

THE LAW IS BACK

By Steven A. Meyerowitz

What it takes
for a lawyer who
has left the practice
of law or taken time off
to get back into it

Lawyers leave the law all the time. Some decide they don't like the work, the hours or the clients. Others believe they are more likely to be happy in an alternative career, perhaps as a teacher or in business. More than the occasional attorney is tempted by the vast sums payable to stars in the financial services industry. And, of course, there are the quite common reasons for turning in the time clock, from raising a

family to caring for elderly or ill relatives to retiring.

Athina L. Cornell, a partner in Lindabury, McCormick, Estabrook & Cooper P.C., a mid-sized general practice in central New Jersey with offices in Philadelphia, is quite experienced at re-entering the law. She has done it three times, for six months each time, following the birth of each of her three children.

Of course, it's one thing for a lawyer to be out for half a year and then basically walk back into the same office at the same law firm, with the same clients and colleagues. It's quite another to be gone for a longer time, such as the 10 years that Shari M. Solomon stayed away.

Solomon began as an associate attorney in the real estate practice group at Philadelphia's WolfBlock L.L.P. soon after earning her law degree in 1991. She worked there

for several years, until the birth of her third child, when she decided to “take some time off,” which turned into 10 years and included a fourth child.

After a decade without an outside job, she decided she “had had enough.” Solomon says she did some legal recruiting for a friend with a search firm and that put her back in touch with people in the law market. After a lunch meeting with a WolfBlock partner, she was invited to rejoin the firm and its real estate practice group at a time when the real estate market was strong. Having first joined WolfBlock in the “class of 1991,” she came back on the “partner track” as a member of the “class of 2001.” Despite having to deal with the personal impact of the transition, including the “logistical challenges of a spouse, children and aging parents,” Solomon says she is “extremely happy to be back.”

She recognizes the transition back was easier for her than it might be for others, although the large gap in time caused a number of difficulties. For one, Solomon had to reactivate her license, which required completing multiple years of continuing legal education requirements, but, fortunately, she did not have to re-take the bar exam. Solomon also had to adjust to the new century’s technology developments. That meant, among other things, asking what a PDF is, a question she says generated much laughter at her expense. As a returning attorney she says she also had to deal with a “time warp” in learning the extent to which the practicalities of practice had changed during her years away. Now “much is done electronically,” she notes. In commercial real estate matters, she says, “most closings that had been done in person now happen via e-mail” and overnight document delivery, with “little actually occurring in person.”

A New Career



Lawyers can re-enter the field without going back to the firm for which they first worked, at least if one follows the example of Brian T. Robinson.

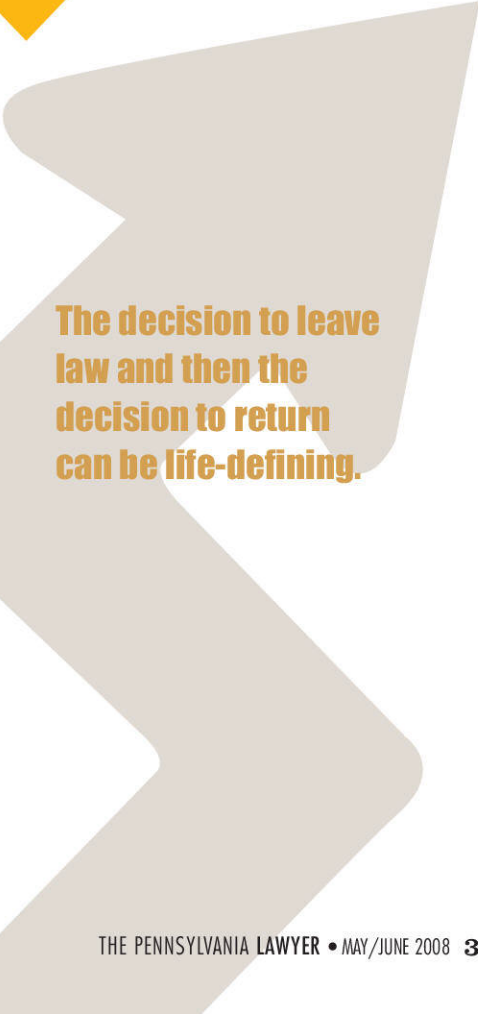

Beginning in 1993, Robinson was an associate in the Cleveland office of Squire, Sanders & Dempsey L.L.P. After taking part-time status in 1999, he severed all ties with the firm and law practice in 2001. Robinson says he thought about teaching law or working at a smaller law firm but ultimately became president of a real estate investment company. In June 2006, he decided he wanted to do “something different,” which, for him, meant going back to what he had done before: practicing law.

Robinson says he went on the Internet, including the careerbuilder.com and monster.com Web sites, spoke with a friend who was a partner at Squire, Sanders who encouraged him to get back into law and called a friend who was a headhunter and gave her his resume. After he was interviewed by the Cleveland-based firm of Ulmer & Berne L.L.P., he received an offer and started working there on the partner track. After just a short while back in practice, he was taking depositions and now says that he has found the year or so he has been practicing law again to be “quite fulfilling.”

The Steps



Despite these examples, former practicing attorneys should not assume the barriers to re-entry are necessarily low. Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of Philadelphia-based Flex-Time Lawyers L.L.C., speaks frequently at PBA programs about re-entry, work/life balance



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and other issues. Epstein Henry says that lawyers who are trying to get back to the law should not focus on themselves and their needs but rather on the challenges law firms face in these circumstances. She suggests a number of steps that lawyers can take to get back in the saddle.

First, Epstein Henry says, lawyers need to find the available opportunities. Toward that end, they should let “anyone and everyone” know they are looking for a job. They must overcome their “fear of failure and insecurities” and put their names in play, telling their contacts, “I am looking to get back. If you know anyone who might be interested in hiring me, please let me know.”

Epstein Henry points out that law firms often view the resumes of re-entry lawyers

as “mysteries” — and frequently throw them away. In her view, a re-entry lawyer should make sure a law firm knows from his or her resume where to put the lawyer in the event the lawyer is hired. Lawyers should “be explicit about what they are seeking and at what level they want to re-enter the market,” as well as the department or practice area in which they are interested and their pay expectations. Resumes should also list volunteer experiences and convey the transferable skills they represent, she says. The goal should be to “make it easier for the potential employer, not more difficult.”

Some re-entry candidates look for flexibility, but Epstein Henry believes the pitch should not be about how the firm should make accommodations. The lawyer is “not entitled to that,” she says.



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Rather, lawyers must be flexible and recognize that they may not be able to find flexibility, at least at the beginning. Lawyers should have “a long-term vision” regarding flex time, in Epstein Henry’s opinion.

Finally, Epstein Henry acknowledges that law firms may very well believe they are taking a risk when hiring a re-entry candidate and that the longer the lawyer has been away from the law, the greater the perceived risk may be. When faced with a recalcitrant firm, a lawyer can offer to intern, for a limited time, “ideally for pay, but perhaps not.” That will let the lawyer demonstrate his or her qualifications and skills and let the firm know whether the lawyer is a team player and someone it wants to keep.

And Then ...

Getting hired only puts a lawyer part of the way there. Shari Solomon of Wolf-Block believes there is a lot to do once a lawyer has returned to the legal world. “You must keep the channels of communication open, especially during the first year,” she says. That’s important in order for the returning lawyer to “get the right work to round out [his or her] experience.” She adds that regular feedback is important and that it’s helpful to have a senior associate or partner assigned to the returning lawyer as a mentor.

Returning to full-time lawyering can be a big adjustment for the lawyer and his or her family, and it also may present what



Solomon refers to as “age-related issues” that other lawyers at a firm may not have. In Solomon’s case, she notes, the associates at her firm are “often much younger than I am and at a different place in life,” while her contemporaries are “usually partners, with the same-aged children as I have, as well as aging parents.” Returning lawyers will have to traverse these roads carefully.

Still, for many lawyers, the decision to leave law and then the decision to return can be life-defining.

Ulmer & Berne’s Brian Robinson notes that when he was out of the law, “I met a lot of disgruntled attorneys who felt that they couldn’t leave” because of “golden handcuff issues, the fear of failure and change, and a lack of support at home.” However, he says, “when you’re relatively young and you have that skill set, don’t be afraid to try something different for two or three years. People won’t hold it against you.” ☺

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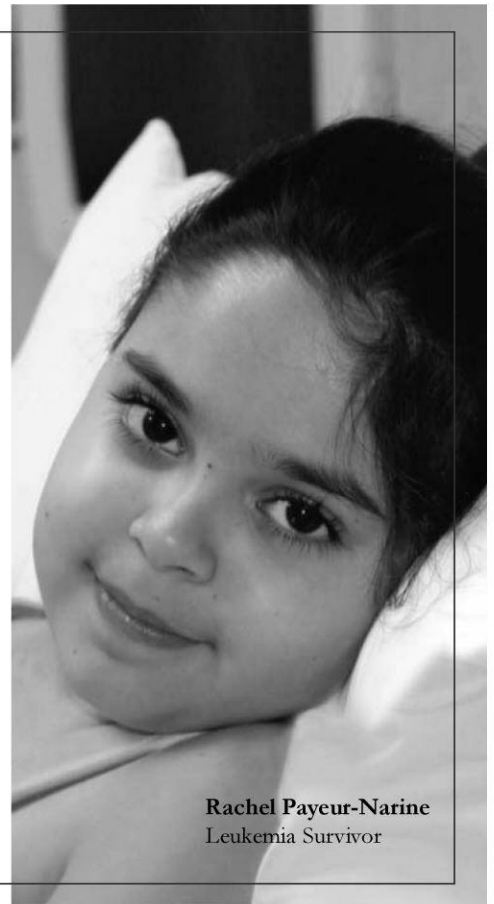
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Rachel Payeur-Narine
Leukemia Survivor