

Transition within the legal sector – how to manage the process successfully

Agnes Bamford of executive coaching company **The Results Centre** has advice for legal personnel dealing with the challenge of workplace transition.

The legal profession is often seen as a static environment by those working outside it (and sometimes within it), populated by traditional partnership structures and slow to implement the different concepts embraced by other industries such as outsourcing. However, the legal workplace is also undergoing change as increasing numbers of personnel consider the alternatives to private practice or self-employment, encouraged by initiatives such as the relaxation of the Bar Standards Board's regulatory changes allowing barristers to act as partners in a law firm.

Whilst this change may be good, it can also be a major source of stress for most people - and those working in the legal profession are no different. You may have worked long and hard for promotion, making senior barrister or partner and you may be excited by moving to an innovative new practice, but you are likely to find the transition period stressful.

There are many variables that influence transition stress, from basic changes in routine to potentially profound changes in how you see yourself and your role within an organisation. This can be particularly difficult if moving to a completely different environment e.g. from chambers to working in-house within industry. Often, much of the focus centres on elements outside of

your control, which can make it hard to understand exactly why you feel the way that you do.

Transition stages

Whether moving to new chambers, a new role or a new workplace, the transition period typically involves several phases that most people experience, although the timescale and intensity can vary widely.

1. Firstly, you are likely to experience the ambiguity of initial excitement coupled with anxiety about the new situation. This may be followed by a honeymoon period of discovery and exploration, where people assist you as a newcomer.

2. The first dip is normally a reaction to the new environment and an inability to consistently function within it as well as you know that you are capable of. This includes logistical systems and procedures that you haven't yet learned to manage. After learning to adjust to the new environment and its demands, you will soon function more comfortably and successfully.

3. As you become more involved in the new role, you may experience a second dip: an internal reaction as you continue to adjust your behaviour. This is because former behaviours may not be sufficiently effective or generate the expected reaction. However, you should eventually find a way to adapt

to the behaviours and norms of the new culture.

The important thing to remember is that it's completely normal to experience these negative emotions, so accept and acknowledge them, whilst focusing on finding the positives and taking action.

Strategies for dealing with transition

The good news is that there are practical strategies that you can use to help manage the anxiety of transition, which apply to most situations and most levels of personnel – from the most junior through to senior.

The first step is being realistic about the situation that you are entering. This means recognising that transitioning between roles or firms will almost certainly incur periods of uncertainty and doubt. However, just acknowledging that this is normal can help you to deal with the situation better. It is also important to appreciate that this is an emotional process, a rollercoaster for some, and therefore not something that you can rationalise your way out of.

Think about how you normally tackle hardship and how you can prepare for these experiences. Difficult situations are often easier to tackle – and may even act as a powerful motivator - as long as you are prepared for them. Whilst the majority of your attention should be focused on success, it will also help if you are prepared for any



negative experiences. It is possible to change your mindset and learn how to like being uncomfortable, teaching yourself to enjoy the possibilities offered by tough challenges.

Learning from change

We all learn from our professional and personal experiences, so looking back at other past transitions can help you understand how you react to change. Thinking about your past responses to major life transitions such as having children, getting divorced or moving house can all prepare you for the changes ahead. What were the periods of emotional 'highs' and enablers of these? Think of the periods of emotional 'lows' and what triggered them and reflect on how stress manifested itself

during the lows. It may also be helpful to focus on what helped you to manage this transition.

Now consider the potential implications for your current situation. What did you learn about yourself that you could apply to your present transition?

It may also be useful, dependent upon your experience and areas of practice expertise, to look at how others, including clients, have dealt with transitional changes in their lives, environment and circumstances – how can you learn from these observed experiences?

Reflect on what normally causes you stress, identifying the situations, types of people, responsibilities or areas (work and personal) that are your specific

stressors. Think about how stress impacts you: what you tend to think, feel and do as a result. Then consider what you can do that will help you to feel balanced and manage stress more effectively.

Tips for managing transition stress

- Get into a positive mindset. List the top ten successes in your working life so far. Consider where you have added value to the organisation or people in it and when you have received praise or recognition. What has brought you the most enjoyment and when you have felt positive and satisfied?
- Considering the above, identify the main skills/qualities you bring that have enabled your success? Identify ten.



- Look objectively at your new role and consider the four/ five best things about the new opportunity: which of your main skills will be useful and what would be the best outcome for you in this role 12 months from now? Identify two things that you can do immediately to move towards achieving this outcome. It may help to imagine a colleague you admire stepping into this role - what would they do in the first month/three months?

- Try to make sense of your new environment. Look for logical reasons for why people behave as they do and for why things work differently. Look for the 'big picture'.

- Pay attention to the different values, behavioural patterns and communication styles of your new colleagues and respect those differences. How do your beliefs, values and assumptions colour the way you perceive them?

- Be prepared to step outside of your comfort zone. Great learning can occur when you do. Take advantage of your new environment and take

reasonable risks. If you are moving home get involved in the new community: volunteer, explore and interact.

- Approach a colleague that you trust who can introduce you to parts of the new culture that you would not otherwise have access to, as well as helping you to make sense of the differences. New colleagues can show you the culture from the inside, as well as helping you to interpret reactions around you and develop effective interaction with others. They can also offer feedback and act as a safe sounding board before you take action.



No matter how successful your career, stress and anxiety are inevitable parts of transition. Approach the situation as you would a difficult case or complex legal issue – by preparing and gathering information. This way, its impact can be managed, minimised and even transformed into something positive.

About the author

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