



Feature

I Wish I Knew How to Quit You: The Guide to Making a Graceful Exit

By Carey Bertolet

Before turning the doorknob to enter a partner's office, stop, breathe, and repeat after me: "Less is more."



The hand-wringing and anxiety often associated with giving notice are almost always completely unfounded. I know lawyers who stay up at night imagining that their partners will crumble and wail upon hearing the bad news.

Others imagine themselves telling the partnership to "take this job and shove it."

Lawyers should come to terms with the fact that in most situations, submitting a resignation is neither as scary nor as fun as one might think. Remember that a resignation is a fairly simple business transaction—it's ending one business relationship to start another. Although there may be complicated feelings of loyalty, excitement, resentment, and pride, it is, at its heart, a professional interaction.

The first step in planning a resignation is deciding when to resign. Conventional wisdom says that Fridays are the best days to resign. People tend to believe that resigning on a Friday gives bosses and coworkers the weekend to process the news and prevents an immediate flurry of gossip mongering. Since the industry standard is two weeks' notice, it does often make sense to give notice on a Friday and wrap things up two weeks hence, at the end of the workweek.

Do be prepared to give your current firm two weeks. While not all firms will require you to stay, the overwhelming majority of people take that time to wrap up their work and transition out of their firms.

My suggestion is that you announce your last day without leaving it open to negotiation. As long as it's two weeks out, your employer will have a hard time arguing. In a minority of cases, attorneys are told to leave sooner than their stated last days of employment. This is highly unusual.

Most folks, myself included, believe that a longer notice period

(three or four weeks) is required because they imagine that their firms will be so devastated by losing them that it will take months to recover from their absences. In actuality, two weeks is typically more than enough.

I, personally, gave longer-than-normal notice but quickly transitioned my files. It was true, despite my perception of my indispensability, that I really only needed two weeks. On balance, most lawyers are surprised at how easy their transitions actually are.

Once you've set the day to resign, you may want to prepare a letter of resignation. This should never be a long letter. It should be short, gracious, and precise. It should say that you are resigning your position at the firm. It should state the last date of employment. Finally, it should state that you appreciate the opportunity the firm has given you and that you wish the people there the best of luck going forward. If you choose not to memorialize your resignation in writing, communicate these specific points to the appropriate person when you have his or her attention and privacy.

One of my clients asked me what the point of being gracious to one's soon-to-be-former employer was, especially after a particularly acrimonious relationship. I suggest demonstrating maturity and professionalism for its own sake.

Taking that aside, even if you don't care what your superior thinks of you anymore, your new employer might. You may need a reference from your boss, so there's no point in provoking him or her. References aside, the legal community can be very small, and it's never a bad idea to stay on good terms with its members. It's impossible to predict how your paths may cross down the road.

I cannot tell you how many lawyers are concerned that partners who otherwise rave about them will turn dark and resentful and provide bad reviews as retribution for resignation. I hear this concern again and again, only to find



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out that the partner in question has been gracious and glowing in his or her remarks to the future employer.

I believe this concern may be the result of a bit of healthy *hubris*. I'm sure your partners' reviews are glowing and that they rely on you heavily. But don't become so impressed with yourself that you believe the only responses to your resignation will be despair and desperation. Expect the highest levels of professionalism from soon-to-be former bosses. I suspect you will get them.

Law firms may conduct exit interviews. I encourage my clients to avoid (again) the temptation to unleash a tirade detailing the firm's shortcomings. While your intention may be to offer constructive criticism that will help shape the future of the firm, I believe that criticism offered on the way out the door is often perceived as sour grapes and is unlikely to be taken constructively.

Even when leaving of one's own accord, quitting a job can feel like a breakup. It can be an emotional time, and I've heard more than my share of stories about people saying things they later regretted.

Once you've gracefully given notice, make it your mission to leave nothing behind but good feelings. You will need to

transition your work to the appropriate people. Be generous with your time as you bring others up to speed on client files. While it may seem like a resignation is all about you and the partners for whom you work, don't forget that client matters are the most precious cargo to protect as you prepare to leave. Make sure you've left all client materials with the appropriate parties, and don't put anyone in the position of having to search for a client file.

It is often appropriate to send an email to your colleagues shortly before actually leaving. Again, keep it gracious and short. If possible, you may want to provide your forwarding information. Take special care to provide accurate information to your old firm's human resources department and to those who are taking over your workload. It's good form to make yourself available for follow-up questions or administrative matters. Don't allow your departure to cause undue work for a former colleague.

Approach your resignation as you approached picking up your high school sweetheart at his or her parents' house. Be mature, but don't linger longer than necessary. And once you are out the door, you're likely to feel that it was far easier than you expected.

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