

In making a lateral move, look before you leap

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By Stephen Seckler

Earning a place at a top law firm is no guarantee that your career will stay on course. For the most part, law school rewards effort. If you do well, you can land a position at a good firm. But once you enter the "real world," success is driven more by your interpersonal skills and resilience and a good measure of luck. If you are fortunate enough to find a good niche, and if you have enough political support, then you may have a shot at partnership.

But if you are like many law school graduates, a lateral move is probably in your future (according to the National Association for Law Placement, more than 75 percent of all associates leave their first law firm within five years). In my 11 years in the search business, I've seen lateral moves that have worked well, but I've also seen careers temporarily derailed by bad moves. What follows are my observations of what works and what does not.

Can you fix it?

When I receive phone calls from lawyers contemplating a lateral move, I always encourage them to think critically about their current situations.

If you have worked somewhere a while, you probably have some political capital. Before you undertake any move, try and "fix" what is wrong at your current firm.

Is it possible to switch practice groups? Have you asked for more of the work that you like? Look closely at what needs to change. Have you done all you can to address your concerns?

Sensible reasons

If change seems unlikely (either because your firm has failed to live up to its promises or because it is fundamentally not a good fit), then perhaps it is time to start exploring your options.

There are many reasons why a lateral move might make sense. Here are some of the more common and sensible ones:

- You want to work for a more prestigious firm. *Higher levels of prestige can better position you for a move in-house or a geographic move.*
- You would like work that is more consistent with your interests or long-term goals. *Maybe you enjoy working with technology start-ups, but your firm represents mostly large financial institutions.*
- You would like a better platform on which to build a practice. *Perhaps your clients have legal needs all over the country, or you are at a national firm that has high fees and this is preventing you from bringing in smaller clients.*

- You would like to be at a firm that places more value on your practice area. *This might mean better compensation. But it also may mean that the new firm is willing to devote more resources to building your practice.*
- You would like more responsibility or better training.
- You would like better partnership prospects. *Is there a glut of associates at your level of seniority?*
- You would like a different work environment/culture. *Do you want better work/life balance? A smaller environment?*
- You are on a sinking ship.
- You are not getting enough work. *Is a layoff on the way?*
- You made a bad first impression and want a fresh start. *Did an influential partner stop giving you work?*
- You would like to make a geographic move.
- You are following a partner with whom you have a strong working relationship.

Questionable reasons

Getting a fresh start is not without risks. Here are some reasons that may raise questions:

- You're making a lateral move simply to increase your salary. *Perhaps you will get paid more in the short run, but if you lower your partnership prospects in the long run, was it worth it?*
- Following a single partner to a new firm can be risky. *Are you placing too many eggs in one basket?*
- Moving in-house can be a good career move for some, but going in-house too soon can be a problem. *Will you be losing valuable training opportunities? What happens if your company is acquired?*
- Restlessness and simple need for a change may not be the best reason to explore a lateral move.
- You're presuming that you will have better work/life balance at a smaller firm. *There are firms where you can work less and still succeed. But make sure to speak with associates about the issue.*
- You're getting an offer only to gain leverage with an existing employer. *Your threat of leaving may help in the short run (giving you the work, bonus or resources that you desire), but it will not be looked on favorably when it is time for partnership.*

Think long and hard

If you are considering a lateral move, think long term and do your due diligence. While you shouldn't "over lawyer" your own career, grabbing the first alternative job that is offered to you without serious deliberation is not a great way to plan for the future.