
2. If it *is* important to you, the best time to make that clear is during job recruitment. Employers are beginning to recognize that WLB is becoming more of a competitive recruitment lever, especially among the millennials they are trying so hard to attract, so the more you and other potential recruits raise it during the recruitment process, the more companies will come to address it.
3. Check sites like Glassdoor to see if your potential employer has WLB issues that concern you, and raise that with them during recruitment. And, since more employers routinely conduct employee satisfaction/engagement surveys, ask whether WLB is addressed in those surveys (it may be a bad sign if they don't) and, if it is, whether you can review the results of those surveys for your prospective law department. Either way, ask to interview some of your prospective colleagues in that department and see what they say about it.
4. If you are already employed and see your WLB being eroded, explore ways you may be able to address the issue. For example, talk to your manager and HR about your concerns. They should take your physical and mental health seriously, and many studies have shown the correlation between health and WLB.
5. In the United States, we have developed a false correlation between more hours worked and greater productivity, but this is a false equivalency as many studies have shown. In fact, there is a clear point of diminishing returns where longer hours mean less overall productivity. If your company tracks productivity metrics, see whether you can use your own scores to show that you do more and better work when you aren't as burnt out. Raise the issue in your employee surveys and in conversations about morale with your manager or HR and encourage colleagues expressing similar concerns to speak out as well.
6. Finally, you may want to consider becoming your own employer, so you can establish the WLB you prefer. As remote and flexible work arrangements become more common, more employers will consider outsourcing work to independent contractors, and you just may find an active and satisfying career being an independent outside counsel who works for just one or a few corporations. If you do go that route, though, make sure you don't make the mistake many independent contractors (and many remote workers, for that matter) make when it comes to WLB, which is to set porous boundaries and work harder than most full-time employees do.

There are many other aspects of creative career management I may address in future columns, such as developing your own brand, developing subject matter expertise, and authorship. But I hope this column may give you some creative ideas. As always, feel free to get in touch if you'd like to discuss

the subject.

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