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Attorneys in Transition

By Susan G. Manch

The Dreaded Meeting

Joe wasn't looking forward to this meeting. Scott, his department chair, had asked him to set aside some time to talk this afternoon. He had his head down and was intently shuffling through the papers on his desk as Joe walked in. He glanced up at Joe, then quickly returned to his papers. Quietly, he said, "Go ahead and get the door, Joe." He was clearly uncomfortable--speaking in short, choppy phrases. *"You've always done good work for me—really a trooper—but the work in our group has slowed—he must have noticed, hadn't he?"*

Joe allowed that his hours had pulled back the last few months, but said he saw it as a welcome respite after a 2800-hour year last year. *"It doesn't mean I don't want to work hard, there's just less to go around. I didn't think anyone would fault me for it!"* Scott assured him they didn't question his work ethic—his attitude—but went on to say, *"We've got to be leaner, Joe. We got hit really hard because we had overstaffed our group with too many juniors who have little experience. Seeing the way the market is acting, we see now that we have to be more fluid—ready to weather market changes. That means making some tough decisions."* Joe braced for what was coming next. *"This really isn't the best fit for you. You've done good work, but I'm not sure that you ultimately have what it takes to move ahead in our group."*

Joe was stunned. Layoffs he understood, even "last hired, first out"—*but his performance not up to par?* Scott was clearly ready to close the meeting. *"I know this is tough to hear, but we will give you sixty days pay. Keep me informed of your progress and let us know if we can help in any way."*

As uncomfortable as it is to read, this conversation is similar to many taking place in firms large and small, all over the country. It's not a scenario designed to produce positive feelings or results. Joe leaves Scott's office angry and fearful. *"How can I find a job in this market? How will I be able to pay law school debts and the mortgage on the new condo? This is so unfair. Those ungrateful partners!"*

The Fallout

If he's like most associates, his first steps toward finding a job will be disastrous. He is likely to do things that will distance his professional contacts, jeopardize potential job opportunities, and most critical—prolong his search. He may tell the wrong people that he's been let go or vent his anger over the firm's decision to a potential employer. He may send out a blanket mailing to every firm in town, desperately applying for any job available—whether he's qualified or not. He may call up acquaintances he hasn't seen in years and pour out his story, asking them for job leads. In the end, Joe will make his job search more difficult and time consuming than it needs to be and cause himself much

more stress than is necessary. The first few days after a meeting like the one Joe had are tough. It's more than just the loss of a job, it's a significant life change. Of course Joe is worried about his paycheck, but after this kind of meeting he is also feeling unsure of his legal skills and where he might find success. Each person reacts in his or her own way, but most feel anxious and angry. Neither of these two emotions lends to a positive beginning for a job search in a difficult market.

Joe does have options. A good first step is to seek professional guidance on making a career transition. Some legal employers provide attorneys in transition with outplacement counseling services. Outplacement counseling, though more common in the corporate world, is becoming a regular part of many firms' employee assistance efforts. Outplacement, or career transition counseling, is an employer-sponsored service that provides attorneys with comprehensive support in their job search efforts. If that service is not available through his employer, he can seek out independent career counselors. His law school career services office should be able to provide him with some initial advice and hopefully can refer him to a respected career counselor who has worked with attorneys. If the firm had offered some form of support services for Joe, his meeting with Scott might have felt very different.

Let's Try This Again

Imagine the same scenario with a different ending. Scott changes the way he ends his talk with Joe. *"Joe, we've made a tough choice, but it doesn't mean we don't appreciate the contribution you've made. We want to support you as you make this transition. The firm has an arrangement with a legal career counseling service. They will work with you one-on-one until you find the right job. These counselors are experts in this sort of thing and can help you at every stage in the process."*

Instead of leaving the meeting in a fog of bitterness and fear, likely to make serious mistakes in the critical early hours of his job search, Joe would have instead been making an appointment with a counselor experienced in helping attorneys navigate all aspects of the job search and selection process. And the best part for Joe? The firm would be paying the bill—evidence to him that they respected him and truly wanted him to land successfully.

Getting Off to a Better Start

In his first appointment with his career counselor, Joe learns that there are important issues for him to consider before he makes his first telephone call or before he sends out the first resume. The counselor explains the market and mood among legal employers and probes to learn more about Joe's interests and personal goals. She helps him begin to see that this transition could actually yield very positive results and helps him focus on his real career goals. Each time he meets with his career counselor, he has the opportunity to get expert advice on potential employers, resume development, and interviewing techniques. He is able to talk over contacts he hopes to make with professional acquaintances and consider the best approach. Perhaps most importantly, he has the opportunity to spend time discussing the kind of work he enjoys, the kind of environment and coworkers that will give him energy, and the things he values most in

his professional life. His initial steps toward finding a job will be carefully orchestrated to achieve the best results.

A Win-Win Situation

In the end, the counseling support he receives gives him the competitive edge. Without support, Joe's search may stretch on beyond the limits of his financial resources or he may become so discouraged that he takes any offer that presents itself. With the support of an experienced career counselor, he has the luxury of being able to spend time learning more about his strengths and the types of jobs that might interest him, making it more likely he will land well.

In the case of firms offering outplacement support, the success of this process is clearly in the best interest of Joe's former firm. Firms who have offered outplacement counseling to their attorneys in transition say the greatest value comes from the satisfaction attorneys like Joe feel with their new position. The support they receive and the respect that it communicates to them helps them to overcome the feelings of anger toward the firm. Most forward-looking firms know that alumnae can play an important role in the long-term success of a firm, shaping both its reputation and its viability. Former firm attorneys may become clients, opposing counsel, judges, or the professors instructing tomorrow's law students. They may leave the law to embark on another career or begin a new venture whose interests may intersect with those of the firm. Whatever path they choose, those who leave with a positive view of the firm are more likely to maintain an active relationship.

Even if Joe seeks out his own career counseling, he is still able to get the advice and support he needs to make good decisions about his job search strategy. Most attorneys are not prepared to deal with the consequences of a meeting like the one Joe and Scott had. Many have not looked for a job since law school and have no idea where to begin. Remembering that there are sources of guidance and advice to turn to may help make the difference between a stressful search and a fruitful search.

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