



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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Weathering Uncertainty

There is no denying the national mood has shifted towards the dark side. It is impossible to escape the reports of natural disasters, global warming, the energy crisis, the housing slump, and the lives lost and forever changed by war.

Since the beginning of 2008, the sound of law firms tightening their belts has become audible. Some attorneys have lost jobs. Senior partners have been demoted, and junior partners unable to develop business have been forced out.

I have not yet seen any attorneys standing on the streets of DC with "Will Work for a Latte" signs. But there are people in the legal industry experiencing uncertainty and loss for the first time in their professional lives. The familiar bubble of prosperity in which we have lived over the past decade has finally popped.

I do not attribute the condition of the overall law firm market to the economy alone. It is the result of a complex combination of factors stemming from changes in the investment industry and the lending crisis, accompanied by the at times careless and overly rapid expansion of some firms and the homogenization of their identities.

The latter factors are the ones I believe will emerge as a major turning point in the industry. But that is an article for another time. Today the question on a lot of minds is how best to navigate the murky waters of law firm life at a time when what the future holds is not something we can take for granted anymore. Here are a few thoughts:

Big-Picture Strategies

- Keep your cool – this too shall pass. This is the third economic recession I have worked through in the industry. Typically, they have been brief for law firms, and while some practice areas have slowed, others will pick up. Fortunes will be made, and the legal profession will prevail, hopefully becoming smarter about how we approach growth and competition among firms.
- Count your blessings for making a wise career choice. We are among the fortunate as far as professions go. If you look around, there are many industries being hit far harder than the practice of law.
- Take care of yourself and focus on your well-being. Avoid the news for 24 hours if you are feeling overwhelmed by the gloom. Do everything in your power to maintain a positive outlook.
- Volunteer and do something to help those less fortunate. Perspective is everything.

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Work-Specific Strategies

- While at work, build your relationships and express a willingness to pitch in on other projects when you have time.
- If your hours are fewer than you'd like, hold your nose and pitch in on a document review or any other project that you can help out with.
- Focus on the quality of the work you produce and maintain the highest possible level of professionalism in all your interactions.
- Take a seminar or class and build or enhance a skill that is in need of fortification in your practice group.
- Write an article and get it published or talk to your practice group's leaders if you have ideas for client seminars or other business development suggestions.
- Keep in touch with the latest trends in your practice and cultivate your knowledge of those areas.

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Precautionary Measures and Steps to Take If You Lose Your Job

- Get your resume in order and order a copy of your transcript. Hopefully you will not need it, but should you conclude your practice group is too slow or find yourself among those who are being let go, having things in order will position you to move more quickly.
- If at all possible, do not quit your job before you have another one, no matter how slow things get.
- If you get laid off, don't panic. Negotiate the best possible severance arrangement you can.
- Find out why to the extent possible you are being let go. Knowing whether the decision was economic or performance based is useful.
- Line up references before leaving the firm and discuss how the firm intends to handle requests.
- Ask for a copy of your personnel file. If you have written evaluations, keep a copy of each.
- Tell the truth to potential employers. Eventually the rumors will make their way into the local legal trade papers, and if you are interviewing with a firm and are asked about layoffs at your current or recent employer but have not been forthcoming, it could cost you an offer.
- Network. Sometimes former colleagues or law school chums are a great source of leads on jobs. Join your alumni association and sign up for professional directories such as LinkedIn.
- Consult with a career coach. (A lot of firms will provide this service to support you in finding a new position, but if you can't negotiate it into your severance, find someone on your own.)

Before submitting any resumes through friends or colleagues in other firms, speak with a professional recruiter or, better yet, a couple of recruiters.

You may not hear the same advice from each recruiter you consult, but it is worth considering the opinions of several recruiters before determining the best approach to your search. A good recruiter can be helpful in obtaining your next job, even if you've been let go.

On the flip side, there are circumstances where working through a recruiter may not be in your best interest. If that is the case, an ethical recruiter will advise you to conduct a search on your own and offer you a few tips on how to proceed.

Taking the time to understand how an individual recruiter works and directly requesting candid feedback on your prospects and the current market conditions in your practice area is worthwhile. If it seems like the recruiter does not know the market or has no strategic advice on how to approach things, think twice before agreeing to allow the recruiter to submit you anywhere. You are entrusting your career to someone, so choose wisely.

And if you see any lawyers begging for a latte outside of Starbucks, buy them one. You never know where your paths might cross again in better times. I promise that the good times will return. They always do.

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