

When A Lay-Off Becomes Personal

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As the headlines proclaim continued job losses and the trickle-down effects of unemployment are examined, it shouldn't come as a shock that lawyers are not immune to this sagging economy. In fact, you may find yourself among those statistics to which you paid only passing notice until job loss happened to you. If that's your situation, first, take a deep breath. It's a good time, too, to reflect on advice from Abraham Lincoln, "The best way to predict your future is to create it."

Job Loss--Now What?

First clear the air and fine-tune your attitude. Keep in mind the "Do's and Don'ts" of the job hunt, "tough 2009 economic times" style.

What To Do

Count your blessings. Take deliberate stock of all the things you are grateful for. Your health, family, a good education. Remind yourself of these things daily. Internalizing gratitude helps to inhibit self-pity.

Take care of yourself. It is the rare person who goes through the job search process without feeling like they are on an emotional rollercoaster. When you encounter a low day, take it off and do something that makes you feel good—a bike ride, a massage, a movie matinee. Stressful times require an antidote. Along the same lines, make sure your support system is lined up; chances are you will need it.

Remember the two "P's": persistence and patience. Without them, job hunting in this climate will be discouraging. From the outset, accept that this likely will be a protracted journey. In the event an employer does have a position, there are many candidates from which to choose, so stay visible and you will be top of mind.

What Not To Do

Don't feed your anger toward your former employer. No matter how justified it is, anger is unattractive and sucks up the energy you will need to find a job. Forgive or forget—whichever you find easier.

Rewriting history is a waste of time. There is nothing that will change the fact that you lost your job. Although reflection may be warranted for lessons learned, the sooner you look forward, the more effective you will be.

Don't let this setback shatter your confidence. It's not personal. Resist telling yourself you're a bad lawyer. You're either a casualty of a challenging economy you can't control or you may have been a bad fit for your practice area or your employer.

Additional Considerations

When it's necessary to start looking for employment, job seekers often need to clear up potential misconceptions. Keep in mind:

There is no such thing as a perfect resume. Ask four outplacement counselors to critique a resume and you will get as many opinions. Minimally, a resume should look professional (standard typeface, organized for logical flow and no typos, of course). If it's been a while since you've brushed off your resume, the web has resources to get you started.

Headhunters do not work for you, so don't depend on one to place you. They are paid by law firms and corporate legal departments to find appropriate candidates to fill a specific position. Headhunters would like to have you in their candidate pool should an employer require your skills, but you cannot count on them to find you a job.

Outplacement services can be an efficient tool. If your former employer offers outplacement, avail yourself. The search process can be more strategic, organized and motivating with such assistance.

Opportunity for Assessment

Seize the day. Before jumping on the web to see what's available, take a time out. Do you know what type of job you want? Really want. Do you want to do exactly what you've done in the past or would you like your next position to be different? Perhaps a new practice area or a different sized firm? Have you considered in-house counsel, government, or non-profit? Do you want to stay with the law or move to a related field?

There are a lot of choices. To help you decide, think about what you enjoyed about your last job and what you didn't like. Think even further back: Why did you go to law school? Can your next job be more consistent with those reasons? What accomplishments as an attorney made you feel most proud? Can your next job create a caseload where that feeling occurs on a regular basis? In short, seek opportunities where you will be most fulfilled. If you have trouble identifying your interests and passions, you'll find assessment tests online, in books, or from professional outplacement counselors that can further assist you. Assessing where you've been and reflecting on how the experience might improve provides powerful perspective.

Passions are one thing, real jobs can be something else altogether. There is a degree of reality to consider. Do you have the skills for your dream job? How transferable are those skills? If you're not sure, here again, assessment testing may help. A greater consideration than the skill set is whether there is a market for that type of job. For example, becoming a real estate or M & A lawyer would not be a good choice right now. Seek out others who are doing what you want to do. Often there are no more than two or three degrees of separation for finding that person within your network. Have a conversation and learn how they got their job, what they like and don't like about it, and what they might have done differently. Evaluate whether your perception of the job is still valid.

Search in Your Network

While Internet job sites can be useful, they are not your best resource. Jobs posted on the Internet receive hundreds of responses, making it difficult to break out of the pack. Studies show that about three quarters of all jobs are filled by word of mouth. That means you must ramp up your networking activities. Begin by creating a list of people you know who may be able to help you find a job or connect you with others. Invite each of them for coffee or lunch, and be prepared.

Every meeting should have a purpose. Be specific about what you want this person to do for you. Is it to identify contacts at particular law firms; to call their contacts to introduce you; to provide a certain type of information? The overriding goal is to expand your network and gather information, so how can this person help you accomplish that? Being vague wastes everyone's time.

Know your story about why are you out of work. Be ready to talk about it in a positive manner, without creating fiction.

Never bad mouth your former employer. The profession is small and word travels fast. In its purest sense, networking is about building connections with people for mutual assistance. It is not only about you and your job loss. Don't forget to ask how you may be able to help the other person.

Follow up afterwards with a personal thank you note.

Remember the Do's

Be grateful for what you have and treat yourself well. Practice patience. Know that persistence opens doors. Keep a positive attitude, knowing this too shall pass, and you will eventually find a job. And if you do the background work and reflection, your next job will be more rewarding and satisfying than the one you recently lost.

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