

Can you say no to a promotion?

Can you decline a new role and still be committed to your career? **RACHEL SETTI** thinks so.

Saying no to a promotion is a difficult scenario. After all, isn't career success defined by job size – the bigger the better?

Not necessarily. With a shift in traditional career patterns, increased remote working and a clearer focus on work-life integration, the “top job” no longer fits into everyone's career trajectory.

The reasons vary. Lifestyle can be a significant factor. Senior roles come with heightened responsibility and less opportunity to switch off. Time is a commodity which for some is more valuable than the salary and status that come with seniority.

Alternatively, the role may not fit someone's long-term career vision. For them, accepting a more senior role requiring a steep learning curve and significant investment by the firm may feel demotivating and morally misaligned if they don't intend to make a long-term commitment to the firm.

In other cases, the new role may not align with an individual's natural skill set. Some lawyers, for example, are subject matter experts who possess significant knowledge of a specific area of law and feel most comfortable within their sphere of expertise. Placing them in a more senior, generalist role and tasking them with the responsibility of managing others, strategising or budgeting can set them (and the firm) up for disappointment.

Case study

A partner who had been moved into this type of situation approached me with concerns about his new role. Although he had been a very committed lawyer, he found his new duties, especially people and team management, arduous to the point he considered early retirement. Upon reflection, he realised he had accepted the partnership for financial and status reasons, replacing a rewarding and stimulating role with one that did little to align to his personal

HOW TO SAY NO

Declining a promotion is a brave move and the way you communicate your decision is important. Avoid giving a flat out “no” as this can lead to misconstrued intentions. Instead, display gratitude and view the situation as an opportunity for a career conversation.

- 1 Consider your rationale** and explore what the business is seeking from the promotion. Is there a solution to suit everyone's needs? Perhaps the opportunity has come at the wrong time for you, or maybe the role can be modified to better suit your lifestyle (less travel, part time etc).
- 2 Think creatively.** There may be alternative career options within the firm which play to your strengths and help the firm progress towards its strategy. Perhaps a broader version of the role you are doing?
- 3 Explore opportunities** for a new role which aligns to your needs and also the firm's.

style, abilities and aspirations. It was a lose-lose situation. He was unhappy and the firm was on the verge of losing a brilliant professional.

Fortunately, he negotiated a new role with the firm which allowed him to focus on his area of expertise while maintaining his level of seniority. In place of managing a team full time, he mentored individuals in his specific area of law: a win-win solution for all parties.

The employer perspective

This case is an example of how rejecting an offer for promotion does not indicate a lack of commitment to the firm. It also shows why it is in the firm's interests to explore the reasons behind any reluctance to take a promotion. Rather than have an “up or out” culture, employers should listen to individuals who wish to remain in their current role and look for ways to reach an outcome that serves the individual, the firm and clients.

Employee perspective

If you find yourself facing an unwanted promotion offer, consider your negative feelings. If your reasons relate to lifestyle, aspirations, values, skills or interests, then your decision to decline the opportunity may be spot on. However, consider whether the real aversion to the promotion relates to your own unfounded concerns.

“Imposter Syndrome”, a term coined in the 1970s by clinical psychologists Clance and Imes, refers to high achievers who experience a persistent fear of being exposed as frauds, despite evidence to the contrary. If you are an over-active self-critic, this might cause you to reject opportunities based on self-limiting beliefs. **LSJ**



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