

New Jersey Law Journal

VOL. CXCVI - NO.7 - INDEX 463

MAY 18, 2009

ESTABLISHED 1878

MANAGEMENT

The Place to Network: Knocking on the Right Doors

Find work in a tough economy

By Christy Burke

Opportunity knocks when you least expect it — but will it knock when the economy is in freefall and the legal profession is seeing some of its worst layoffs ever? The answer is ... maybe — if you network. Great career opportunities do exist for attorneys, even in today's bleak economic atmosphere, and you can uncover them through creative networking strategies.

Lisa Rothblum is a managing director of the in-house group at Major, Lindsey & Africa. Rothblum says that while executive recruitment firms like hers are certainly important to any job search, especially to the high-level executive searches, she notes additionally that, "Statistics show that a large number of people also find jobs through networking."

Rothblum points out that attorneys often have challenges getting back on their feet when they lose their jobs, primarily

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because they're conditioned to accomplish tasks that are assigned to them, rather than being trained to promote themselves or think divergently. "Most lawyers think in a project-specific way. They complete an assignment and are given another one. When they become jobless, their first instinct is to hunker down like a turtle so they don't get hit again."

Looking Ahead

When the chips are down and you've lost your job, the worst thing to do is to bury your head in the sand and hope for the best. This is the ideal time to aggressively and enthusiastically network to find work in the legal industry, or to look outside of law firms for other interesting possibilities.

When networking or interviewing for a potential position, Rothblum suggests, "Don't be defensive about being unemployed, and don't overdo your explanation of why you were let go. Even if you feel desperate, don't manifest that in the presence of others." Your mission should be to make the other person feel comfortable with you, not sorry for you.

The Ideal Focus

Everyone in today's business world is under pressure to justify his or her own existence and save money. Therefore, focus

on how you can be a solution to someone else's problems. You'll get much farther that way than you would by expressing your outrage or telling your tale of woe.

The supply and demand of jobs vs. lawyers is definitely skewed right now, with a lot of lawyers looking for work. This may seem like a panic-inducing situation, but it can also spark innovation and lead you down a path you never thought about before. David Krell is an IP trademark/copyright attorney based in New Jersey who has found interesting ways to apply his legal skills in nontraditional and creative settings.

According to Krell, the number one problem with lawyers that find themselves without jobs is the victim mentality they often take on, which interferes with their networking. Krell says, "Saying 'why me?' won't get you anywhere. It's about creating movement and momentum, and setting measurable goals."

Make a List

Krell recommends that attorneys make a list of everyone in their circle of contacts and meet with them, one by one over breakfast, lunch, coffee, or a brief "I'll be in your neighborhood" office meeting. He reminds lawyers not to discount contacts who are also unemployed or underemployed. "Definitely network with people who are in the same position as you, so you can get ideas from each other. Reinforce and expand your network and help others with their requests in addition to seeking work for yourself."

After he was laid off from a conference planning company in November 2008, Krell decided to make a change.

Since he enjoyed both writing and teaching, he decided to launch a CLE course business where he teaches writing skills to attorneys.

Take the Initiative

Recalling secrets of his success in getting his CLE business off the ground, Krell suggests, "Lawyers should look at finding a job as a job in itself. Make a To Do list every day and then accomplish those things, one by one."

Taking the initiative is one of the biggest challenges of networking, especially for attorneys who are accustomed to work coming to them rather than their actively looking for it. Hanging out a shingle and starting a solo practice can be a terrific solution, especially for professionals who have good substantive legal skills and a head for business. However, it can be daunting for attorneys to have to bring in business and service clients as well as running a small company.

James P. Duffy III recently joined the New York City office of Sullivan and Worcester as Of Counsel. Previously, he had been in private practice for many years, where he maintained offices in several locations. He joined Sullivan because he had the attractive opportunity to further develop the firm's international practice. In addition, he also wanted to join a firm rather than running his own small firm and thereby eliminate the administrative burdens of being an entrepreneur. Duffy recommends that

lawyers who find themselves out of work can definitely start their own practices. However, in order to ward off isolation and long hours that can come from working as a solo, they can consider forming a small boutique firm with a few other attorneys. Duffy says, "Smaller firms can operate more efficiently and cheaply than large firms. A few attorneys can combine skills and form a nucleus of a small, nimble firm that can make a lot of money."

He continues on to say that clients may prefer to work with a firm that has several attorneys rather than just one. "A firm with several people gives clients more peace of mind, and gives the impression that you're in business in a more significant way."

Befriend Other Lawyers

Sean Sweeney, an associate at Milwaukee firm Halling & Cayo recently joined the firm after having run his own legal practice since he graduated law school in 2006. He answered an ad in the Wisconsin state bar magazine, got himself in front of the right people, and, through persistence, eventually landed his current position.

Sweeney has found that getting to know other lawyers is essential for networking for a new job, and also to get new clients. In addition, he has gotten great exposure for his legal practice through social networking. He explains, "I've done a lot of social networking to get my name out there, such as LinkedIn, Twitter, blogs, Web sites and participation in

the ABA's SoloSez listserv. I've been contacted by lawyers I've never met from across the country, and they've sent opportunities my way that have really surprised me."

Be Realistic

Being realistic is one of the most important ingredients of networking and seeking a new opportunity. You may need to be willing to do work that may not be exactly ideal or within your core expertise, but that pays well enough and allows you flexibility to network, meet others, and gain new skills while you're doing it. Be willing to do something you may not ordinarily want to do. If someone needs help with filing or administrative work, or if there is a pro bono opportunity, volunteer yourself for it. Or if contract attorney work is available and plentiful, why not consider it?

Conclusion

The upshot is if you're looking for a job in today's legal world, you face a number of stiff challenges, no doubt about it. However, there are definitely windows of opportunity out there, and to get to those, you may need to be creative and network outside of your usual comfort zone. The more you move, shake and network with a positive trajectory, while also considering new and potentially unfamiliar options, the better odds you'll have of finding a solid opportunity that might just knock your socks off. ■