

How To Keep Your Job In A Downturn

Law 360, New York (July 25, 2008) — No one is irreplaceable in the current economy, but professionals at law firms can take steps to increase their job safety, recruitment experts say.

Some of those charged with placing employees at law firms said that while the economic news is all gloom and doom, the rate of mergers in the industry — and the redundancies such deals create — is a bigger fear.

Not that the economy isn't worrisome. Some firms have made cutbacks this year that were credited to a need to tighten the belt. Powell Goldstein LLP, Sonnenschein Nath & Rosenthal LLP and Holland & Knight LLP are among the firms who have trimmed employees amid the downturn.

Sandra Robinson, who finds temporary and permanent placements for every position at law firms in her job as vice president of Bond Staffing, said that every job at a firm is at risk in this economy.

“When they let go of an attorney, the secretary loses her job. And when lawyers are laid off, you don't need as many people in payroll or human resources. It has a trickle-down effect.”

Robinson said that outsourcing continues to squeeze out workers.

“In the last seven years, it's been escalating. Larger firms that I thought would put quality over saving a buck are willing to do it,” she said.

Even with the heady economic times, two other headhunting and placement company leaders said they are as busy as they have ever been.

John Pinkerton, the president of Ascent Executive Search, jokingly called the evening news 30 minutes of reporting on the Armageddon.

“You'd think everyone was losing their jobs. That's not true, he said. But he noted that it is a time when mergers among law firms are plentiful. Such deals create redundancies, which tend to translate to layoffs, he said.

“They say it's a merger, but really one firm is taking over the other firm,” Pinkerton said. “In reality, there's one power broker. And then what do you do? You have two I.T. staffs, two marketing staffs.”

Jennifer Johnson, vice president of recruitment and strategy at Wisnik Career Enterprises, said that if there are any ramifications of the downturn so far it's that firms are hesitant to add jobs. But “if positions open, the firms are re-filling them,” she said.

Those in legal marketing positions seem safe, said Pinkerton and Johnson, who both specialize in placing such professionals.

Law firms hit by the subprime loan crisis have even been turning to legal marketing professionals to help them plan for the future, Johnson said.

But for those who are worried, Johnson, Robinson and Pinkerton recommended taking steps that could be beneficial to an employee in any workplace: work hard, know all you can about the office, diversify your skill set, be a positive presence and keep in touch with recruiters to hedge your bets.

“Diversifying your skill set makes you more valuable to the firm,” Pinkerton said. “If a person was doing business development in marketing, they may want to get involved in the public relations aspects.”

Johnson said: “The more you know in any organization — how it works and who the players are — the better off you are. More people know who you are and what you are doing, and your position is less likely to be eliminated. If people don’t know who you are or what you do, they won’t think of you for anything.”

Pinkerton also said that employees should focus on bringing a positive attitude to the work place.

“The first person to get laid off is the person who is negative,” Pinkerton said.

Even if professionals are taking such steps, he recommended that they regularly touch base with recruiters and network with their peers. If you do, “the moment you get laid off you have a network you can reach out to,” Pinkerton said.

“I think the economy is strong enough that if you are strategic with networking and what not, you’ll be able to find another position,” he said.

Johnson recommended that non-lawyer workers should employ a tactic attorneys use: keep an accounting of work time and tasks.

Every three months or so, employees should look back and see what they have worked on, Johnson said.

Having a list of work projects and accomplishments can prepare a professional for a job review, help them make the case for a bonus and arm them with a list of accomplishments to tout to future employers should they leave the firm.

Robinson said that the economy or the merger environment makes no difference when it comes to safeguarding your job. Those surfing the Internet all day and instant messaging while at work are going to be the first to be downsized when the firm enters hard times.

“The key is doing a good job,” she said. “The reality is that when people are good at their job, they will have work.”

— *By Shannon Henson*