



MIND THE GAP

How to rejoin the legal workforce after taking time off.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN AND PORCHE JONES

Gaps in employment occur for all levels of talent from junior attorneys to the most seasoned chief legal officers. Nowadays, more than half of the many hundreds of resumes we each see annually as search consultants show some type of time off in the work history timeline. These employment gaps—defined as periods of time when a job applicant is not employed—are often an uncomfortable topic for prospective employees and employers alike. The reality is, however, that lawyers find themselves taking time off from the practice of law for countless reasons—both personal and professional.

Most people would probably agree that attorneys, as a whole, are hard-charging Type A personalities who thrive on a challenge and embrace the adrenaline rush that accompanies a full plate. Given that, any deviation from this path and questions about an uncertain future can be traumatizing. These inquiries, however, are answerable, and will allow for successful re-entry into the workforce when the time comes.

VOLUNTARY VS. INVOLUNTARY

When the time comes to rejoin the workforce, in an

interview, a hiring manager will want to know the reason for the gap and the motivation for returning to practice, explains Amy Monroe, former internal recruiter for Sidley Austin and current Major, Lindsey & Africa legal search consultant. Whether voluntary or not, the key will be how the gap is explained, which is just as important as what caused it, if not more so.

Keep in mind that human resources executives are empathetic and simply want to understand the story behind the gap. The explanation does not need to be an apology or overly informative in nature; it simply needs to be concise and honest. Most hiring managers are familiar with the causes surrounding involuntary gaps. They've lived through market ebbs and flows from the dot-com bubble and subsequent bust, the 2008-2009 financial crash, the drop in oil prices, and other similar downturns. Pair that experience with consolidations and roll-ups and involuntary gaps become evident and relatable at every level in both companies and law firms. Downsizing, a change of control, a change of chief executive officer, restructuring, bankruptcy, etc., are all easily explainable.

A voluntary gap is no different. Most people have faced a personal crisis that requires their undivided attention away from the office or an existential crisis that requires time to reassess and re-evaluate. These situations are explainable and are becoming increasingly more common in today's workforce. However, the story here needs to be told with the utmost confidence and conviction, emphasizing how the decision was made, how time was spent staying active during the break, and how that time was used as preparation for the future.

NAVIGATING THE GAP

The activities you pursued during the gap are important to successful re-entry into the legal workforce. This gap can be used to traverse many paths: furthering education, developing relationships, volunteering, etc. This time should be looked at as an opportunity for growth. However, if your goal is to ultimately return to practice, a period should be set aside each day to return calls and emails, set appointments and interviews, and read up on the latest trends and developments.

The legal landscape is constantly transforming, and staying on top of what is happening in the profession will make the transition back smoother no matter how much time passes. Continuing education courses are one way to stay abreast of changes and keep at the forefront of the profession. Opportunities also exist through local bar associations, giving members access to resources and services that will keep them active and in touch with trends, colleagues, and opportunities. The ultimate goal should be keeping a hand in the industry, developing new skills, and building connections. Experience shows that the longer someone is out of practice, the harder it is to get back into the workplace. During this time, it is vital to maintain connections and build new ones, which is where old-fashioned, in-person networking becomes imperative. Done right, it can broaden your opportunities while significantly easing the actual job search process.

Of the many candidates with gaps on their resumes,

those most successful at getting back into the industry have remained active in the legal community in some manner. Often, a former colleague or networking connection will be the key to identifying that next opportunity. In fact, most of the in-house attorneys we interviewed for this article found their path back in through their networks. One of them, currently working as a senior attorney in a large corporation, had taken an eight-year gap to care for family. Another current general counsel of a public company had taken two years off after serving in the same position in an entirely different industry. Another general counsel had a shorter gap, but nevertheless, like the others, continued to let people know she was ready and available and to keep their eyes and ears open for her.

Some choose to explore nontraditional work opportunities to remain involved and fulfilled until they are ready to re-enter the legal ranks in full force. These could include part-time positions that might require more routine work but may offer more manageable hours and greater work-life balance. For some, this could mean teaching law school classes. Others choose to volunteer for nonprofit organizations supporting the legal industry. All of these opportunities help keep skills fresh and keep a lawyer relevant in the profession.

THE SEARCH

When the time comes to return to the workforce, “the job search should be treated like a job itself,” explained the general counsel for a global Fortune 200 corporation who had been displaced earlier in her career due to an acquisition of her company. She said it requires drive, passion, and energy and ultimately found her current general counsel role by focusing on networking. Like another Fortune 200 general counsel we interviewed, she wasn’t sure she’d land another general counsel role, so she was somewhat flexible in her search.

Alternative career opportunities should still be considered, especially for those higher up in the corporate hierarchy. Keep in mind that fewer job openings exist at the top, while opportunities abound for associate-level attorneys, especially those willing to explore something new. This does not mean more experienced lawyers should not consider something new. For example, those who previously served as in-house counsel could return to a law firm. The firm gains the benefit of the former in-house counsel’s savvy from the client perspective, while the lawyer gets back into the profession.

Sometimes the career change means permanently becoming a contractor or working part time—both of which can be highly appealing thanks to flexible work schedules. Contract work consists of working in a law firm or in-house legal department for a specified period of time. Some contract roles may be ongoing, depending on the need. It is ideal for attorneys who may have been out of work for a period of time and want to sharpen their skills or those who prefer a flexible work schedule. Some attorneys also take on contract work after retirement. It allows the flexibility to work short periods of time to make extra money while also enjoying life after a full-time job. Another perk is the ability

to work remotely. Some employers prefer having a contractor work out of office to reduce costs. Additionally, some attorneys accept contract-to-permanent jobs because it allows the employee to learn more about the role and the culture of the team and to determine whether the fit is a good one before making a permanent decision.

The best move may even be to take a step back in your career, whether it’s a different title or smaller company. Whatever it is, the name on the door should not be a hindrance to a position that could be a better fit. This was the approach taken by one general counsel who was let go after a change in management and worked her way back to the top legal position.

GETTING BACK IN

Personal stories can allow candidates to win their way back into the legal world. Time and again, persistence and drive gets you in the door. Remember that those hiring will still want to understand a resume gap, which you can explain during the interview process.

Hang Bower, former chief human resources officer for Chicago-based BDO USA and current executive search consultant for Allegis Partners, suggests approaching an interview by:

- Being clear, honest, and concise with your explanation.
- Concentrating on accomplishments during the time off (i.e., kept up on certifications, went to industry events, and volunteered at a local nonprofit) and connecting them to the job at hand.
- Focusing on passion for why you do what you do—making it clear that you are back and ready to go full throttle.

In a life filled with competing priorities and unpredictable work environments, gaps on resumes are becoming more common—whether they are caused by caring for young children or an ailing parent, pursuing another passion, a change of control or CEO, or just moving beyond an ill-fitting job. Once it’s time to return to the workforce, a gap should not define you. In the words of a successful senior associate re-entrant: “It hasn’t been hard to get back into the permanent workforce because I have a good story to tell—I was a great employee and I have great recommendations.” If you want it, know your story and the rest should follow. **TBJ**



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