

New GPS Coordinates — Transitioning Associates Beyond Law Firms

by Jason Levin

Jason Levin, a career and outplacement coach, founded Ready, Set, Launch, LLC® after a career in brand management at Unilever, consulting at Accenture, and employer branding sales at Vault.com.

While working at vault.com from 2008 to 2011, I observed an incredible transformation in the legal industry. Firms reevaluated their staffing needs out of economic necessity. Conversations in law firms ended with deciding “who stays?” and “whom do we need to transition?” Delivering these messages to impacted attorneys was even harder.

Today, while such transitions may be less frequent, letting go of a law firm associate remains an unpleasant decision. It “took a village” to support that emerging associate’s entry into the law firm community, and that same “village” is needed upon his or her exit. A career services office leveraged significant resources to support that law student with on-campus interview preparation and eventual summer associate success. Law firm recruitment and development professionals invested significant resources in attracting, onboarding, and professionally developing that student.

Once an exit message is delivered, the impacted associate needs this supportive community as he or she transitions. The emotions that come with a layoff are significant. In addition to the initial shock and anger, the subsequent self-doubt and looming uncertainty can become overwhelming. Whether or not the firm has dedicated resources (internal career coaches, alumni relations staff, external transition support), there is still a vital role that the broader NALP community can continue to play.

Some exiting associates see their first step as getting on the phone with the next legal recruiter, but this may not be their best first option. When associates take the next available opening without self-reflection, they increase the likelihood their next role won’t work out,

which can ultimately earn them the stigma of “firm hopping.” It is not uncommon for an associate to say:

- “I just don’t know where to begin.”
- “Working for a firm is the only option I considered.”
- “Who is really going to hire me now?”

Go Back to the Future

In being laid off, associates have a rare opportunity to take an honest look at their careers by focusing on professional self-awareness. Their priority should be taking the time to walk through their own résumés and be honest with themselves about:

- Why they did what they did at each turn;
- What motivated them at each moment in time;
- How that has changed;
- What was enjoyable about their firm experience and role; and
- What skills were not being used in that role that they would hope to use in their next opportunity.

By taking a step back and focusing on natural strengths, interests, and values, transitioning attorneys provide themselves with criteria to target industries, employers, and roles where they would likely be more successful. It is the antithesis of saying “I’ll do anything.”

Firm professionals can encourage departing associates to explore career options in-house or in government; this also benefits the firm’s alumni relations and ability to build future client relationships. Additionally, the market-

place has expanded to include alternative careers beyond traditional legal settings (e.g., legal technology, legal publishing, politics, advocacy, human resources, and venture backed start-ups). As law school CSOs continue to plan programming around alternative/non-traditional careers, firms can proactively stay in the loop by partnering in these programs. To help support these discussions, firm professionals can encourage their exiting associates to have discussions with alumni advisors at both their law schools and undergraduate institutions.

Coordinating Resources to Manage the Transition

Transitioning attorneys who might have struggled with initiating relationships within their firm might face similar problems initiating relationships in their transition. Firm professionals with broad relationships in their firms can facilitate introductions to current/former attorneys who would be open to supporting an exiting associate. Additionally, firm professionals can also coordinate with CSOs to see what resources may be available to exiting attorneys to support their transitions.

Smooth Transitions Benefit the Firm with Positive Alumni Relations

Creating an uplifting exit for the transitioning associate is not just good for the associate; it’s good for the firm, too. Providing support and resources during this time of transition can strengthen the firm’s employer brand in the legal marketplace. It can also create positive alumni relations both for the firm and for the transitioning associate. ■