

Gone but Not Forgotten: Leaving Your Job, Not Your Professional Reputation

By Jamie Rene Abrams

While you may have selected a date to depart your current job, your professional reputation will live on with your clients and coworkers long after you leave. Leaving your legal job is not as simple as cleaning out your desk; you have ethical and professional responsibilities to your clients. You also need to preserve the professional reputation that you have worked to develop. These four guidelines can help:

1. Maintain a client-centered approach by transitioning the relationship, not just the files.

- Approach your job transition with the same high standard of client service you maintained in your practice.
- Communicate with your supervisors to ensure that you or your supervisors notify your clients of your departure appropriately and promptly.
- Think both prospectively and retroactively in assessing client needs. Assess the tasks that clients will need completed in the short- and long-term future.
- Anticipate historic work that might resurface to save valuable time and money.

2. Develop and follow a departure plan by identifying and anticipating outstanding tasks.

Develop a written plan or outline to communicate your transitional efforts, solicit input on your plan from your supervisors, and organize your time and tasks. Include:

- the names of your assigned matters and clients
- descriptions of your involvement in these cases
- other attorneys and personnel involved in these matters
- any outstanding tasks or upcoming deadlines and the approximate time commitment involved. If known, identify the attorney who will handle the tasks.
- a summary of historic tasks or work product that the client may revisit
- the location(s) of relevant files or materials

3. Transition your caseload collaboratively by being proactive, communicating with your colleagues, and using available resources.

- Do not rely on your colleagues to transition your work for you. Rather, take an active role in identifying the tasks and proposing transition steps; then follow through on those steps.
- Your transition does not have to be a solo act. Use the resources available through your administrative support, human resources, and records-management personnel. They have assisted other departing employees and can offer valuable insight and suggestions.
- Circulate your departure memorandum to your supervisors and team members to ensure that you have captured all relevant information and completed all tasks.

4. Always offer professional courtesies by expressing appreciation and staying positive.

Approaching your departure with the highest standard of professionalism will set the tone with coworkers, communicate your appreciation to your supporters, and enable a long-term relationship with your employer.

- A heartfelt “thank you” can go a long way in expressing your gratitude for supervising attorneys who have taught you valuable skills, assistants who have helped you manage your workload, and clients who have given you professional opportunities and business.
- Many employers offer exit interviews and other formal and informal structures to communicate constructive feedback to employers. Stay positive and know your audience. These conversations are rarely appropriate or effective at the peer or casual level.

The above framework will help ensure a smooth transition of your work product and client obligations, leaving a positive, final impression with your employer.

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To discuss more issues like this, attend the “Young Lawyers: The Next Generation” Summit at the ABA Midyear Meeting in Los Angeles on Friday, Feb. 8, 2008.