

Career Path: Sit Down and Stay Awhile

Career Development



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If you want to advance in your career, there's never been a better time to make a leap.* Higher pay, flexible hours, work from anywhere are all yours for the asking.

There's certainly less justification to put up with a bad boss, an underperforming company, or missing development opportunities. And yet, if you're not suffering from a significant disadvantage where you are, I'm going to advise you to think about staying put for a while longer.

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Whether you stay or go really depends on whether you want merely career progress or to get better at your job. They are not necessarily the same. I find getting better at your job often leads to sustainable career success. I can't say the same about people who pursue a new job whenever it's dangled in front of them. Often, the bigger job at the new company actually sets you back, at least in terms of your effectiveness. Why is that, you ask?

Success requires much more than legal expertise

What makes you effective in your job is a lot more than your legal skills. Knowing the law and how to apply it is of course important, but many good lawyers can do that. What makes for a great in-house counsel is efficiently helping your company achieve its strategic objectives. Your core contribution to this goal is helping your company identify and navigate relevant risks. Here's how you do that.

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Know the business

You first need to understand well what your company wants to accomplish from a business perspective. This is not trivial for lawyers, because you need to get out of your lawyer mindset and think more like you've got a masters in business administration (MBA). Your business colleagues will have a long list of items, some vital to the company's success and others less so. You can't make useful risk assessments unless you understand the importance of the various business project to the business. You will spend more time and be more creative in designing a risk-based approach when the project is critical. And you will be less tolerant of excess risk when a project is merely "nice to have."

Stay out of trouble

Similarly, how do you know what sorts of things are likely to get your company in trouble? Well, regulators themselves give you hints by the pace and scope of their rulemaking, as well as when they make public comments. Politicians do the same, usually by ratcheting up pressure on regulators. And if you're lucky, authorities will investigate and penalize other industry participants before you. All this gives you warnings about what's hot and where you need to focus.

Work well with others

Next, because you are just one person, the amount you can do directly is limited. Thus, every manager is ultimately measured by how well they work with and through others. For legal counsel, you more than most need to get your colleagues to do what you want them to. That's doubly hard because what you want often goes against their incentives and inclinations. You want salespeople to pay attention to contract terms even though that makes getting new business harder and takes longer. All employees need to be compliant and follow the law, even though this adds administrative burden to their daily work.

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Thus, you need to be great at building relationships. When your senior management team not only understands but is fully bought into your legal priorities, they will help you implement them. They will do this because they see the value to the company in what you're trying to accomplish, not just the costs. You don't need everyone on your side, but you certainly can't do it alone.

There's likely much to learn and do where you are

I got better at my job every year for 20 years. You never stop finding ways to understand better your company and its business. Every year makes you sharper in assessing which risks are the ones you need to focus on. And with every relationship you build and deepen, you expand your effective reach. Last but not least, you may feel immensely satisfied seeing the results of your hard work pay off over years.

> Far from being a cop-out, making the decision to stay at a company where you perform well demonstrates good judgment *and* courage.

Now consider the frequent job hopper. Even if they stay within their known industry, and many do not, they are but a novice when it comes to many important things relating to their new company: the history that led to the current strategy, relationships among management and the board, and whose opinion is respected while which others have the potential to cause trouble for you.

It's a long list of things you need to learn when you switch companies before you have any hope of being as effective as you were at your old company. The shiny new title (and let's not forget, higher pay) frequently blinds us to how much harder and riskier our jobs are in the early years. That is, there are costs and tradeoffs when taking that new job.

I know some remarkable people who have gone from strength to strength, who seem to be effective from the first day in a new job. These people are pretty rare in my experience. You may be one of them.

For all the rest of us, we owe it to ourselves to think about how effective we've become in our current jobs and why. Our self-reflection may inspire us to stay around a little longer.

Far from being a cop-out, making the decision to stay at a company where you perform well demonstrates good judgment *and* courage.

Be well.

*This is a conversation I would have liked to have with every colleague I worked with over the years who was tempted to leave the company. Better late than never.

Questions? Comments? Contact Career Path's James Bellerjeau.

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