

Making the Most of These Slow Times

Now that you are not working night and day to keep up with the business crossing your desk, what should you be doing to make the most of these slow times? Besides catching up on your sleep and getting reacquainted with family and friends, there are specific steps you can take to position yourself to advance your career once the economy turns around. In a slow economy, attorneys must work harder to achieve their career goals. With a dearth of work, it is more difficult to keep busy, let alone to continue to develop new legal skills. However, like savvy law firms which are laying off underutilized attorneys while seeking to make strategic hires to position for the next upturn, individual attorneys must take stock of their current situations and determine how to use this downtime to best prepare for the future.

Take inventory of your current skills and those you wish to further develop. Look at your firm's work flow, and ascertain whether you will be able to keep yourself sufficiently busy for the near term and gain new expertise in the not-too distant future. You may be competing with other attorneys for work just to keep busy in this slowdown, and you will need to be proactive in going after assignments. Determine which partners are continuing to bring in work and which departments are most busy. Get up from your desk and ask them how you can be of assistance in servicing their clients. Let your firm know that you are willing to work in other areas of practice. If possible, ask for work that will allow you to develop new areas of expertise or particular legal skills that will serve you well in the future. Remember to do your very best work on even the most mundane assignments because the quality of your work and attitude will determine whether you get more assignments, or whether you will be the next to get the ax if times continue to be tough.

Take this slow time to position yourself to be a rainmaker when the business climate changes. Take a look at the kinds of clients the firm has served historically. If their legal needs have slowed but you have reason to believe that they will turn around in the future, take this slow time to get to know their business. Conversely, you may determine that the firm's clients might be in long-term trouble, and it would be better to pursue new avenues for business. Stay ahead of industry trends and seek to identify upcoming legal needs. Whichever you decide, this is a good time to develop your expertise in the areas where you believe there will be potential business. Talk to your partners, do some research and write an article, join trade organizations, become active on related bar association committees, volunteer for *pro bono* projects, and otherwise become known in the legal and larger business community for your expertise.

While your business and professional contacts may also be experiencing a slow time in their businesses, you might want to take time to renew your relationships in hopes of asking for their business when the economy takes an upturn. Join business networking groups; attend your undergraduate and law school alumni functions. Join and use social networking sites that are business-oriented, such as LinkedIn or Plaxo. Update and expand your contacts database so it is ready for use when business picks up. Now that you have the time, catch up on your reading of business and legal publications, and do what all the marketing experts recommend—send copies of articles of specific interest to your contacts. Set up a system whereby you maintain regular contact with those in your database so that you are fresh on their minds when they have business to refer.

While your billable hours are down, start writing business-related articles or blogs and, if you are comfortable speaking before groups, making speeches. Take advantage of any in-house or CLE classes offered not only in areas of your current expertise, but also in practice areas that are busier in your firm right now, and that interest you. This is a good time to become an expert in your current practice or to position yourself for a possible new career path. And, you might want to get to know your legal recruiter in the event you decide (or events require) that you are best served by making a strategic move.

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