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Exiting a Job on Good Terms

Maybe you've decided to test the waters of the job market in search of new opportunities. Or, perhaps you've been quietly interviewing for a new position and have reason to believe that an offer is imminent. Whether you're just thinking about the possibility of making a job change or are about to give formal notice that you've accepted a position with a new firm, it's wise to brush up on what to do – and what not to do – when announcing your departure.

The cardinal rule of exiting a job is to leave with grace and tact. Not only is it likely that you will want to use your managing partner or colleagues as business or personal references in the future, but few professionals want to be remembered in a bad light, especially when it is just as easy to leave on good terms.

Here are some pointers for making an exit that is memorable for all the right reasons:

Tell the boss first. No matter how eager you are to share your news with your law office confidantes, always inform your manager first. You don't want your supervisor to hear whispers of your impending departure at the coffee station. Schedule a time to talk to your boss, rather than catching him or her off guard. In addition to telling your supervisor about your decision to accept a new position, present a formal letter of resignation. Keep it brief and respectful in tone, and be sure to thank the firm and your manager for the work experience you've been given.

Be accommodating. Although you may be brimming with excitement about your new job and eager to move on, keep in mind that your resignation may come as an unpleasant surprise to the managing partner. Not only does he or she have to accept that a key team member is leaving, but there may be concerns about finding a replacement. Therefore, be sensitive to your boss' reaction and as accommodating as possible in working out the details of your departure.

If you have not settled on a start date yet with your new employer, be open to negotiating your last day on the job. Although two weeks' notice is typical, you might consider staying a little longer if needed to wrap up unfinished projects and ensure a smooth transition. On the other hand, if you're joining the staff of a law firm that is a direct competitor, be prepared for the possibility that your boss will ask you to leave even sooner. Assuming this doesn't happen though, offer to help with the transition by drafting an updated job description, screening resumes, training your replacement if it's someone who is already on staff or developing a guide that explains key aspects of your position. Also, be receptive to the idea of letting your supervisor announce your resignation. Some managers prefer to convey the news so they can make it clear to other staff members that an employee's departure is amicable.

Mind your manners on the way out. Even if you've been unhappy or frustrated with your current position, don't use your final days on the job to air your grievances or try to get even with an office nemesis. Badmouthing your employer or colleagues won't do anything but damage your reputation. Be gracious in your comments about your current employer and let co-workers know that you've enjoyed working with them and have appreciated their support.

Although your office mates may try to get you to divulge specific details about your new job, resist bragging about the salary increase you're getting or the generous perks offered by your new employer. Also, continue to perform your job as you did before your announcement. Taking long lunches and leaving early – especially if your colleagues have to pick up the slack from your neglected duties – may cause others to quickly forget what an asset you've been to the firm.

Participate in the exit interview. If your employer conducts exit interviews, take advantage of this opportunity to offer honest feedback. Although candor is encouraged, don't use the meeting as a forum for personal attacks or to air serious concerns about your boss that you've never bothered to bring up before. Be as truthful as you can, but be mindful that what you say could have an impact on others' careers.

Even if your work experience was not always positive, your comments will be taken more seriously if you maintain a professional demeanor. Constructive suggestions on improving policies and procedures, corporate culture or organizational structure are almost always welcome. In fact, according to a recent survey by our company, more than three-quarters of senior executives polled said they "always" or "somewhat frequently" act on information gathered during exit interviews.

Most employees will have numerous jobs over the course of their career, which is why it's so important to observe the finer points of workplace exits. Colleagues may forget the improvements you made in office procedures but remember the impression you left in your final days on the job, and their memories could help or harm your career in the future. Why not leave on a positive note?

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