



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Deborah Acker
Managing Director, BCG Attorney Search,
Palo Alto

How to Survive and Thrive during an Unplanned Relocation to Join a Future Spouse

Many junior attorneys work incredibly hard for four years to get top grades at first-tier law schools, work on law reviews, and get offers from prestigious firms. Then, they face unplanned speed bumps in their careers when their fiancés feel it is time to live in the same city, get serious about their commitment, marry, and settle down. Legal recruiters receive many questions in relation to different versions of this scenario. The following is what I tell attorneys in this position. (Many of these thoughts may apply to same-sex couples as well, where one partner is relocating to meet the needs of the relationship.)

You are not alone. This scenario is one of the more common stories that cross my desk. Fortunately, there is some empathy for this situation among hiring partners and recruiting staff, but you should be aware of the pitfalls so that you can handle it with delicacy and finesse.

First, I would be remiss if I didn't note that I have almost exclusively worked with women making moves to be in the same locations as their future husbands. Rarely have I helped an imminent husband find a good legal position to relocate near his soon-to-be-wife. Often there is a good reason for choosing who is to move. His job may be in a professional field less amenable to transition, they may both want to settle where he is, or they may want to live in a location where their families have settled as well.

However, lacking an obvious reason to choose his location, many times the women still are expected to make the job change. This works if *both* individuals share that value in terms of their respective professional priorities within a relationship. But not infrequently a woman will throw her professional trajectory into the hopper with smoldering resentment (of which she may or may not be consciously aware) to meet an expectation that may not jibe with her sense of fairness and her definition of mutual support between two committed people.

Therefore, the first step in this situation is to examine the decision-making process. Talk out short-, medium-, and long-term goals for each person's respective career both as individuals and as a couple. Map out the pros and cons of location and opportunity for each individual in various locations in light of these goals.

Don't *assume* that you will take turns putting individual career goals first. Don't *assume* that she is always going to accept that her career will be secondary in light of assumptions about children and gender stereotypes. The current generation is very savvy and evolved when it comes to gender roles and providing mutual support regarding professional issues. But in my experience the couples who are the most successful talk it out.

Be explicit. Make sure each person understands the other's viewpoint, values, and desires. Ensure that each person feels acknowledged and heard according to the norms of his or her culture and the mode in which he or she wants to merge into a relationship. *Then*, make the decision and jointly figure out how to best unfold the plan.

How to Survive and Thrive during an Unplanned Relocation to Join a Future Spouse

We will assume that the couple now living apart in separate cities has decided they are going to get married the summer after they both start working as first-year associates. They also have decided that they will settle in his city for the long run and she will change firms.

Probably the most important tool you have on your side to minimize the negatives of moving to a new firm at this point in your career is timing. If you can stay at a law firm for at least a year, you will minimize the penalty of “leaving too soon.” The prevailing wisdom is to stay at least two to three years before any move. But in the case of leaving to marry, staying for a year, and staying even if it means you may be somewhat inconvenienced for a few months, is often seen as a good-faith effort on your part.

Each situation will be different. If you are a junior litigator and are on a case that is going to be “crazy busy” and you play an important role, try not to leave until your role has been played out. If you think the demands of the case may go on for years, try to give three to six months’ notice. If you are part of a practice group that is slow on work, an early departure may not be a negative at all; it might be the best of both worlds—for you and for the firm.

Try not to be totally self-serving. If the firm has provided expensive continuing education programs, held a luxurious all-firm retreat, or given you financial support above and beyond the norm, figure out some way to show some appreciation and not give them your “two weeks’ notice” the day you return from the retreat. Often you will have at least one relationship with an established member of the firm who is also a mentor and a friend. Speak to this person about your long-range plans and seek his or her advice regarding the politics of leaving the firm early despite having represented that you would probably be there for a much longer period. You may gain some insight regarding what the firm values most in this situation, whether it is staying until a busy case or deal winds up, training someone to do what you were doing, or simply moving on gracefully and expediently so that the firm is no longer making an expensive investment in someone who is not going to be there.

PAGE: 2

The goal is to not burn bridges, maintain strong collegial relationships, appear savvy and responsible, and ensure a source of references to assist with your search for your next position in your new location. In top-tier practices, it is a small world. Attorneys are moving between firms more than ever before. You may well be meeting the colleagues you worked with in your first firm across the negotiating table, in the courtroom, or as office mates in the future.

In the best of all worlds, a firm may have an office with your practice group in your new location. You can explore transferring rather than leaving the firm. This can be more complicated than it appears at first glance. Often it is a matter of personalities and your perceived value by the managing partner in your current office. If you are moving from a situation where you are sought after to do work for partners to a situation where you may be begging for work, then perhaps going to a new firm will make more sense than a transfer.

When approaching firms in the new city, a good legal recruiter can help you frame the transition so that it can be seen as a positive and your departure from your first firm is reflected in the best possible light. Try to speak to a recruiter before you give notice or, even better, before you have a rigid time frame. The recruiter can give you market information regarding the potential time frame in that market to find what you want. This can vary tremendously. Optimally you will not give notice until you have a new position lined up. In tight markets, there may come a time when you simply have to join your fiancé/husband and leave without having a new position. Be very sure you understand how this will affect your search before you give notice. It can be handled, but it can be a significant negative to many law firms to consider hiring someone who is currently unemployed.

As you consider moving to a new firm, it is a wonderful time to reexamine your values and what you want professionally. After working for a year at a big firm, most associates have a much better idea of what they want and need to develop their careers. Pause before you go immediately for prestige and paycheck, and make sure the firm lifestyle supports your career goals.

It may also be time to rethink your professional goals in light of your married status. Will you have additional time responsibilities at home related to what you and your spouse plan for the near future? Will the choice of neighborhoods to support your goals as a couple have an impact on what you are willing to do in terms of a commute? Will supporting your financial goals as a couple mandate a certain level of compensation, or will your marriage allow more freedom in that respect?

How to Survive and Thrive during an Unplanned Relocation to Join a Future Spouse

An unexpected career transition related to a committed relationship need not be a professional negative. Communicate with your spouse-to-be so that everyone's values and goals are acknowledged in formulating the plan. Approach the firm you are leaving with honesty, humility, and flexibility. Use your legal search consultant to help you form a search strategy in your new location that recognizes your evolving career goals, the realities of the market you are entering, and the need to make a graceful exit from your old firm.

We help people make these career moves successfully all the time. And congratulations!

PAGE: 3