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Preparation key to making yourself recession-proof

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Special to the Legal

While economic pundits equivocate over using the word “recession,” there is no question the present legal market is tight. Keeping yourself recession-proof is more important in today’s legal marketplace than ever before. Taking timely, preventive measures will reduce the possibility that you may be the next victim in a rush of layoffs.

One of the biggest mistakes people make is failing to prepare for a possible career change. Whether or not your firm or corporation is on a sound footing, you must be ready for anything. Knowing when it is time to begin your new job search is critical. As in golf, if you do not have proper timing in your back swing, the ball is not going to land in the fairway to give you the competitive edge over your opponent. Similarly, simply waiting for the “right” opportunity to happen or letting the chips fall as they may will throw your timing off, and you may find yourself missing out on opportunities available to qualified candidates who have been more proactive.

RECESSION-PROOF

There are four elements in making yourself recession-proof.

The first element is staying informed. Observing the pulse of your firm or your department often provides clues to the health and well-being of your employer.

Knowing how healthy your firm or corporation is at any given time is essential to determining the course of your career. If you have noticed tension between key players in your department or the firm, layoffs of support staff, a lack of new hires in departments where attorneys and paralegals are overworked or regular cut-backs in expenditures, these may be important clues your employer is tightening its belt to weather economic conditions or preparing for layoffs.

Keeping abreast of these kinds of changes allows you to assess whether it is a good time to put out feelers for other opportunities before you find yourself in a position that forces you to do so.

Making yourself invaluable is another smart career move that may help to ensure your position is secure. Volunteer your services to other attorneys in your department and let your manager know you are ready, willing and able to take on more or different assignments, even if they are coming from other departments. Attorneys, especially partners, recognize that, if they can utilize talent to the fullest potential and maximize productivity, they are making the best use of their staff, and the odds are you will be seen as a value-added employee.

Knowing where you actually stand with your present employer also is essential to staying ahead of the curve in tough economic times. You need to take an honest and introspective look at how you are perceived by the head of your department and immediate supervisor.

Take a second look at your reviews and, instead of dismissing your evaluations, analyze what your annual reviews have said about your job performance. If you are in a position where your reviews have been critical of any aspect of your abilities, work product or interpersonal skills, you need to make immediate improvements in those areas.

Ensuring your work product is of the highest quality at all times and guaranteeing you are able to stay ahead of deadlines are keys to being viewed as an integral part of the team. Strive to be the go-to person in your department and be flexible and willing to work for even the most difficult people. Also take advantage of training programs or CLEs offered by your employer to strengthen your skills and improve your identified weaknesses.

Ideally, one of the best ways to stay ahead of the employment curve is having your resume ready at a moment’s notice. Remember, your resume always should be a work in progress. Don’t wait until you need one before digging up an outdated version.

Keep your resume updated at least quarterly to ensure it accurately records your accomplishments each year. The biggest mistake many job seekers make is putting together resumes at the last minute to respond to an opening or using old versions that are not reflective of their current skills and experience. A mediocre resume often translates into a missed career opportunity.

If you do not have a current resume, now is the time to begin working on it. Over the next few weeks, take a few hours during the evening or over a weekend to spruce it up and bring it up to date. A good resume is not something thrown together in a matter of hours but requires a number of drafts to get it right. Remember to stress the use of action verbs and to highlight meaningful accomplishments.

THE INEVITABLE LAYOFF

Should you find yourself in a layoff situation, do not panic. It is possible to secure a good position even during lean economic times. In fact, there are fabulous opportunities available, if you are prepared and willing to be open-minded about your career path.

Dust off your resume and review it carefully, as mentioned above. Make certain it is updated accurately to reflect your accomplishments, skill sets and the responsibilities you have been given over the years. If you are unsettled as to whether your resume is in good order, ask a colleague, supervising attorney or mentor to review it for accuracy.

Feel free to contact the department of human resources at previous employers to verify the dates of employment and titles delineated on your resume.

If you find yourself having trouble preparing your resume, seek professional help. Legal recruiters are valuable resources to critique your resume and help you prepare one that is effective and professional. Many so-called professional resume services do a poor job, are expensive and do not know how resumes for the legal community differ from those in the business world.

Take advantage of any resources your firm or corporation may provide. Often,

when forced into significant layoffs, corporations and law firms employ an outplacement service company to steer laid-off employees in the right direction, provide them with contacts or even have actual job postings to pursue.

Personal and professional contacts are another valuable resource to have at hand when seeking employment after being a part of a layoff. Make certain you keep a chart of all of your professional and personal contacts, identifying who has a copy of your resume and where your resume is being sent. This chart will serve as an effective tool for sending thank-you notes and following up with prospective employers. Your chart also will assist in letting your legal recruiter know where your resume has been sent to avoid duplicating efforts.

Before sending your resume out to firms, corporations or legal recruiters, make certain that you have lined up your professional references. Be sure to have met with your references beforehand so that you know exactly what they will say to a prospective employer about your job performance and interpersonal skills. Verify with your references their contact information, listing the times and methods by which they prefer to be contacted. The last thing you need in a tight and competitive job market is a disinterested reference or one who is cold-called without knowing that they have been identified as your reference.

While not all practice areas are affected during a recession, your willingness to be flexible about location or accepting temporary-to-permanent employment opportunities may be factors in how quickly you land your next position.

If you find yourself out of work longer than anticipated, use the time to learn new practice areas or take additional training

to make yourself more marketable. This is also a good time to volunteer your services handling pro bono matters for nonprofit organizations. Occasionally, volunteer positions may turn into permanent employment opportunities.

These can be challenging times for anyone in the work force, but it may be good to remember the Chinese word for "challenge" also means "opportunity." If you stay alert, watch what is happening within your law firm or corporate legal department, have prepared the materials you will need if it becomes advisable to look for a new position and have maintained your professional contacts and memberships, the challenge of a new job may prove to be the opportunity for real career advancement.

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