

## Caught: When Your Firm Finds Out You're Looking Elsewhere

***Q. I am a fourth-year associate at a large firm. My reviews have always been very positive, but I wonder if I wouldn't be happier at a smaller firm. About a month ago, I saw an ad for an associate position that caught my attention and submitted my resume. After the second interview, I received an offer. I decided, however, the firm would not be a good fit for me.***

***Everyone at the prospective firm assured me that my application would be held in strictest confidence. Yesterday, one of the partners at my current firm came into my office and closed the door. She asked me if I had interviewed at another firm. I was honest and told her that I did not accept the offer I had received. I have since learned that a partner at my firm is married to a paralegal at the firm where I interviewed. Ever since the above conversation, I feel as though I am being treated with suspicion. I have not received any new assignments, and one significant matter I had been working on for several months was recently reassigned to a newer associate. What can I do?***

A. First, take a deep breath. What you describe is not at all uncommon. The legal community is very small when it comes to keeping secrets. There are steps you can take but there are no guarantees of confidentiality. In the future, you will want to prominently label your resume and cover letter "Confidential." If possible, address your cover letter to someone you know and can trust. Asking for assurances of confidentiality at the interview is also a good idea. But the reality is that once you take steps to look for a new position, you are at risk. Although some associates who are discovered go on to become partners, many are not so fortunate. An associate who is suspected of being disloyal is often ostracized, as you apparently are. In some instances, if the associate is still with the firm after three months, she is often asked to leave. (I don't know why it is three months, but the managing partners apparently consult the same book on this subject.)

So what should you do? Remember you had already thought about finding a new position. Do you still think that a smaller firm would be better? Take some time to assess your situation carefully before you take any further steps. You probably should act quickly -- but not without deliberation.

Before you send out another resume, assess your motivations, values, skills and talents. Looking at your past accomplishments (those times that you did something well, enjoyed doing it, and were proud when you were done) may provide some insight into the best course for the future. Once you have a clearer focus, you will want to incorporate the relevant accomplishments into your resume. Then develop a search strategy. Don't rely on classified ads to find openings. Be creative in your search. Talk to your colleagues and law school classmates. It is estimated that 85-95% of all available positions are never advertised. The only way to access this "hidden job market" is through networking.

Obviously you will be very busy during the coming weeks. It will be tempting to let things at the office slide--especially if you don't have enough work to keep you busy. Remember that you will probably need good references from the partners at your current firm in order to land your next position.

You should also be making plans to deal with any financial difficulties you might encounter should you be faced with a gap in income. Now is the time to start adjusting your budget to pare down unnecessary expenses. You also need to factor in the additional expenses you will incur in your job search.

What if in your self assessment you determine that your current firm is actually right for you? Make very sure that you are not just resisting change, but if in fact you think you could make it work, go and talk to two or three partners with whom you work most closely. Explain to them your dilemma and your sincere desire to stay with the firm. Emphasize the fact that you have given it careful consideration. Ask them for suggestions on how to show your loyalty. You will also want to make sure they are encouraging your desire to stay. Often an associate receives mixed signals from the partners only to discover that staying is not really an option. Unfortunately, valuable time in the search process is often lost and then the associate has a very short window with in which to relocate.

Don't be discouraged. You are probably feeling a little overwhelmed right now. It takes time and effort to land the right position--but with determination and diligence it can be done.

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