



The Art of Making Sensible Decisions

While her powerful intellect is of high value to her and the clients she represents, Sylvia does not want to ignore what her body can teach her.

By Dennis Coyne

Sylvia is a senior associate at a major law firm. She is smart, hard working and successful. In fact, she's just been told that she will soon be made a shareholder.

Sylvia's path to success has been somewhat unusual. Five years ago, with the birth of her first child, Sylvia decided to work part-time. Even though the firm has a part-time policy, she is the only associate in her class to take advantage of this opportunity.

The In-House Position Promises More Of A 9 To 5 Schedule

Over the years, many people discouraged Sylvia from working part-time, for fear that some lawyers in the firm might think of her as less than fully committed, and deny her the votes needed to become a shareholder. But, working only four days a week has been important to Sylvia, since she has been able to be home with her children on Fridays. Her family comes first, and Sylvia has been willing to suffer the consequences of working part-time, if some choose to hold it against her.

Then, on the cusp of the becoming a shareholder, a headhunter contacts Sylvia and tells her about a full-time position, as in-house counsel. Based on the job description, Sylvia appears to be an ideal candidate. The job appears to be very challenging; the salary is competitive; and the company is highly respected. Importantly, the in-house position promises more of a 9 to 5 schedule.

Sylvia Does Not Know What To Do

Even though Sylvia has been on a part-time schedule at her law firm, her Fridays off have been difficult to protect. Often, her work follows her home. As the children nap, she often finds herself drafting pleadings, returning calls, or catching-up on her paperwork. From time to time, she's curtailed family trips to meet the needs of her clients. In fact, working part-time has only meant that Sylvia has billed fewer hours than other associates at the firm. In truth, most people would not consider Sylvia's status at the firm to be part-time work at all. Given Sylvia's desire to tame the demands of her work, it is not surprising that the in-house position is very appealing to her.

At this crossroads in her career, Sylvia does not know what to do. She's worked hard, likes her assignments, and appreciates the efforts of the firm to allow her to work less than full-time. Yet, the promise of a more balanced life leads her to apply for the in-house position. In short order, the company extends an offer to her.

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Family, Friends And Co-Workers Encourage Her To Take The Position

Still undecided what to do, Sylvia seeks the advice of her family and friends. They encourage her to take the in-house position. She also turns to a few confidants at the firm. They are dismayed that she might leave. And Sylvia is saddened at the prospect of leaving them. But, her friends are quick to reassure her, telling her that she needn't feel sad. They can always meet for lunch and catch-up.

Others at the firm see her as a standard-bearer for work-life balance, and as a champion for those who choose to work part-time. As she talks with her friends at the firm, Sylvia again feels sad at the prospect of leaving them. Wanting to be helpful, her friends again advise her not to feel sad.

Sylvia also feels a bit guilty when she thinks about leaving, as she believes the firm has done all it can do to accommodate her at this time of her life, when her children are so young and need her at home. But, her friends advise her that she's done a lot for the firm and her clients, and that she needn't feel guilty.

Sylvia also talks to a few of the shareholders in her practice group. There, the response is more mixed. While most express support, one feels betrayed and is angry at the prospect of her leaving, given the firm's investment in her. Sylvia also talks with the two shareholders who (nominally) work part-time at the firm. Neither of them is able to assure Sylvia that her life as a shareholder will be any less demanding than her experience as an associate. Sylvia feels disappointed, as she realizes that if she stays at the firm, she will continue to struggle to find the time she wants for her family, and for herself.

Her Mind Leads Her In One Direction, While Her Body Is In Revolt

With no encouragement that the firm would provide her with any greater opportunity for work-life balance, Sylvia decides to submit her resignation, and to accept the offer for the in-house position, and its implicit offer to provide more of a 9 to 5 routine. She will submit her resignation tomorrow.

But then, Sylvia is surprised and provoked when her body revolts at the carefully thought-through decision that she's made. That night, she doesn't sleep. She is gripped by anxiety. Her stomach is cramped. Her neck and shoulders are tight. Quite literally, her decision does not rest well with her. Once again, Sylvia is left with the question of what to do. Her mind leads her in one direction, while her body is in revolt.

Sylvia Is Not Willing To Ignore Her Restless Night And The Anxiety She Felt

The next morning, and throughout the day, Sylvia and her husband revisit her decision to leave the firm. The more she considers staying with the firm, the more relaxed she feels. She does not know what her future as a shareholder will hold for her. She is no Pollyanna. And, no one has assured her that her future there will be any less compelling than her years were as an associate. Likely, work-life balance will continue to be a struggle. Yet, Sylvia is not willing to ignore her restless night and the anxiety she felt.

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She Decides To Stay At The Firm

For now, Sylvia decides to stay at the firm. Perhaps there will be a time when she leaves, for whatever reason. But, for now, she declines the in-house position. As she does so, she feels a sense of energy, optimism, and appreciation for the firm and the clients she represents.

Sylvia does not regret the time and energy spent these past few weeks, at this intersection in her career. She knows that there will be other intersections to pass through in the future; other on-ramps and off-ramps along the way, as there are in any career. She simply has decided not to take this off-ramp, now. In other words, her decision today is not a decision for a lifetime.

Going Forward, Sylvia Intends To Make Decisions That Incorporate Physical Sensations And Feelings

Sylvia has also learned an important lesson in listening to what her body can teach her, as she decides how to live her life. She resolves to be open to the emotions she feels and to resist being talked out of them. She knows that people only want to be helpful when they suggest that feelings are not necessary, or should be ignored. But, Sylvia has learned that ignoring her feelings can get her into trouble. She definitely doesn't want to wait until her body is in revolt, as it was the night before she intended to resign.

Going forward, Sylvia intends to make decisions that are more sensible, that is, decisions that incorporate physical sensations and feelings. While her keen mind and powerful intellect are of high value to her and the clients she represents, Sylvia does not want to ignore what her body can teach her. In navigating the intersections of her career, Sylvia has learned the importance of making sensible decisions along the way.



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