

Associates

Nose to The Grindstone, Ear to the Ground

In time of stealth layoffs, due diligence a must

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By G.M. Filisko



Alan Sclar

Photo by Julianna
Thomas

The reality of law firm layoffs is here and growing, so it's no surprise some firms are using formal and informal meetings to assuage associates' fears. But not all managers are reassuring. Six BigLaw firms didn't respond to interview requests or declined to comment on what they are doing to talk associates off the ledge.

"Associates are feeling very vulnerable, but I don't think firms are very good at calming their fears," says Roy Cohen, master coach at the Five O'Clock Club, a New York City outplacement and career coaching firm. "That's why I don't think it would be a good strategic move for associates to tell management they're concerned. I think it suggests weakness."

Cohen instead advises associates to gather information under the radar. "Pay attention to what's happening at the firm," he advises. "Get a feel for people's workloads. A lot of firms are cutting or eliminating bonuses. That's an important signal that times are rough and suggests the need to make sure you're doing everything possible to be valuable at the firm."

"Think about what you can do to generate business, and even offer yourself up to other areas to expand your skill set," Cohen says. "In addition, in most law firms, there's a beneath-the-surface flow of information, and you need to make sure you're in the loop. Secretaries to senior partners are invaluable."

At the same time, Cohen recommends planning for the worst. "Associates need a proactive plan," he says. "Work on your resumé, identify recruiting firms, investigate other career options, and understand how to package and promote yourself."

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As much as associates prepare, they may still be blindsided by stealth layoffs. That troubles Paul Secunda, associate professor at Marquette University Law School in Milwaukee.

"By waiting to announce layoffs, law firms are trying to keep productive employees around as long as possible," he explains. "But I question whether that's a best practice."

"Their story ends up on the front page on a gossip website," explains Secunda. "All of a sudden, there are thousands of people who had a neutral idea of your firm who now think your firm is despicable."

Associates generally don't come right out and ask whether the firm is in trouble, says Alan Sclar, managing partner at 25-attorney New York City firm Silverman Sclar Shin & Byrne. "They don't want you to be concerned about them. But you get a sense of the scuttlebutt around an office."

"I've spoken to every associate individually and said, 'If you're busy, you're OK,'" he says. "A lot of them didn't think about the

fact that they're very busy, and that's the best job security.' ”

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