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A Prescription for Hard Times

by Stephen Seckler

It's easy to focus on bad news. Misery does love company and blogs like *Abovethelaw* have made a sport of tracking the latest law firm layoffs, start date delays, salary cuts, etc. I'm not sure how it helps you to read these daily reports; but I must confess, they provide a certain entertainment value (as they say in journalism, bad news sells.)

So what's an anxious lawyer to do? What are some of the steps you can take to relieve yourself of ongoing angst about your future. What actions should you take when in the course of a week, you vacillate between imagining yourself as a partner at a respected law firm and worrying whether McDonalds will think you are overqualified?

As we start to see faint glimmers of hope that our economy is approaching the "bottom", I offer these seven tips. Good times are surely on the way. We don't know when; but those of us who are on our third or fourth recession can at least promise you that. Until then:

1. Stop reading blogs like Abovethelaw and stop talking about the layoffs. Yes, we all want to be "in the know" and sharing the latest gossip is one way to demonstrate that you are in the loop. But think about the drain on your mental energy when you spend so much time discussing these negatives. Wouldn't it be more energizing to spend time reading about and discussing the positive things that your clients are doing?
2. Since it is hard to completely avoid bad news, skim industry blogs like Abovethelaw; but ignore the articles that focus on problems in the profession. You do want to be an informed professional. It's fun to read about the summer associate who bore his bottom during a firm outing; but stop after the headline when you see something like "Biglaw Axes 75".
3. Use your extra time at work to get more involved in non-billable activities like professional development, firm committees or marketing. There is no shortage of things you can do to improve your skills, contribute to your firm's management or begin building your reputation outside the firm (to set the stage for future business development).
4. Work with a coach. It's difficult to stick to a regimen that has mainly long term benefits. As human beings, we are not well wired to be motivated by rewards that are somewhere off in the future. Get help. Aside from teaching you the skills you need to succeed at marketing, a good coach helps keep you on track, keeps you motivated and supports you in getting past your own roadblocks. While I coach lawyers professionally, I have actually hired several business coaches myself in the last 10 years. I have always found their support and guidance to be invaluable.
5. Get exercise. If you don't have a routine, create one. Taking long walks at lunch can clear your head and now that winter is finally over, it's time to explore the great outdoors. Personally, I

like going to the gym but for some, having home exercise equipment provides a more efficient way to get the workout you need. The bottom line is that down economies are stressful and exercise is an important part of stress management. Consider hiring a coach to get you into a routine. I've done this as well with great success.

6. Turn to friends and family for support. A friend of mine once said that he doesn't like to keep bad thoughts inside because he is afraid he'll end up with a tumor. Lawyers are trained to listen to their client's problems; but as a group, we are not always good at articulating our own difficulties because we don't want to come across as weak. Taking the time to vent some of your negative feelings is an important part of trying to get past these feelings to focus on something more productive.
7. Schedule something you enjoy (i.e. something not work related). Read trashy novels, play an instrument, cook, organize old photos, explore new neighborhoods, hike, do crossword puzzles or watch old movies. The point is to take a break from work angst and feel good about something. You will bring this energy back with you to work.

In the Fall of 2009, we are not at the end of bad times. But for the legal profession, we are entering the "beginning of the end". How do I know this? Pure speculation actually. But if anyone tells you otherwise, I give you permission to conclude that they are wrong. It won't cost you anything to have a little faith in the strength of the U.S. economy and maybe you'll be right.

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