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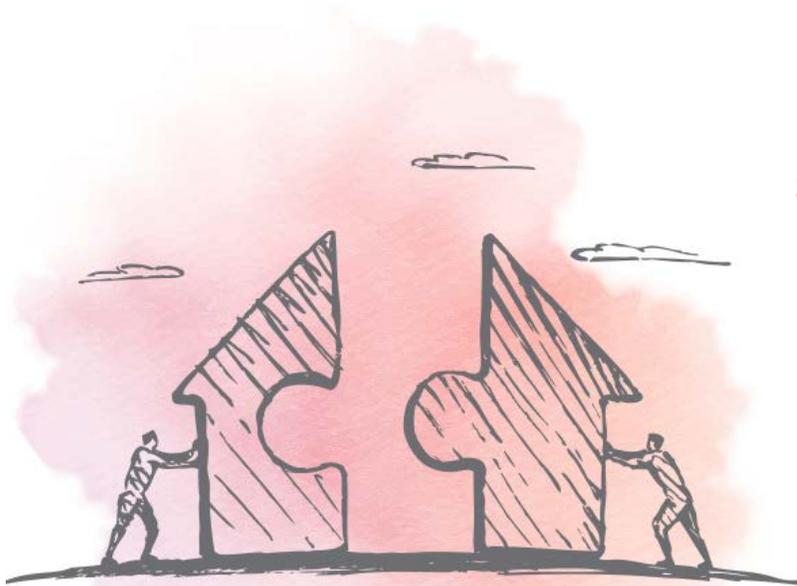
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# Merger Matrimony: When Law Firms Say “I Do”

By Amber James, SPHR, SHRM-SCP



**It's not always love at first sight. Months — and sometimes years — of weighing the risks, talks among shareholders, intense negotiations and secretive meetings will occur before two law firms become one. Sealing the deal will impact everyone in the firm, top to bottom, for better or for worse. Keeping your eyes on the future will help you navigate the uncertainty that looms amid the transition.**

**1. Listen to the rumors.** Before any merger or acquisition is official, an announcement of some sort will be made. With any luck, you'll hear about it for the first time directly from leadership; however, there is a greater chance you will hear half-truths about it on the internet or from someone at work. Keep in mind that rumors are like the game of telephone. Even coming from a reliable source, the first mention of your firm as part of a potential merger

can send panic through an organization. Deals fall apart all the time. This is the time to simply take in what your colleagues are saying and what the industry publications are printing. You have work to do, and spreading rumors is not part of your job.

**2. Pop the champagne!** The firms are gettin' hitched! Whether it's a quick wedding or the plans will be carried out over the course of several months, the announcement of a merger will put some uncertainties to rest and make way for others. As leaders from both firms weigh in on best practices, processes, technology, policies, benefits and branding, you may wonder how you can help or what you should be doing, saying and thinking during the engagement period. Here's an idea: Volunteer to co-organize (with someone from the other firm) a lunch-and-greet in or near the space where the newly combined firm will be located. If the opportunity arises, thank your firm's leaders for having the courage to grow and for the work they're doing to get the deal to the finish line, and share your excitement for the future. Enthusiasm is contagious, and there is no place in this stage of the deal for negativity.

**3. It's the big day!** There will be speeches, toasts and media coverage; the highly anticipated new logo will be revealed on nametags and cocktail napkins. Soon, "they" will be moving into "your" space or vice versa. Now is the time to be kind and be helpful. You represent the new firm and, frankly, no one knows what the future holds. If a celebration is planned, introduce yourself to as many new colleagues as possible. You're all in this together now, and you have a lot more in common than you realize — not only do you work in the same industry, you've also been experiencing similar feelings since rumors of a merger began. Shareholders know that cultural alignment is vital to a successful blend.

**4. New marriage, new traditions.** It's like the first Thanksgiving with your new in-laws! There's no substitute

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for Grandma’s stuffing, but by fully embracing change, you may discover new traditions you enjoy. Decisions made during this stage of a merger can be tough to accept. Perhaps this is when you learn the document management system you helped select and roll out a decade ago will be replaced with a more sophisticated system. Take an opportunity like this to volunteer to pilot the new system. This will position you to be a training resource once it’s fully deployed.



During the busy weeks surrounding a merger, training and human resources teams are spread thin. You can leverage your understanding of a new system by offering to lead a peer-to-peer training session. Becoming a subject-matter expert may even allow you to travel as a trainer to new locations across the country or the globe, if the merger includes such offices. Any employee who can expand their role without compromising their primary responsibilities is a valuable asset. Adding value during a merger is vital, and such opportunities are numerous in this stage.

**5. Settling in.** It will take time and the integration of systems and spaces, but eventually things will settle down. Unfortunately, as they do, the firm’s workforce may be cut. There is no way to determine when the combined firm

will decide the time is right to let employees go. When a couple combines households, they must make tough decisions about what will be kept, what will be stored and what will be let go for good. If they have duplicate items, they might consider the brand, functionality and size before deciding which to keep — but all things being equal they’ll likely decide to retain the one that will serve them best in the long run.

Sometimes, it makes sense to keep both. Never give up hope that you will have a place within the combined firm, and resist the urge to retreat back to the comfort of obsolete practices and systems. Replace fear of the unknown with productive thoughts about how you can contribute in new and unique ways, using all the resources and tools now available to you.

The most common reasons for any merger are economic at their core, whether your firm is trying to expand its client base, gain a competitive advantage or simply survive. Don’t take the decision personally, avoid succumbing to fear of the unknown and recognize that opportunity abounds in a time of change. While the firms are doing due diligence, inventory your skills, stay agile and be open for ways to help outside of your usual role. You will add value and help set your firm on the path to happily ever after. ■

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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