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Landing on Your Feet: Outplacement Services Make It Easier

Hard times make for hard choices, sometimes including termination of employment relationships. Outplacement services can serve both the employer and the employee in these circumstances, preserving good will for the former and enabling the latter to quickly move on to new opportunities.

By Roy S. Ginsburg

Severing employment relationships involuntarily is never pleasant, personally or professionally, no matter what your role. When it happens in a law firm or law department, it can be particularly challenging. Lawyers are competitive by nature, and a dismissed lawyer might be embittered or worse, tempted to contest the dismissal. Taking a cue from the corporate world, today's proactive law firms and corporate legal departments are more likely to ease the transition by offering released attorneys the services of an outplacement provider. Outplacement services, tailored to the legal profession, can mean the difference between lasting resentment and, surprisingly, acknowledged respect.

Considering Outplacement

In today's economy, where the legal industry is not already suffering, it's bracing for the effects of a slow down in a variety of practice areas. What happens when a law firm has to trim headcount in certain practice groups? Or when an in-house legal team feels the squeeze of lowered corporate earnings? What if an associate has fallen off the partnership track? How about when a partner's inadequate book of business can't support a law firm's revenue goals? In any of these scenarios, when departures are imminent, an environment of tension, stress, suspicion and rumor swirls around the office, potentially scarring those who are let go, as well as those who remain.

However, if the organization is prepared to offer transitional outplacement services, the transition will likely have fewer after-effects for the employer and a far more favorable outcome for the dismissed employees.

The Employee's Perspective

Losing a job is one of the most emotionally challenging events a person can go through. One's position in society, livelihood, and sense of self are inextricably tied to one's employment. So it's not surprising that, even after the initial shock has subsided, many dismissed employees find it difficult to overcome feelings of anger, fear, and inadequacy about how to support themselves or their families. Emotions like these, as natural as they are, can seriously impede one's progress moving toward a new opportunity. Employees who are offered and accept personalized outplacement counseling often are better able to cope with job loss and more successful launching an employment search that yields results more quickly.

Outplacement services may lead the employee to discover that a partner-track in a law firm environment is not as appealing as first envisioned. Outplacement may also enable one to be more open to alternatives, possibly leading to increased satisfaction in a different practice area. Many lawyers resist change and remain in jobs where they are unhappy. Talk to any professional who has been forced to change jobs and most will confirm that their new position is more meaningful and rewarding than the one they left. That is because they had the time and incentive to consider opportunities they otherwise might have overlooked. While the time between jobs may have been an emotional roller coaster, once it's over, few regret having been on the ride.

In the Firm's Interest

So, what's in it for the law firm or the in-house department that funds the outplacement option? Minimizing disruption and possibly gaining future business are among the things to consider.

The legal community, regardless of location, is a small town, with all the advantages and disadvantages that implies. The experiences and reputations of firms and attorneys alike are soon common knowledge. Forward-thinking managers recognize that their former employee may someday be in a position to either refer work back to the firm or even become a client. So treating an unpleasant situation as respectfully as possible may pay dividends later.

Offering outplacement services can also foster good will, helping to maintain good relationships with those leaving the firm and, in turn, across the broader legal community. Employees who remain with the firm get the message that leadership cares for and respects everyone in the workplace. Word like that gets around and can have a positive impact on retaining talent, as well as recruiting talent in the future.

How Outplacement Works

Legal outplacement is employer-funded, typically for a term of three months to one year depending upon the seniority of the departing attorney. Some lawyers,

when offered outplacement services, attempt to negotiate an alternative, asking that the money be applied to the severance package. Employers who realize the value of outplacement refuse. While a released employee can't be forced to take advantage of any service offered, those who choose outplacement generally shorten the time it takes to find a new job.

The first order of business in outplacement sessions is to work through the range of feelings that people experience after a job loss. Coming to terms with the resentment, anxiety and fear is necessary before beginning a new search for employment. And the sooner the better, before the job seeker's negative outlook becomes so entrenched that it undercuts the ability to enter new situations with confidence and interview properly.

Next comes an assessment of the attorney's transferable skills, experience, aspirations, and education. This portion of the outplacement process helps the attorney identify specific practice areas and potential employers for more targeted follow-up. At this stage one may even discover that leaving the practice of law altogether feels like the best choice.

Working with an outplacement coach, the attorney then develops an actionable plan that entails positioning oneself for particular employment and identifies contacts within an area of interest. There's more coaching to devise techniques for networking and interviewing, as well as strategies for negotiating compensation. Apart from the tips and techniques offered, the process bolsters the job-seeker's sense that they are not alone at a vulnerable time. They have professional support and guidance available to them, especially when frustration sets in, as it often does during an extended job search.

Doing Well, Doing Good

Breaking up an employment relationship is almost always unpleasant for all concerned. But offering legal outplacement services curtails much of the hard feelings, enabling everyone to move on to more productive outcomes. Often after time passes, the situation can even create the possibility of a different type of professional relationship that is mutually beneficial.

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