

Recognizing the Upside of Attrition— With Change Comes Opportunity

By Ilana Schrager

An associate is leaving the firm, and a fellow associate is feeling pretty down about it. The two associates had summered and articulated together, were hired back together, and had become quite close over the years. When it came to workload, they had settled into a good rhythm; the departing associate worked with certain partners, this associate works with others, and it had been that way for years. The associate is concerned about who will fill the departing colleague's shoes, and of course, the effect the departure might have on general associate morale.

When it comes to attrition, associates tend to focus on what they view as the disruptive, negative outcomes of a colleague's departure, with an underlying assumption that these effects are beyond their control. Despite the well-known saying that "with change comes opportunity" (associate attrition being no exception), many young lawyers seem to lose sight of the fact that they are empowered to affect what a colleague's departure means for them personally, as well as for the firm. There remains a business to run, and their own practices and profiles to build. These departures, however unwanted on a personal level, can open up valuable opportunities that may have previously been unavailable.

This is not to say that some mourning is not justified; friendships with colleagues are important, and part of what makes for an enjoyable workplace. Further, lamenting the loss is part of acknowledging the value contributed by the departing associate. This, in turn, highlights the opportunities that will become available when they leave. Are there partners the departing associate worked with who will require support? They will likely appreciate someone raising their hand to help out. Did the associate do certain types of work that will now need to flow elsewhere? This may be an opportunity to expand one's skill set or develop an interesting niche practice. Does the departure create openings in leadership and other profile-raising roles? Associate morale may take less of a hit if someone steps up to ensure that these types of gaps are filled.

Attrition represents a chance for ambitious associates to proactively seek out the desirable opportunities that the departing associate is leaving behind, and to demonstrate to the partners that they are team players, mindful of the needs and success of the firm. Depending on where the departing associate is going, there may also be the potential for business development, particularly for fellow associates

who enjoyed a strong relationship with the departing colleague. It never hurts to remember that good friendships do not dissipate overnight, and lunches and coffees can still be had on a regular basis (perhaps now on an expense account).

Lateral movement during one's career is increasingly viewed as the norm. Barring any changes to that mindset, it follows that associate attrition will continue to be an inevitable, and even natural part of working in big law. Does that mean the law firms are going to stop fighting attrition? Absolutely not. Law firms are and will continue trying to learn from associate departures in order to retain top talent, improve their processes, and maintain strong associate morale. Nor does it mean that law firms will not continue to actively recruit lateral associates to ensure that practice groups are appropriately staffed in the wake of associate departures. However, associates would do well to recognize that in addition to being part of the law firm life cycle, there are potential upsides to attrition for those ambitious associates willing to adapt and take advantage.

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