



## The Globe and Mail



### Employees Climbing Down Career Ladder

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*Forget advancement: A growing number of employees are choosing to take careers in the opposite direction, MARJO JOHNE writes*

#### Special to The Globe and Mail

When MaryLynn Patton's employer of eight years began to make changes that "didn't sit with my values," her job as a personal banker at one of Canada's big banks turned from a dream career into a daily struggle.

"I was stressed out all the time and bringing that stress home to my family," recalls Ms. Patton, who lives in Sidney, B.C., near Victoria.

"Then I ended up with a sciatic injury that forced me to bed rest for a month and a half."

It was during this time off that she found out a law firm she knew through the bank was looking for a part-time receptionist. She applied -- and got the job.



“You could not meet a happier person than me today,” says Ms. Patton, who has been working at the law firm for almost four years. “My friends think what I’m doing now is wonderful. They’re jealous.”

While most people strive to climb up the corporate ladder, some, such as Ms. Patton, are choosing to climb down, by taking work of lesser status than their previous roles, either as a temporary break in demanding careers or for the long haul.

While there are no statistics tracking the move, human resource and other career experts say they are seeing a growing number of employees making the descent, or thinking about doing it.

“There’s less stigma attached to it, largely because there’s more openness now about work-life balance,” says [Lynne O’Connor](#), a consultant with LMC International Inc., a Toronto HR consulting firm.

“People are more willing to stand up for what they need for themselves,” she says.

Today’s workers are climbing down the corporate ladder for a variety of reasons, ranging from extreme job stress or serious illness to the need to take care of young children or aging and sick parents, the experts say.

Some are boomers who just want to spend their last years on the job with fewer responsibilities and less stress. Others simply want to get back to a happier time in their career -- a time when they were in a more junior position, Ms. [O’Connor](#) says.

“I often hear people say: ‘I want to get back to my roots, I want to work closer to the clients,’“ she says. “Some managers just don’t want to manage people any more, or have to go to all those meetings and travel every week.”

Some employers are making it easy for employees to move down.

The University of Western Ontario, for instance, has had a “reduced responsibilities” program embedded in its HR policies for more than a decade.

University employees who want to lessen their hours of work or responsibilities can apply through the program, which, among other things, reserves their job for up to two years should they decide to return to it.

Michael Lathem, the London, Ont., university’s staff relations consultant, says about 10 applications come through each year, and most are approved.

“This is about recognizing that our employees also have commitments outside of work and need to have that balance,” he says.

Just as important, “it’s connected to our efforts to attract and retain employees by creating a good work environment.”

Still, career experts suggest that anyone thinking about stepping down a few rungs should do some soul-searching before making the descent.

Katherine Gibson, a Victoria-based life management coach and author of *Pause: Putting the Brakes on a Runaway Life*, says those looking to lighten their duties should make sure they’re ready for a position with fewer responsibilities

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“There are certain personalities that find it hard to disentangle themselves from the old ways. And all they end up doing is transferring their need to do more, more, more from one job to another.”

[Ms. O'Connor](#) says that even employees who have thought long and hard before moving down the ranks are sometimes broadsided by the loss of prestige associated with their old job.

Ms. Patton, the former banker, knows that story. She admits she had a hard time in the first year telling people she was a receptionist. In fact, she admits, she was often tempted to call herself a “legal assistant.”

“I know that sounds so shallow but I had a certain status at the bank, with my own office and tellers reporting under me,” she says.

“I just had to realize that my job doesn’t make me who I am.”

Aside from dealing with the emotional and psychological ramifications of a downward career move, it’s also important to sit down and calculate how the move will affect finances, the experts say.

Ms. Patton, who is married and has two children, says her new employer matched her hourly salary at the bank.

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But since the law firm was offering only a part-time position, she and her husband had to do a lot of number-crunching to ensure they could make ends meet on her reduced salary.

“We adjusted our expenses. We don’t go out for dinners or treat the kids to as much stuff as we did before, and we cut out impulse buying,” says Ms. Patton, who works four hours a day from Monday to Friday.

But while her household budget is leaner, her family life is richer. She’s no longer coming home stressed and her kids are able to sign up for extracurricular activities.

Michael Viala, a business development representative with Victoria-based Smart Dolphins IT Solutions Inc., used to work as a well-paid legal assistant with the province’s law ministry.

But after his wife died at the age of 32, Mr. Viala slipped down the corporate ladder altogether and worked for a year as an actor before accepting his current position with the fledgling company.

He says he now earns half of what he used to make with the ministry, but his new job gives him something he was missing in his previous position: control over his hours.

“I still put in the full work week, but I can dictate when I work those hours -- I take Fridays off typically but I might work on Sunday,” he says. “It was a drop in pay in order to have balance in my life.”

Both Mr. Viala and Ms. Patton had no problems getting jobs a few tiers below their previous positions, but Salony Lyons, a recruiter in the Toronto office of employment services firm AppleOne Canada, warns some companies are wary about hiring senior employees for more junior positions.

“When a marketing director comes into ABC company for a marketing co-ordinator job, that’s a red flag for the employer,” she says. “They’re going to think this person is overqualified and wonder how long he would stay content in that role.”

Ms. Lyons says job applicants should be as honest as possible about why they’re looking for a more junior position.

To allay prospective employers’ concerns about being overqualified, applicants should explain how they could apply their senior skills in their new job, she adds.

Ms. Gibson, the Victoria life management coach, recommends, for instance, that seasoned workers present themselves as potential mentors to other employees.

What about employees who want to climb down the corporate ladder where they’re already working?

Ms. O'Connor says that's tougher to do. Unlike at a new employer, where other workers don't know your history, stepping down at a current employer could set some tongues wagging.

"Be aware that your co-workers will be watching, so how you conduct yourself will be especially important," she says. "In fact, some of them may be watching because they might want to do the same thing themselves."

Supervisors and managers can help ease the transition by circulating a positive announcement about the switch in roles, perhaps one that spells out how the employee's experience can be useful in the new position, she says.

Can people who climb down the ladder easily climb back up again?

Marcia Steyaert thinks so. Until last year, Ms. Steyaert was the associate director of UWO's media relations department, with five people under her command.

But after having a baby, she applied to the university's reduced responsibility program. It granted her a non-management post as a community relations specialist working three days a week.

Ms. Steyaert knows her old job may no longer be available if and when she's ready to go back to work full-time. But she isn't worried; she's picking up new skills in her current position, which she believes will make her even more valuable to the university.

Ms. Patton says she has no plans to ever climb back up the corporate ladder. She has taken a few courses, added a few new responsibilities and says she feels fulfilled in both her job and her life.

"Making that move [from banker to receptionist] was a very big step for me," she says. "But I'm very proud of what I do now and I'm a much happier person, a way better person."

## Making the descent

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Thinking of climbing down the corporate ladder? Here are some dos and don'ts from the experts:

Do explain why you're climbing down.

A senior worker applying for a more junior role raises a red flag for most employers, says Salony Lyons, a Toronto-based recruiter with AppleOne Canada, an employment services firm.

So be honest about your reasons for wanting to step down, she says, but put a positive spin to your story.

Do spell out how you'll be applying your senior skills to a more junior job.

During job interviews, describe scenarios that show how you could use your skills and experience in the new job, the experts suggest.

Also present yourself as a potential mentor to co-workers, or as the right hand to the department manager.

Don't let your lower status lower your self-esteem.

Expect to miss the elevated status -- and paycheque -- you previously enjoyed, but don't let these losses deflate your self-esteem.

"You need to release yourself from defining yourself according to your job and find a new meaning and value in your new job," says Katherine Gibson, work-life balance expert and author of *Pause: Putting the Brakes on a Runaway Life*.

Do take the new job as seriously as the old one.

Just because you've moved to a more junior position doesn't mean you can coast, says [Lynne O'Connor](#), a consultant with LMC International Inc., a Toronto HR consulting firms.

"You should be every bit the asset to your company as you were in your previous position." *Marjo Johnne*