



## The Role of Family and Friends in Career Transition

What do you do when your friends, family, spouse, or significant other aren't as supportive as you would like when it comes to your desire to make a career change?

The first thing to realize is that this phenomenon is surprisingly common. Based on my work with clients, there are three recurring reasons why the people in your life might be less supportive than you would like of your desires to make a career change. First, they may not understand what you do, or what is involved in being a lawyer. Significant others, spouses, family, and friends often take pride in the fact that we are lawyers, and sometimes don't perceive why lawyers would be dissatisfied. For example, they may wonder why or how someone who makes as much money as some lawyers do could be unhappy with their job. Their views of what it means to be a lawyer are often shaped by television or other cultural depictions, but they haven't experienced the less glamorous aspects of lawyering. I do come from a family of lawyers, and even I had difficulties conveying to my mother, who has practiced law for more than forty years, what it was like to spend three months working on a 7 million page document production.

Second, there may be differences in values between the attorney seeking to make a change and the people who usually comprise their support system. For example, I had a client who was the first in their family to graduate from college. She had worked for the same law firm for five years. Her parents couldn't understand why anyone would be so unhappy about such a job; they had different expectations about jobs than she did, and largely saw a job as something you had to do to make money. Not surprisingly, they had a tough time understanding or supporting my client's interest in finding a position that focused on a different substantive area of law.

Third, and most commonly, potential career changers and the people around them might evaluate risks differently. For example, when I left an in-house position to start my own career counseling firm, other lawyers with whom I worked said that they couldn't afford to take such a risk. I felt their reaction was ironic, given that the company for which we were working had previously had a mass, spur-of-the-moment layoff. I saw starting my own company as a way to take more control over my life. And they emphasized, not without good reason, that walking away from a biweekly paycheck involved a significant amount of financial risk. There is no universal answer to the question of how much risk you should take, or how others will perceive



the risks you are taking. But be aware that, as you make career transitions, people's assessment of risk might affect their reaction to your plans.

So what to do if the people around you aren't as supportive as you would like them to be? A two-pronged approach seems to be most effective. First, understand that this reaction happens fairly frequently, and is often temporary. Most of the time, the people who are expressing reservations about your plans are well meaning; they have your best interests at heart. And they often become more understanding after you have completed your career transition. At that point, they see that you are happier; are not sleeping under bridges, and have otherwise landed on your feet. Of course, this might mean that they are least supportive when you need them the most—during the process of going through the transition.

So what do you do before and during a career transition? Find people who share your vision. This may require you to change the pattern of your interactions with others. When I started Successful Career Strategies, I spent more time with entrepreneurs and others who owned or managed businesses. Not only did they have information that was useful to me, they also seemed to understand what I was going through better than friends and family members who were employees.

This is not to say that that the process of making a career transitions necessarily creates tension with family and friends. Nor am I discounting the potential for family and friends to be supportive of you career transition. If you are fortunate to be surrounded by people who support and understand your desire to make a career change, this isn't an invitation to become paranoid, or a suggestion that you isolate yourself in monk-like seclusion. But if you do encounter reactions that are less than helpful, consider exploring with those around you the three most common causes of tension that were identified above. Above all, recognize that, while you might be disappointed and frustrated by the reactions of those around you, their reactions need not be an absolute barrier to making the career changes you want to make.