



ANSWER KEY

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## PRESS HIGHLIGHTS

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SPECIAL SECTION

## CALIFORNIA Legal Pro WINTER 2008 INSIGHTS FOR THE OTHER LEGAL PROFESSIONALS

### Seven Steps to Survival

How to protect your law firm job, while preparing for the worst

By Pam Smith  
RECORDER STAFF WRITER

**T**he specter of layoffs looms in the minds of many a U.S. worker now, and law firm staffers are no exception. (At least they can consider themselves in good company.)

The recent and prominent dissolutions of California stalwarts Thelen and Heller Ehrman weigh on their minds. So does all the news about layoffs at a long list of firms — the likes of Reed Smith and Proskauer Rose — that just keeps growing.

A number of administrators and recruiters have advice, though, for trying to avoid the ax. There is the obvious: Pay more attention than ever to the quality of your work, volunteer for extra projects at the office, update your resume (and ask for a second opinion on it). But there are a number of other ways to shield yourself, too, like seeking out cross-training, initiating critiques at work, making industry research a habit, and signing up with just the right number of recruiters.

If you do end up pounding the pavement for a new job, take heart: The jobs may not be as plentiful as they once were, but there are still openings to be had.

"Many of [our] clients are expanding and continue to be in hiring mode," Bonnie Blair, the San Francisco-based executive director of Davidson Legal Staffing, wrote in an e-mail. "What has changed is the competition. There are more qualified candidates available compared to a year ago," so the strength of a resume and references matter more than ever.

#### FIND MORE WORK, BE FLEXIBLE

Many staff recruiters and firm administrators suggest finding a way to join key clients, and to add new hats to your job description.

"Often times, an administrator or an office manager will also have a secretarial or both those functions, you're obviously a little more planted."

One administrator of a Silicon Valley branch office for an international law firm, who remains anonymous, warns against hoarding work, saying that doing so will isolate and decrease your visibility. Instead, focus on teamwork and mentoring.

"From my perspective as a manager, if someone had all those [good-citizen] hats, I'd had to make a really, really difficult decision. I wouldn't want to lay them off. I'd like to have someone who has weaker skills, someone who isn't versatile in terms of practice areas — they do not get along with coworkers, someone who [takes advantage of] policies."

Margaret Shaw Lilani, a San Francisco-based managing director for staffing company Law Registry, suggests seeking out feedback from your supervisor, your peers or employees. Press for specific performance examples on what you've done well, or do better. Those conversations not only deepen relationships within the work area — they also get you recognized for your current contributions, and show you your output.

Plus, those talks will put you one step ahead should you decide to (or be forced) for a job. They'll make writing a resume and lining up references a snap. "In the event that they do get let go, they're already going to be in better shape than most," Lilani said.

#### PUT YOUR ANTENNAE UP

"I think people have a tendency to think, 'I'm just going to try to hang on to matter what.' And they don't really think about the future until it's there," says Shafer, who's spent more than 20 years as a law firm administrator, most recently at Heller & Parker in San Francisco. Tune in to what your managers are saying — in terms of performance, as well as what may be going on behind the scenes at your firm, if you should always be cued into those, to keep abreast of law firm news.

She also suggests becoming an industry-news junkie, to keep abreast of law firm news, and more specifically, the practice areas that you and your firm are involved in. "The staff often stays very separate from the business of law. I think that's how they sometimes," says Gifford, who worked for Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison for five



*Answer Key provides research, information management, and library auditing services to law firms.*

#### OR ARE YOU AN ENTREPRENEUR?

Daniel Raphael had worked as a law librarian since 1998, at Bingham McCutchen in Los Angeles, Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel in New York, and, most recently, Greenberg Traurig in Santa Monica, where he was the firm's manager of reference services. But in late 2005, he left to start Answer Key, a one-man business that provides research, information management and library-auditing services to law firms.

"At the time I was considering leaving, many people near me said, 'Are you crazy? Are you going to leave the job security of a law firm?'" said Raphael, whose company has provided research for clients such as Greenberg Traurig; Munger, Tolles & Olson; and O'Melveny & Myers. "And what I learned ... is that being self-employed is far more stable, and far more predictable."

When the market shifts, he says, he can adjust. He can be proactive. "It's my own responsibility. My fate is not in the hands of an executive committee," he said. "I know that a lot of librarians are very nervous now. A lot of attorneys are nervous right now. Because their fate is in someone else's hands." v

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