

Outplacement Counseling

Career Transition Support and Coaching

By Susan G. Manch

As we start a new year and begin setting priorities for attorney personnel management and development, it pays to think about what happens to associates who do not meet the firm's performance standards. The most recent NALP Foundation study on attorney retention and staffing management (*"Keeping the Keepers II: Mobility and Management of Associates"*, 2003) notes that while attrition has slowed, many firms are faced with a high number of individuals who are not a good match for the firm's needs. This most recent study tells us that among entry-level attorneys, 20.4% of associates leave their law firms as a result of performance issues. Among lateral hires, 21.5% are identified as failing to meet performance standards. What we can intuit from these results is that at the end of any given associate review cycle, hundreds of associates are being told that their skills and abilities are not a match with the needs of the firm or their practice. The cost to firms is almost immeasurable, but there are significant costs to the individuals as well.

Anyone who has participated in a critical review meeting (whether as the reluctant partner giving the review or as the beleaguered associate receiving it) will tell you that it is not a pleasant experience. Many associates say they were blindsided by negative comments heard for the first time at the review session, while just as many partners say the associates had to have known their work was not well-received. Even when problems were well-documented and both firm and associate acknowledge a mutual need to part ways, the moment of separation is not an easy one to cope with. This is where outplacement or career transition counseling comes in. No, it does not change the outcome of the associate's career path within the firm, but it may change the way both the associate and the firm experience this event now and long into the future.

Outplacement counseling, for the uninitiated, is a focused form of career counseling and coaching designed to help individuals in every aspect of their career decision-making and job search process. Paid for by the employer, outplacement support is an important facet of a comprehensive approach to legal personnel management. Specialists in the field utilize a combination of professional counseling skills, application of interest inventories and career assessment tools, and focused job search strategic support to assist individuals in the process of reorienting their career path. For lawyers in law firms, this process is especially difficult because most accomplished their initial job search while still in law school. It is likely that many of them were interviewed and hired based almost entirely upon the quality of the school in which they were enrolled and the level of academic success they had attained there. Few firm employers make a careful assessment of the match between the candidate's skills, experiences, and personal qualities and the demands of the firm's practice. As a result, many who find themselves being told to find new employment do not know where to begin.

It is our job, as outplacement counselors, to help each individual determine the right path for him or her. Sometimes associates know exactly where they want to land and other times they have idea whatsoever. Trained career counselors and coaches can help both of

them and everyone in between, as well. Those who know what they want need help finding the best ways of identifying and making contact with that type of employers. Those who do not know need help crystallizing their interests and career goals before doing the same. Both groups need assistance in constructing their job search process in a way that will help them find an environment in which their skills can be fully utilized and appreciated.

Referring an associate who has been asked to leave the firm is a gift of support the firm bestows upon the individual and an investment in the future. Associates who receive outplacement counseling almost always look more favorably upon their past employers because they feel as though the firm still cares enough about them to support them in this process. In addition, those who receive assistance find jobs faster and are more satisfied with the positions they land. Too many lawyers left to their own resources begin and end their job searches with the nearest headhunter, narrowing their job options and foreclosing the option of any career goal setting. Those who enthusiastically participate in career transition counseling feel supported and appreciate having experienced job search counselors to go to with questions. Knowing how to craft a great resume, which questions the Department of Justice is likely to ask in an interview, and which person to send your credentials to is a huge advantage for job seekers in a tough economic climate (or boom times, for that matter). Experienced outplacement counselors for attorneys know all that and more.

For firms, the advantages to providing associates being asked to leave with outplacement counseling are clear: we shorten the learning curve, improve morale, and make certain each person finds a position that is a good fit for him or her. If one of your firm's marketing strategies is to make good use of your alumni rolls, providing outplacement support ensures that a greater proportion of those who have left the firm will have positive feelings about it. Remember that we are talking about as much as 20% of the law firm associate pool. Support for attorneys in transition is money well spent to make certain that the firm's greater investment in hiring and developing the attorney are not lost forever.

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