

We'll Keep Calm And Carry On

Fortune favors those who don't panic but prepare for life's other options.

BY MANDIE LANDRY

To my fellow junior associates:

You're all upset—and you probably should be, given this dismal economy and its impact on the legal industry. The world that existed when you left law school is no more. Before the latest and greatest economic depression hit us, the only way you could get fired from a big firm was to not show up at the office. Even then, you probably had a good six months to a year before someone realized you weren't telecommuting.

Before the downturn last fall, the greatest worry of a junior associate was an existential dilemma: "Do I really want to do this for the rest of my life? What about my dream of prosecuting war criminals in the Hague? What if Larry Flynt calls—will I be ready for his next Supreme Court case?" The one thing no one ever worried about was job security.

I pity those poor senior associates because really, what else can a sixth-year corporate associate do besides deals that may not exist again for, at best, a very long time? Can a seventh-year real estate associate just transfer to litigation? I hope these people married well.

But us, the juniors, we're in a sweet—well, less sour—spot. We vaguely recall most subjects from our three years of law school, or at least enough to get started in a brand-new area. Yet we're old enough to have experienced \$160,000 starting salaries. We are the "young'uns" routinely mocked for flailing around in a Westlaw rabbit hole, but at least we're resilient. There's no doubt we're going to bounce back from this momentary 180 in our profession, but it's going to be tough.

Like many of my counterparts, every day for several months I've kept a window open in my Web browser for that most favorite and most hated Web site, Above the Law. We're afraid to look, because new layoffs are reported on an

almost daily basis, but we're also too worried not to track the tornado.

BEYOND WORRYING

So how do we handle this brave new world? How do we save our careers and our souls? Here are some of my nonsense suggestions:

1. Share. Billable hours have never been scarcer. That's why you need to share whatever you have with other associates. I mean it. Stop hoarding! Sooner or later, someone will have a case or project that is a bit too big to handle all alone. And where will he or she turn for help? That's right, to you, the "nice" one.

Remember, partners don't really care who does the work, as long as it gets done well. When it is, everybody can bask in the credit. So make nice, and more work will be sent your way.

2. Dress like you have a date every day. No, don't wear your little red dress or your striped Dolce & Gabbana shirt to work, but seriously, dress like you're trying to impress someone every single day, including casual Fridays. Use a dry cleaner, and buy an iron. Ladies, wear makeup and ditch the chunky loafers. Gentlemen, don't show up in a polo shirt and khakis unless you're actually playing golf with a client. Look like you're worth saving.

3. Go out to lunch with every single attorney in your office who will eat with you. Listen, no one is going to hire you for years and years unless (a) she is related to you or (b) you helped him hide a body back in the late 1990s. The only work you will have for the foreseeable future will come from within your firm. Lunch is a great way to network because lawyers love to talk about their work with fellow lawyers. After a few weeks, you'll know who's busy, who has a new case, who's thinking about leaving, and probably much, much more.

And hey, it's not like you don't have the time.

4. Become a member of another bar. The more options

the better, right? Find out which state bars have reciprocity with yours or, if you're too junior and extremely impatient, take another bar exam. You're only a few years out, so it will come back easily (enough). Then, after you pass the Hawaii bar, maybe you can make that move to Maui you've been talking about for so long.

5. Accept your worst-case scenario. Think about it, think hard. If you lost your job today, what would you do tomorrow? Are you willing to spend your savings on rent and necessities, possibly for many months? Are you prepared to change your lifestyle to live on half your current salary or less? Look honestly at your financial and living situation, and then think about what the absolute rock bottom would be.

For me, it would mean moving back to New Orleans and living with my parents. I'd go crazy, but you know what? The legal market in New Orleans, while never great, has remained surprisingly steady, even post-Katrina. Living expenses would be low. And frankly, it would be nice to spend some time with my parents as an adult.

In other words, the end of the world as I know it wouldn't be all that bad. And I suspect that yours wouldn't be, either.

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