

AT ISSUE

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How To Lateral Without Burning Bridges

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Decades ago, it was common for attorneys to eagerly enter the workforce and remain with that same first employer for the entirety of their career. Even now, I am sure you can think of at least two partners at your firm who are proudly touted as “lifers.” While being a “lifer” is certainly an admirable feat (and one that I myself aimed for originally), it is by no means the reality for most young attorneys in today’s legal market. What happens when, like me, you become a mid-level associate and realize that the firm where you work is no longer a good fit?

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The hardest part of any transition is realizing that it is time for a change. The firm where you work may not be a bad place, you may even love the work you’re doing and your co-workers even more, but something is just not right and you start to look around. If you’re like me, you may feel an immense sense of guilt for sneaking around without your employer’s knowledge and abandoning your original goal to become a “lifer.” You keep looking and, as luck would have it, you interview at a new firm and get an offer. What happens now?

While we all have moments where we want to throw that file on our desk in the trash and say, “Good riddance,” or walk into that unpleasant partner’s office and say how you really feel, that’s definitely not the route to go. Too many times have I witnessed associates (and even partners) give notice and so badly damage the relationship with a firm that there is no hope of ever doing business again. And that is the key: The practice of law is challenging, thought-provoking and groundbreaking (at times), but it is also a *business*.

From a young age, my mother repeatedly told me never to burn my bridges. A testament to her thoughtfulness, I do not think I truly realized how critical this advice was until I accepted an offer at a new firm. How do you properly give notice? What do you do to make sure that the firm you’re leaving is not offended? Some people care about these issues; others do not. I would argue that those who do not are being short-sighted. After all, no matter how bad the work environment, the firm provided the foundation for your legal career. Of course, there are instances where the work environment is so bad that you simply do not care about your employer’s feelings, but even then I would caution against a bad break.

What then can an associate who is leaving his firm do to ensure a clean parting of ways? The answer is seemingly simple, but often not followed: show your appreciation and do what needs to be done to appropriately leave without causing too

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much disruption. Before you even give notice, rehearse what you are going to say. This step is critical because what you say when you give notice sets the tone for your departure. In my case, I made a list of all of the things my firm had done for me: helped build my confidence, showed me how to be a respectable attorney, allowed me to see the practice of law first hand. Your list may not be as easy if you are truly miserable (and, let's be honest, many of you are).

Giving notice (whether to your first real legal job or beyond) is never easy. To say it brings up a mix of emotions is an understatement. Even after giving notice, I felt as if I was going to throw up for a week (a feeling others have confirmed having). But, what you need to remember is you get one shot to do this right. Do not blow it. There are competing schools of thought, but my view is that giving notice is not the time to air your grievances with your current employer. That's not productive and undoubtedly won't be well received. The damage is done and you are already out the door, so why rub salt in the wound? Be gracious, appreciative and thankful that you are a young attorney who can switch jobs in a not-so-great economy.

Congratulations! You took the high road and managed to give notice in a mature and thoughtful manner. How do you handle the next two weeks or 30 days before you formally end your time at the firm? Simply giving notice in a respectful

manner is not enough. You likely have cases you are running, or, at the very least, staffed on, that will require transitioning. There are likely procedures the firm would like you to follow as you start to wind down. Even though you have given notice, you do not want to check out. Trust me, I know it's hard to resist coming in at 11:00 a.m. and leaving at 2:00 p.m. because "Who cares?" Well, your current employer cares and notices every action you take during the notice period.



Burning a bridge with a former employer is never the right move and, as hard as it may be, taking the higher ground is always the better option.

You may have developed all the goodwill in the world during your time at a firm, but it is how you handle your departure that the powers-that-be will remember. Why undo all of that now? For this reason, you should immediately take care of any administrative work required by the firm once you give notice. Then, start transitioning your cases to other attorneys. We have a duty, as members of the bar, to our clients. You should not then, upon giving notice, disappear for a week or simply leave a file on a coworker's desk without explanation. Instead, take the time to explain your role

in a case to the newly assigned attorney and ensure that there is no disruption in competent representation for the client.

You've worked hard during your notice period and it is now your last day. How exciting! Just as first impressions matter, so does your last. Do not walk out the door at noon without so much as a goodbye. Take the time to individually say goodbye to partners you have worked with. Granted, this may be unrealistic and time-consuming, but at least try to get to those partners who have truly impacted you. And, lastly, never underestimate the value of a thank-you note. In my case, I

wrote a thank-you note to the managing partner, the chief operating officer, and the name-sake of the firm, all persons I value and respect, to reiterate my gratitude and appreciation for the experiences that helped shape me into the young attorney I am.

Your reputation is everything in the practice of law. I am sure most of you reading this article can, like me, think of a story about a former law school classmate or associate that is less than flattering. You may laugh about it or cringe (or both). Either way, leaving a firm can be done the right way and how you handle yourself during the departure process is paramount. Burning a bridge with a former employer is never the right move and, as hard as it may be, taking the higher ground is always the better option.



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