

Legal Times, June 26, 2000

## Making a Graceful Exit

*By Susan G. Manch*

Attorneys striving for a career in private practice have always been bedeviled by the onerous “up or out” system of promotion ascribed to by law firms. Even though firms have been responding to a strident market for legal services by making more and more partners, many law firm attorneys will still find themselves facing a career transition at some stage in their career. For some attorneys, it is a personal choice to move on to a new challenge. For others it is a mutual decision between firm and attorney prompted by the results of a partnership decision, a poor fit between lawyer and law firm, or based upon the ebb and flow of demand for particular legal specialties. For a wide variety of reasons, many attorneys find themselves in transition at some point in their legal careers.

And that is where the service of outplacement counseling comes in. First widely accepted by corporate culture during the massive white collar layoffs of the mid-1970's, outplacement is individualized career transition support provided to individuals at the expense of their (former) employer. The legal employment world did not broadly utilize outplacement services for its attorneys until the downturn experienced in the late 1980's and early 1990's. That period found many firms agonizing over having to lay off legal personnel, often for the first time in the firm's history. Our firm has been providing outplacement counseling support to attorneys since 1984. Today, more than half of the largest firms in Washington, D.C. offer some form of outplacement or career counseling to their associates and partners in transition. The following represent answers to the most common questions asked about outplacement:

### **What is outplacement?**

The word outplacement actually perpetuates several misunderstandings about what these services are all about. First, the attorney in outplacement counseling is rarely Aout≡ of the firm-most remain practicing in their firms until they find a new position. Second, it is not Aplacement≡ in the sense that the provider does not earn a fee to place the attorney in a new job as a search professional would. Outplacement, or more aptly career transition counseling, is an individualized program of support for attorneys making decisions about their careers that is provided for by their current employer. Comprehensive career transition support includes assisting individuals in assessing personal interests and strengths, identifying a full range of employment options, developing a job search strategy, preparing resumes and cover letters, practicing for interviews, writing a business or practice development plan, and negotiating for salary and benefits.

Sometimes it means exploring careers outside the practice of the law or finding a new

environment in which to practice. Often it provides people with the first opportunity they have had to really consider the type of work they enjoy and the type of environment that they need to be productive. Outplacement counselors are not headhunters, they are career counselors who are experienced in helping attorneys make vocational decisions.

### **Why would I need help in a great market?**

Navigating today's job market successfully requires both knowledge and experience. One reason attorneys in transition benefit by having this support is because it shortens the learning curve. Most have not looked for a job since law school and the last time they wrote a resume they had no work experience to relate. Many do not know how to clearly describe what they do or what their critical skills are. A great number are not really sure what they want to do next and are concerned about making the right choice. Some are feeling angry and need time to refocus. The majority can benefit from having a professional to talk to and bounce ideas off of before putting a plan into action. Often, the worst mistakes made by job seekers are the ones made earliest in the process, before the candidate had time to learn or relearn critical job hunting and networking skills. Taking the first job offered is usually the fastest way to ensure that the same mismatch will occur once again.

In addition, that a great market is very deceiving. Attorneys today are struggling with a constantly changing employment market. On the surface it appears robust, but in reality the bulk of the jobs available are in narrow areas of specialization or for only very junior attorneys. In fact, lateral hiring among firms in D.C. **decreased** by 14.4% over previous year in 1999, and nationally, there was only a 2.6% increase (*National Association for Law Placement, 1999*). After five years of record rates of increase in lateral hiring, many firms took a hard look at the success of their lateral hiring efforts and did not like what they saw. Experience and expectation mismatches, high rates of attrition, and a wildly fluctuating market demand all contributed to concerns about hiring laterals. Mid-level and senior attorneys are finding that job searches take longer and are far more rigorous than expected.

The recent salary wars have had an effect, as well. Many firms have been forced to make tough hiring and staffing decisions as a result of the economic realities of paying first year salaries of \$125,000 and up. Only firms with the highest per partner profits will be able to absorb these increases without making strategic personnel adjustments. Firm mergers, practice group or partner defections, and shifting client demand are creating a challenging marketplace for attorneys in transition. Competent outplacement counseling can give individuals a competitive edge in this market, allowing them to anticipate where and by whom their talents will be most valued.

### **Okay looking for a job is hard, but why would my firm pay for this?**

Law firms provide this support to their employees for a number of reasons. First and foremost, because they want to acknowledge the contribution of the attorney and provide support during the transition. Second, firms who regularly offer outplacement know from experience that attorneys who are receiving professional support in the job search find good positions more quickly and are more satisfied with their career choices than those who elect not to use the

service. Forward-looking firms also recognize that the legal world is a small one and that any attorney who has worked for their firm in the past may one day be a client. Maintaining positive relations with all firm alumni is always good business. Recognizing that leaving the firm will be stressful for the attorney, firms want to offset the anxiety of changing jobs by providing one-on-one career transition counseling that is available to the attorney until he or she finds a job--no matter how long it may take. Most firms value the attorneys they have hired and trained and are disappointed if the match is not a good one. They communicate the firm's commitment to support and development by providing assistance to those facing the challenge of a job search.

### **What if I don't want to be a lawyer anymore?**

Many attorneys in transition are interested in learning more about themselves and exploring a variety of career options. Professional career counselors encourage attorneys to think broadly about the work they find challenging, the environment in which they thrive, and the long-term goals they have for themselves. Examining their work-life balance and setting priorities for their future workplace experience are all part of making an informed career decision. There are great jobs available to lawyers in most sectors of the workplace. Their education and training has prepared them well for many different careers and their credentials are sought after by employers in many fields. Business, education, public service, and media are just some of the areas in which lawyers may find positions that will utilize their strengths.

Sometimes lawyers start out by thinking they want to leave the law, but instead come to believe that what they need is a new environment to practice their skills. Many choose to explore a different type of law firm, legal positions in the government or corporate legal departments, or opportunities to teach law to the next generation of lawyers. Whatever the final choice, exploring all avenues available is the best way for an individual to feel certain that he or she had all the information necessary to make a good decision about the future.

Career transition counseling support is used by each attorney in the way the best meets his or her own unique needs. There is no boilerplate menu of services that will be appropriate for each individual. Just as every lawyer presents a unique array of experiences, talents, and goals, so is every job search different. What worked for your best friend, colleague, or spouse may not work for you. Making a successful career transition requires both art and science. In the end, what **will** work is a thoughtful, but strategic approach that includes looking both inward and outward.

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