

Securing Your Law Firm Job in a Down Economy

By Susan A. Berson

By now, your law firm's management has (hopefully) developed a plan to successfully carry the firm through 2010. However, just as law firms must adapt to the economic climate, so must their employees. Take a proactive approach to safeguarding your job and consider the following suggestions.

Do outstanding work. Now more than ever, your work product is what counts. It is how you add value to your firm and build a solid reputation. Every assignment counts. If you are on a short deadline and become concerned that you could do a better job with more time, don't be afraid to ask for it. Also, remember that clients are paying for solutions and not just issuing spotting; you should offer alternatives when possible.

Think like an owner. This means understanding firm economics. Depending on overhead costs, as a general rule, you must bill two-and-a-half times your salary before a large firm will profit from you. For many firms, the current economic conditions have resulted in client work drying up or clients freezing the rates that they will pay for associate work—sometimes even partner work—which means a freeze on associate salaries and, at some firms, layoffs.

Law firm management does understand that in this economy there are few practice groups where attorneys are able to walk into their offices, turn on the light switch, and start billing. Nevertheless, to avoid explaining to management why you aren't satisfying your billable-hour requirement, you should be flexible about trying a new practice area and ready to learn. In addition, associates who are willing to handle boring assignments, cover weekend or evening projects, and work outside their practice groups will garner better job security.

Become sought after. When partners must decide where to make personnel cuts, the nameless, faceless associates will be first on the layoff list. If one or more partners see you as the "go-to-associate" when things must be done, your job is more secure. You may be a hard worker but becoming the go-to associate is not just about hard work. It's about building a reliable reputation and good relationships with partners, senior associates, staff, and clients. Remember, staff members are being paid to work for you, but how and when they get your work done may mean success or failure in your job performance. Treat everyone with respect. Show that no matter what is thrown at you, your focus remains on accomplishing the goals of clients and the firm.

Focus on what you can control. Partner exits, client losses, and practice group purges are beyond your control. How you approach your own career advancement is not. Educate yourself about the firm's expertise in areas that are booming. Figure out where you can be brought in. It sounds cliché, but a positive attitude counts; if you were given a choice between two paralegals who were equal in all categories, except personal disposition, wouldn't you choose to work with the consistently pleasant person rather than the grumpy one?

Seek advice. Some practice groups routinely experience lulls during certain periods. For example, your firm's transactional attorneys may have survived past economic slumps (given that bankruptcy, litigation, and regulatory work typically

increases when corporate work slows) and may be able to offer their views on the current market and workload expected in your area in the next six to twelve months. Consulting with these co-workers can give you a read on whether it's time to send out résumés. It also leaves your co-workers with the impression that you are an integral part of the team. As a result, you may find you are included when an article needs writing or a business development pitch arises.

For most associates, the ultimate goal is to become a highly skilled lawyer while building a financial nest egg. Following these suggestions can help you achieve your goal despite the financial uncertainties many law firms are facing.

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