

Hope for a silver lining

Current legal market offers attorneys an opportunity to figure out what they want to do outside of a big firm.

Kate Neville / Special to NLJ.com

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Attorneys who have been laid off or who cannot find a job after graduation have plenty of reasons to be disappointed and resentful--they have invested a great deal of money, time and effort to get where they are professionally. It is important to remember, though, that these feelings are not uncommon to lawyers who are actually in the sought-after big-firm jobs. Indeed, stories of unhappy attorneys at large firms are nothing new; they continue to drive traffic to numerous blogs and websites, such as *Above The Law*, which has covered in detail the panic attacks, ulcers, and other stress-related issues of which large firm attorneys often complain.

When economic times are booming, attorneys typically have gotten jobs at large firms almost exclusively based on their law school, their first year grades, and their ability to play well with others over the course of a summer. Rather than the result of thoughtful consideration whether they are a good fit for a big firm, many new attorneys accept these jobs as the path of least resistance. And while some love their experience at large firms, the hiring decisions often result in a mismatch as a significant percentage of these lawyers routinely become miserable after they begin to work there on a full-time basis.

Among those considered the lucky ones — both new and experienced attorneys who have large firm jobs — a not uncommon thread continues to be, "The idea that I might still be doing what I'm doing now for another ten years is frightening to me...I'm so bored, and when I look at the life more senior people lead, I do not want that in my future."

A considerable number of large firm attorneys who feel this way nevertheless spend several years mulling over their situation before taking any action to address it. This inertia is often based in part because many seasoned lawyers have never looked for a job before — they went from college to law school and then were recruited by firms — and are not sure what else to do. And, of course, the firm salary has made it easier to defer making a move.

The current economy has changed that calculus. For many attorneys at large firms, the current market is accelerating the timeline of their departure, albeit to a time they would rarely choose independently.

Rather than lament the loss of the pre-recession system, however, it would be nice if some constructive changes could come from the current pain. As businesses, large firms might adjust their hiring practices to become more effective. As institutions, law schools could help students learn the skills necessary to succeed at a firm, such as interacting with clients, working as part of a team, and business development. As individuals, attorneys who have been laid off or are unable to secure a law firm job can hopefully take advantage of an opportunity to investigate the range of their professional options and determine which might prove to be a good fit, now and in the longer-term.

The pain unemployed lawyers are feeling should of course not be minimized. It is difficult to consider being laid off a "blessing in disguise" under any circumstances, and particularly not when recent graduates bear significant debt and questions about how those loans can be paid off by people without jobs remain unresolved. Similarly, as fewer options are available at the moment for more senior attorneys who have been laid off, they have to focus on how to pay mortgages and college tuitions, and often on how long their savings can support them.

For a substantial number of lawyers, the real challenge to getting out of their current situation and moving ahead remains taking charge of their careers to learn about their options and make knowledgeable career decisions. For better or worse, this is rarely something attorneys at large firms do. Many lawyers who always wanted to practice law get frustrated with large firm life and take the first offer they get to leave, sometimes becoming dissatisfied all over again. Other attorneys who went to law school to "keep their options open" remain unsure after years of practice what those options are or how to pursue them.

Now is the time to find out.

For attorneys having difficulty finding a job, it pays to keep in mind the following as they move forward with their searches:

IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S THE ECONOMY

Because of the recession, being laid off or graduating without a job is no longer the black mark that it may have once been. It is fairly obvious that law firms — even those who continue to claim that their layoffs are performance-based — would never have fired these attorneys in a better economy. Similarly, a decision to rescind offers to new graduates has nothing to do with the performance of those individuals.

CAST A BROAD NET

It is in a lawyer's interest to cast a broad net when looking at potential options. Whether expanding the search to include non-legal and quasi-legal positions or different geographic areas, being flexible increases the

chances of landing a job. One job does not have to dictate the rest of a career. Further, many people report that some of their best work experiences proved to be in jobs that they never thought they would take when they first heard about them. For example, an attorney who initially scoffed at compliance as "checking off boxes" eventually accepted a job as a compliance officer only to discover that the management and policy issues inherent in ensuring compliance within the company were quite compelling. She ultimately found her work there much more satisfying than her large firm position litigating multi-million dollar cases.

IMPROVE INTERVIEWING SKILLS

In bullish markets, many lawyers have gotten good jobs without ever needing strong interviewing skills, but in the current market, those skills have become critical. Since many talented professionals are now in the market for jobs they otherwise would not have pursued, lawyers cannot assume they are attractive candidates by virtue of their credentials or intelligence. They need to make the case for themselves — why they are genuinely interested in a position and how their skills and experience make them a good fit.

NETWORK EFFECTIVELY

Another important difference from flusher times is that headhunters no longer routinely call with a range of opportunities. Instead, sitting behind a computer and applying for postings has become the most common method of job searching — and that is where many attorneys are most comfortable.

It turns out that this strategy rarely works, however, because most jobs are never posted. The vast majority — most statistics cited say over 80 percent—of jobs are gotten through networking, which is not necessarily a skill most lawyers have. While it is possible to do quite well in law school without interacting with other people, much less having to make a good impression on them, learning to network is key to success in a job search and as a professional.

AVOID VENTING

The importance of networking in a job search complicates things for many attorneys who have been laid off or searching for some time. Being upset at your current situation can cloud your judgment, and it is critical to remember that pouring out your heart or taking out your frustration on people who are in a position to help you professionally is a self-defeating strategy if ever there was one.

DEVELOP A ROUTINE

It can be helpful to treat a job search as a job in and of itself — ideally, a job with good hours: 9 to 5 with a break for lunch. Even if those hours are not feasible given the need to bring in some income, developing a

routine is important. While something can fall into a strong networker's lap at any time, six months proves to be a good case scenario, and many searches take significantly longer. Use this window of time productively rather than procrastinate and get stuck.

Kate Neville, a Harvard Law graduate, is principal of [Neville Career Consulting, LLC](#), providing services to attorneys who are interested in changing jobs or making a career transition. This article is the first in a series to help attorneys who are looking for a job or are interested in making a transition.