

How International Lawyers can Break their Golden Handcuffs

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Many international lawyers enjoy perk-filled, high paying and exciting jobs—and often the perks, pay and excitement attracted them to the field in the first place. However, after many years of a highly demanding practice, some international lawyers find that their jobs have become too stressful, too demanding and too consuming.

When this occurs, some international lawyers begin to question whether the benefits of their jobs outweigh the costs. Although they may dream about switching gears—perhaps even giving up the practice of law entirely—many feel reluctant to relinquish their high compensation and other perks. In other words, they feel trapped by Golden Handcuffs.

Common Causes of Burnout in International Lawyers

Many different factors contribute to burnout in international lawyers, with technology being one of the greatest culprits. Although designed to help people work less, improved technology means that international lawyers are on call at all times. Increased accessibility has resulted in clients expecting their lawyers to be available 24/7. Therefore, many international lawyers can never truly relax, regroup and rejuvenate.

Although an international lawyer might have originally considered international travel a perk, it can quickly become a burden. The older the lawyer, the more that jetlag—and now security delays—take a toll. Because business trips are consumed by meetings, many lawyers have less time to enjoy their foreign surroundings than they once imagined.

Experienced international lawyers also know that international business travel can be far from glamorous. Writer and editor Clifton Fadiman once said, “When you travel, remember that a foreign country is not designed to make you comfortable. It is designed to make its own people comfortable.”

Results of Burnout

Frequent travel often precludes an international lawyer from maintaining a happy home life, fostering interpersonal relationships, or simply meeting the everyday demands of life. Separation from friends and family can weigh heavily on international lawyers, especially for those stationed abroad for lengthy periods. Some international lawyers resort to excess food and alcohol, sleeping medications and other crutches to cope with the job's physical and emotional demands.

Many also cope with job stress by rewarding themselves with material possessions and other lifestyle perks. Once accustomed to such a lifestyle, it becomes hard to give up.

Finally, many of the most road-weary international lawyers cope by becoming workaholics—and convincing themselves that their lifestyle is normal. Workaholic habits may even become a badge of honor. Working too much is also a way to avoid dealing with personal problems at home.

Identifying Stress Factors

The lawyer's first step in reducing stress is to become aware of it and specifically identify its causes. Each lawyer's stress factors are unique, but they often include: inordinate travel, lack of family time, inability to pursue hobbies or interests, pressures to maintain certain lifestyles, stressful clients, and disinterest in job functions.

Because most layers are analytical, many lawyers find it helpful to chart their stress factor systematically, clearly identifying when the stress occurs and the specific causes of it. Each source of stress should be ranked on a scale of 1-10, giving a clear indication of which problems are the biggest.

Barriers to Change: Golden Handcuffs.

Identifying causes of stress is one thing, but implementing change is another. When it comes to making a job change, the Golden Handcuffs stop many lawyers dead in their tracks.

Barriers to change take many forms, but they commonly include fear of: loss of prestige, money, and identity; others' reactions (peers, spouse and other family, colleagues and employer); change; and the unknown.

Money—and the fear of living with less of it—keep many lawyers bound in Golden Handcuffs. While embarking on their self-assessment, lawyers should temporarily put aside their concerns about making enough money so that they can freely consider their possibilities. Once a lawyer puts aside money concerns, he should explore questions like: “When I am happiest, where am I and what am I doing? When was I last so engrossed that I lost track of the time? What would I do if money were no object?”

However, because money is necessary, lawyers should also get a really good grasp on their personal income, their current spending, and also understand what they really need to live on. Often lawyers are so busy with job demands that they habitually pay for certain luxuries (club memberships and the like) that they neither use nor value. Although it takes precious time to gather this data and prepare a budget, having a realistic sense of required income is critical to making informed choices.

Clarifying what is Really Important

The next step to living a satisfying life is to clearly identify what is really important. A lawyer should ask, “When I look back on my life, what will have made it fulfilling with few or no regrets?” Lawyers may be able to figure out their real values on their own or with the help of a trained coach or other professional. Books like Deborah Arron’s *What Can You Do with a Law Degree?* propose other helpful questions.

Most lawyers who want to break free from their Golden Handcuffs benefit from objective feedback about themselves, their personality type and communication styles. Diagnostic tools such as StrengthFinders, Meyer Briggs, or DiSC teach lawyers about themselves, and their strengths and weaknesses. Combining data about a lawyer’s personal strengths with data about his or her values, aids the lawyer in career decisions.

Analyze Possibilities

Next, lawyers should brainstorm about potential solutions to their stress and possibilities for their life. Attorneys who are overcome by exhaustion and stress especially need help in brainstorming alternatives. It is often best not to brainstorm with a spouse at least initially because spouses are an interested party, and often tied to the same Golden Handcuffs. Rather, the lawyer should seek out a trusted friend, associate or coach who is a creative thinker.

Using the lawyer’s chart of stress factors, he or she should list as many solutions as possible—from the realistic to the unrealistic. For example, if

working with one particular client is causing most of a lawyer's stress, the lawyer could chart possible solutions ranging from the simple (ignoring the problem), to the manageable (trying new communication techniques with the client, or passing the client to another lawyer), to the extreme (firing the client).

And this is the real key: seeing the possibilities listed in black and white helps lawyers to recognize that they really have choices. In fact, by keeping the status quo, lawyers also make a choice—to do nothing. Seeing all the possibilities encourages lawyers to know that they have a way out.

While brainstorming, the goal is to come up with as many creative alternatives as possible. For example, if heavy travel is causing a particular lawyer the most stress, he might consider transferring to a domestic law job—but getting his annual “international law fix” through international pro bono work.

One easy way to jumpstart job-related brainstorming is to peruse classified advertisements and choose jobs that appeal—regardless of salary or category. Doing so can help a lawyer to discover which job characteristics appeal most; for example, a lawyer drawn to a park ranger job may recognize that she would love to work outdoors. Perhaps a researcher position appeals because it guarantees a quiet, tranquil book-filled work space. This simple exercise can give a searching lawyer invaluable clues about what would make an ideal job. He or she can then use that data to find a law-related (or other) job with such characteristics.

Again, because many lawyers think analytically, charting options is helpful. Charts can be used to compare choices like: (a) change job, (b) keep current job but implement change (i.e., part-time hours, reduce travel, delegate duties, etc.), (c) maintain the status quo, or (d) not work at all, i.e. sabbatical.

Lawyers should also compare the qualities of their current positions with jobs they would enjoy, together with the pros and cons of each. For example, lawyers should note which jobs mesh with their particular values, involve their particular strengths and talents, meet their income requirements, and use their transferable skills.

Lawyers using this exercise invariably come up with a variety of solutions. The solution may simply mean keeping but altering an existing job, such as by going part-time or changing practice groups or cities. Sometimes the solution requires a minor tweaking of the lawyer's existing life—and sometimes a radical departure.

A senior international lawyer recently used this process to decide between two job offers: one with less money but more prestige and excitement, and the other with more security and better pay. Charting the pros and cons of each in detail, and identifying which job better met her values, made it easier to choose between them.

Resources:

Many lawyers find it stimulating to pour through career books like these get ideas: *Careers In International Law* (American Bar Association's Section of International Law and Practice); *Careers In International Affairs* (Georgetown University Press); *Running from the Law: Why Good Lawyers are Getting Out of the Legal Profession* and *What Can You Do With a Law Degree?: A Lawyer's Guide to Alternatives Inside, Outside and Around the Law*, both by Deborah Arron; *The Right Moves: Job Search and Career Development Strategies for Lawyers* by Valerie Fontaine; and *The Lawyer's Career Change Handbook: More than 300 Things You Can Do With A Law Degree*, by Hindi Greenberg.

Others enjoy perusing websites like: www.careerjournal.com (maintained by *The Wall Street Journal*); www.careerstorm.com (career assessment tools); <http://www.job-hunt.org/international.shtml> (listing many of the Web's job resources); and <http://www.netshare.com> (executive job postings).

Life without Golden Handcuffs

By brainstorming, introspection, analysis and creative strategizing, even the most entrenched and fatigued international lawyer can break the Golden Handcuffs. The first step is admitting that the Golden Handcuffs exist, and then courageously taking steps to become free.

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