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Stay Active and Career-Smart During a Down Economy: Ten activities will keep you sharp and make you feel good

By Diane Costigan

Lawyers can easily get so bogged down in day-to-day work that they don't think about their careers in a broader perspective. Busy, overscheduled, and overworked, they fantasize about the respite a slow period will bring, and promise themselves that they will reflect on the bigger picture "as soon as things calm down."

When the market does slow down, however, lawyers often feel more anxious than relieved. Free time gives them opportunity to worry about decreases in salary and bonuses and even worse, being laid off.

There's no point ruminating about what's out of your control. Instead, focus on what you can control. Rather than panicking, channel your energy into activities that will showcase you in a positive light and will also double as career insurance should you ultimately end up in a job search.

Many of these ten activities will not only make you feel good, they will also serve as tools to enhance your resume and build your network.

Ten Activities Will Keep You Sharp And Make You Feel Good

1. Write. This is a direct way of getting your name into circulation. Writing articles can help with business development by establishing you as an expert in your field. It can also distinguish you from other similarly situated candidates both in interviews and on your resume. Speaking of resumes...

2. Update your resume. Many of us think of this as a painful process. In an ideal world, you would regularly update your resume two or three times a year – adding new projects, responsibilities and accomplishments as they happen in real time. For those of you who haven't updated your resume in years, I recommend *Make the Right Career Move* by Rachelle Canteri, an excellent book with invaluable chapters on resume writing. As you redo your resume, think about where you are in your career and where you want to go.

3. Organize your office. If clients walked by your office, would they be impressed or would they quickly retreat with a look of disgust? For those of you who haven't sent a file down to records in years, now's your opportunity. Invest some time to make sure everything in your office has a place where it belongs. Check the health and effectiveness of your filing system. Getting organized will be a huge help when things pick up again. Also, as you go through your files, you may discover topics on which to write, and accomplishments to add to your resume.

4. Focus on training. Rather than dashing to complete CLE credits before state deadlines, get them out of the way now. Better yet, offer to teach a CLE course. This will help establish you as an expert and will give you a chance to practice public speaking. As an added bonus, in many states presenters earn double the CLE credits. With the luxury of time, you can pick topics that actually interest you and are relevant to your career as opposed to settling for whatever is being offered. You can also use the time to work on your development areas. If writing has been an issue for you, get a writing coach. If you've been working on your negotiation skills, spend time with a colleague skilled in that area. Ask questions about your development areas and then practice, practice, practice. Keeping busy with non-billable time will look better than just having low billable hours – particularly when expectations around billable hours will be low anyway.

5. Get current. Now's the time to catch up on all the articles, newsletters or books you've been accumulating. Look at your particular industry through the lens of the economy. What strategy can your clients adopt to steer themselves through tough times? What legal or business implications might they be facing and how can you help them? Even better, use your newly enhanced knowledge of your area to connect with clients: spend time with and stay close to them. Show them you are just as concerned about their businesses as they are.

6. Practice business development. A dip in the economy is the perfect time to brainstorm: write down ideas you have for expanding your current client base or acquiring new clients. Don't dismiss anything. Start building a strategy for each idea. Keep the good ideas and recycle the old ones while staying open to creative solutions.

7. Get involved. If you work at a firm, offer to interview new applicants for summer and first-year positions. Join firm committees or groups that you've always been interested in. Volunteer to mentor a new associate. All of these activities will establish your citizenship in the firm. As a former insider, I can assure you that being in the good graces of the recruiting and professional development staff is always a good idea.

8. Network. Make good on your promise to reach out to all the contacts you've been amassing. Look up the person you shared a panel with. Combine networking and business development by catching up with a former client or law school classmate; conversations like this might spark either a business development opportunity or an idea for a written piece. Reach out to someone who has a job you might be interested in. Network to catch up on what's going on in your clients' industries. Get involved in your local or state bar association and avail yourself of the tremendous networking resources it can provide.

9. Give back. Get involved in a pro bono case – particularly one that has meaning for you. This will give you an opportunity to keep your skills sharp while waiting for other work; you might even learn a new skill or two to use in an interview or job transition. Don't restrict yourself to the legal field: volunteer for any organization you're interested in. All of this can help your interviewing, networking and business development – while doing something good. For some ideas, check out www.probono.net or www.voa.org.

10. Recover! Don't panic – use the time productively. Go on that vacation you had to cancel last year. Spend more time with loved ones. Read the crime novel that's been collecting dust on your night table. Schedule long-overdue doctors' appointments. Check in with your financial

adviser. In all likelihood, the market will rebound and when it does, you'll be in an energized and positive state of mind.

If you adopt my new favorite quote, "Pain is inevitable, suffering is optional" (author unknown), you'll start converting your nervous energy during slow times into productivity. Keep busy, stay on people's radar screens, and become engaged in other endeavors. Focus on the overall value these activities add to your career and plan for ways you can make them part of your regular routine, even when the economy picks up.

ⁱ Canter, Rachelle; *Make the Right Career Move*; Wiley, John & Sons, Incorporated, 2006.