

From Layoff to Launch: Planning Your Career Transition

Career Development



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This year has been challenging for many employees. Through November, employers have announced more than one million job cuts. This represents an increase of 54 percent compared to the same period last year, and the highest level since 2020 when 2,227,725 cuts were announced through November.

Leading companies (and their legal departments), including those in Europe and across the globe, haven't been spared. Major law firms — such as A&O Shearman, Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner,

Perkins Coie, and Faegre Drinker — also have conducted staff reductions.

For in-house counsel, these statistics represent colleagues, mentors, and perhaps your own recent experience. Whether navigating an involuntary transition or contemplating a strategic move, the new year presents a unique inflection point.

The year-end strategy: rest, reflect, plan

If you find yourself out of work at the year's end, resist the urge to flood the market with applications immediately. December is typically the slowest hiring month, with decision-makers out of the office and hiring budgets frozen until January.

Instead, use this time strategically:

Rest and process. Job loss triggers a genuine grief response. Allow yourself space to acknowledge the emotional impact before launching into action mode. Mindful reflection allows you to examine your past and make changes in the future with clarity. It also gives you space to clear your emotional and mental space and avoid desperate or negative energy leaking into future interviews.

Conduct a career audit. Review your last 3-5 years: What kind of work energized you? Which drained you? This reflection prevents you from replicating your last role without considering whether it truly served your goals.

Update core materials quietly. Refresh your resume, update your LinkedIn profile, and document key accomplishments with metrics. Don't announce your search publicly yet. Just ensure materials are ready when hiring accelerates in January.

Reconnect personally. The holidays offer natural opportunities to reach out to former colleagues, mentors, and law school classmates. These conversations can plant seeds for January opportunities.

> Rise with power. Rise with purpose. Rise as only a phoenix can.

The January advantage: when hiring surges

January and February represent peak hiring months across industries. Companies have fresh budgets, new annual goals, and a backlog of unfilled positions.

Cross sectors strategically. Don't limit yourself unnecessarily by industry. Your regulatory expertise, contract-negotiation skills, and risk-management experience translate across sectors. Think broadly about the problems you solve rather than the industry you serve.

Leverage recruiters effectively. Legal recruiters can be powerful allies if engaged correctly. Remember: they work for employers, not candidates, and won't be compensated if you contact the employer directly first.

Key strategies:

- Target recruiters specializing in your practice area, region, or seniority level.

- Understand their incentive structure.
- Consider working with multiple recruiters targeting different employers.

Master the algorithm. More than 98 percent of Fortune 500 companies reportedly use Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) to screen resumes. Your beautifully crafted resume may never reach human eyes without passing algorithmic screening.

Critical tactics:

- Use keywords from job descriptions naturally throughout your resume.
- Avoid tables, text boxes, headers, and footers that confuse ATS systems.
- Submit in the requested format (usually .docx or PDF).
- Tailor each application.
- Apply early; systems often rank by timestamp. If your application is number 53, no one may ever see it.

Be proactive! After submitting, follow up with the recruiter or hiring manager. Among other benefits, a premium LinkedIn subscription allows you to contact people outside your network. You may land an interview based solely on your LinkedIn outreach.

LinkedIn as your digital storefront

Your LinkedIn profile is often the first impression recruiters have of you. Optimize it:

Headline: Write compelling headlines that showcase specific expertise: “Privacy & Data Security Counsel | GDPR/CCPA Compliance | SaaS Transactions” rather than just “Senior Counsel.”

Summary:

- Open with a compelling hook showing your philosophy.
- Use specific metrics (40+ agreements, 60-percent reduction).
- Expand beyond your current role; tell a career progression story.
- Ditch the paragraphs! Demonstrate business impact with bullet points.
- Include searchable keywords naturally.

Other strategies:

- Request recommendations from managers and colleagues.
- Expand your network with conference attendees and people you meet in other settings. You don't need to be best buddies; you are expanding your professional network.
- Engage thoughtfully with content to demonstrate expertise. Commenting on other people's posts provides exposure to tertiary networks and expands the people who know about you.
- Watch this three-part series hosted by the Baltimore ACC for in-depth guidance on leveraging LinkedIn to advance your career.
    - Session 1: LinkedIn Profile Principles & Formatting
    - Session 2: The LinkedIn Algorithm and the 4 Steps to LinkedIn Visibility
    - Session 3: Live LinkedIn Profile Feedback

The power of networks

Many employers struggle to find qualified candidates despite high unemployment in some sectors. Most opportunities are filled through referrals before reaching job boards. This means that simply submitting online applications is your least effective job-search strategy.

Activate your network, including reconnecting with dormant connections. Plan to talk to at least two or three people per week about your job search. At the end of each conversation, ask for two or three more referrals. Join professional associations and leverage resources, such as those offered by the ACC. Attend in-person events because this kind of connecting is still king.

Be specific about what you're seeking. Make it easy for people to help you. Hand out a one-sheet overview of your skills, accomplishments, and desired roles. Lead with value, not neediness. Employers recruit to solve their problems, not yours.

Help others and invest in your relationships. Not only because it's the right thing to do, but also because interviews aren't always cloaked as such. One good turn today can help you years from now.

> Make it easy for people to help you.

Bone up on AI: your competitive edge

If there's one skill to prioritize during your transition, it's AI literacy. Legal departments are increasingly seeking candidates who can leverage AI tools for efficiency and innovation. Many candidates will have comparable legal expertise. AI fluency can differentiate you. More importantly, it signals that you're forward-thinking and adaptable; exactly what employers want in uncertain times.

Use this downtime to build practical AI skills:

- Take free courses on AI fundamentals. Even YouTube can provide a useful starting point. Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, and Udemy offer legal-specific and generic tracks and certifications.
- Practice using AI tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and Perplexity both in your job search and for substantive legal activity. Avoid over-reliance on AI tools to retain accuracy and authenticity.

- Learn prompt engineering basics. The ability to effectively instruct AI tools.
- Understand AI governance and ethics issues facing legal departments.
- Without exaggeration, include your AI capabilities in your LinkedIn profile and application materials.

From flames to flight

The phoenix doesn't simply survive the flames; it transforms within them, emerging with renewed strength and crystalline purpose. This year-end period isn't merely a time to recover. It's your crucible moment. The space between chapters where disappointment becomes fuel, where clarity replaces despair, and where you architect the career you're meant to build.

January's hiring surge is coming. But you won't just participate in it; you'll command it!

Use these weeks to rest deeply, recharge intentionally, and design your strategic launch. Reflect on what the ashes revealed: the roles that no longer serve you, the values you won't compromise, the impact you're meant to make. When you rise, you won't return to what was. You'll ascend to what's next — sharper, wiser, and unshakable in your direction. Your transformation isn't just possible. It's already beginning.

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Spiwe Jefferson leads global legal and integrity functions across international operations for ABB's Electrification Service division. A sought-after speaker and thought leader on AI enterprise adoption, she has achieved over 710 hours (18 weeks) of AI-driven efficiency gains on one platform alone. Spiwe authors the *Mindful in 5* book series and podcast, providing leaders with actionable strategies for resilience and growth.