

Resigning in Style: What Lawyers Need to Know in Order to Make a Graceful Exit

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You have labored over your resume, prepared for multiple rounds of interviews, received a great job offer and are ready to move forward with your career. Can you finally tell your supervising partner or the general counsel what you really think about him or her and say, "I quit"?

Before you do anything drastic, you should sit down and read this article — it may save you a lot of heartache. A botched exit can actually hurt your career; a professional exit can enhance it.

Here are a few suggestions for making sure your exit goes smoothly.

Eliminate Contingencies

Before you announce your resignation, you need to make sure all contingencies have been eliminated with your new employer. Contingencies and terms should be included as part of the written offer letter. If you do not have them in writing, you are taking a risk. After all, those terms may make the difference in deciding whether you will stay with your current employer or move to your new one.

Next, make sure you have cleared conflicts with your potential employer. This is especially relevant if you are moving between law firms. This can be time-consuming, both in terms of gathering and providing the required conflicts information and waiting for conflicts to clear. Let your new employer know that you would like to hear from them as soon as conflicts clear so you are free to resign.

You should clear any necessary background checks or be very certain that you will clear them. These can involve anything from a bar verification to a drug screen or a credit score. Any skeletons that you fear may come out will, so make sure those things are not deal-breakers for your new employer.

Also, confirm that your new employer has successfully completed all necessary reference checks. References should be attorneys who have had the opportunity to supervise and evaluate your work, and with whom you have spoken about providing a positive reference.

These are the most common contingencies, but read your offer letter closely to make certain that there are not others that could create issues. Your new employer should confirm with you once all contingencies have been satisfied.

Prepare a Written Resignation

You need to prepare a formal written resignation. The letter will be placed in your file, so you want it to be courteous, professional and something you would feel comfortable having others read (for instance, any bar to which you apply). You should include something positive about

your current employer, your decision to leave (and an indication that it is a final one), your resignation date and your desire to facilitate a smooth transition.

Resign in Person

If at all possible, meet with your supervising attorney. Pick a time when your supervisor is not rushed and can close the door and speak to you. As with the written resignation, you might want to start with something positive (such as, "My time here has been rewarding ..."). Reiterate that you have given the decision a great deal of thought and, while there is much you will miss, you are looking forward to new challenges and opportunities.

Soon after meeting with your supervisor, you may also want to tell other attorneys you work with and your administrative support staff so they do not find out from the rumor mill.

During the meeting, do not let your employer's reaction catch you off-guard. Employers may be shocked when you resign. They may say, "You picked a great time to leave — who's going to finish these matters?" Remember that your employer has transitioned matters before and they will do so again. They may probe to get details about the position you accepted, your new compensation, etc. They may even try to tell you bad things about your new employer. It is not necessary to elaborate about your new position; the point is to make a graceful and professional exit.

Counteroffers

Your employer may try to convince you to accept a counteroffer, promising that you will get that bonus/promotion/other incentive if you stay. Although a counteroffer is flattering, do not be deceived. The counteroffer is made to benefit the company, not you.

If you accept the counteroffer and stay, will your current employer fulfill its new promises? Will it affect your relationships at work? Will your peers view your success with skepticism? Will your superiors question your loyalty?

Remind yourself why you wanted to move in the first place. If you stay with your current employer, isn't it likely the same issues will resurface? The answers to these questions show why independent studies have found that 80 percent of employees who accept counteroffers leave their positions within 12 months.

Transition Your Work

At the end of the resignation meeting, suggest setting up a time to discuss transitioning your matters. Two weeks is a minimum professional courtesy for notice, but depending on the complexity of what you are working on and the level at which you are working, you may want to consider offering three weeks or more.



Some attorneys are surprised to learn that resigning and transitioning their projects may raise certain ethical concerns and obligations. The questions you might want to consider asking include: Whether, what, and how should you communicate your departure to your clients? What will happen to your client files and matters? Is it permissible to recruit attorneys or administrative support staff to join you at the new firm? The answers to these questions will vary between jurisdictions and individual firms, so take a look at your bar's ethics opinions or consult with counsel.

Continue to be a team player during your remaining time with the firm. Many attorneys slack off during their last days, becoming "short-timers" or "lame ducks." Resist the temptation — not only does it shortchange your current firm and clients, it reflects very poorly on you. It is amazing how quickly word travels within legal circles (and how small the circles are),

so keep in mind that how you act now could send ripple effects in all sorts of directions.

Exit Interviews

You will probably be asked to sit down with Human Resources and provide feedback on why you are leaving. Be careful. Make sure your criticisms are constructive: "It would have been helpful to have yearly reviews so I could have improved my practice" vs. "My boss is a jerk and I couldn't take her yelling at me anymore." Remain professional.

Wrap It Up

Wind down your matters and send a professional farewell e-mail to your colleagues with your new contact information. Sending the e-mail a day or two before you leave will give colleagues a chance to stop by and say goodbye, exchange contact information, etc.

It is imperative to handle a resignation with professionalism, dignity and as much goodwill as possible. By resigning with class, you will preserve your professional relationships, which can be especially important in an era where mergers, acquisitions and lateral moves may see you end up on the same team as a former colleague. It is a smart thing for your career and it is also the right thing to do — giving you the opportunity to start at your new employer without regrets and to negotiate a smooth transition to this next exciting stage of your career.