



ATTORNEY SEARCH

by Stephen Seckler

Unplanned Problems when Changing jobs

Unless you are part of a shrinking minority of lawyers who spend their careers at one firm, chances are you'll be changing jobs several times during your working life.

Perhaps you will be following a partner you like. Or maybe you will switch firms so that you can get more exposure to a particular type of work or client.

Maybe you will be seeking better hours, or perhaps you will want more responsibility or training.

Whatever the reason for a move, it will be up to you to make sure you get what you bargained for once you make the switch.

An Ounce Of Prevention

It is important to ask the right questions before accepting a job offer. This is the best way to ensure that you are making the right move.

Ask associates and partners for facts rather than conclusions, but save the heavy-duty "what's in it for me?" questions until after the offer has been extended (e.g., don't bring up compensation issues at the first interview).

If you want a job with better hours, don't accept statements liked "the hours are not too bad here." Ask attorneys what time they leave the office on a typical day. Ask them how many weekends they worked in the past six months.

If you're curious about compensation and want to know what to expect in terms of salary increases, ask what the salary increases have been for the past three years. Don't assume that your new employer will follow any industry norms.

Also, try to meet all the key people you will be working with before you accept.

Another way to protect yourself prior to starting a new job is to get the offer in writing. Do not be afraid that this will be perceived as too pushy -- it is an indication of your seriousness.

Be sure that the offer outlines any special terms or conditions that you deem important to accepting the job. For

example, if you expect to do corporate work for the firm's technology clients, then this should somehow be put in writing. If you expect to work with a particular partner, again it may be worthwhile to memorialize this.

Anything that does not appear in the written offer can be referenced in a written acceptance letter that you send back to the firm. The point is that putting things in writing will help to avoid misunderstandings in the future. (As a lawyer, that is exactly what you do for your clients so why not do it for yourself?)

What Next?

Assuming that you did take the necessary precautions prior to your move (and even if you did not), realize that things are never quite the way you expect them to be when you take a new job.

This is not to say that employers lie during the hiring process; rather, it is very difficult to know what the "chemistry" will be like until you are actually there.

In addition, change is constant in most firms, so even something that is promised today may not be feasible tomorrow. After your arrival, the firm could lose a big client, the partner you want to work with could leave or the firm you left behind could make a bold salary increase that your new employer cannot match.

As a new employee, you should be very conscious of making the "right" first impression on your co-workers. Therefore, the first thing you should do if something is not what you expected is to do a great job on your first assignments.

In other words, the first few months at a new job are not a good time to be a "squeaky wheel." You want to build some credibility with your new colleagues before you call in your chips. Even if the hours are different than promised, demonstrate that you are a team player and will do what needs to get done.

You should also remember that it takes time to feel comfortable in a new work environment. Try not to pass judgment right away. Get to know the firm or company before reaching any conclusions.

But do not let your bad feelings fester over a long period of time. After two or three months, if things are not going as you had hoped, you should request a meeting with your supervisor and address your concerns. If you do nothing over a long period of time, you are acquiescing to the status quo.

Do not assume that senior attorneys are even aware of your feelings. Lawyers are pretty busy these days and management and communication with subordinates is not always a great strength of lawyers.

Try not to sound accusatory. Present your concerns in a factual way (rather than in an emotional way) and ask the supervisor to suggest solutions to the problem.

Also, try to start the discussion on a positive note. A sample dialogue might go something like this:

"John, there are a few things I wanted to go over with you. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure."

"I want you to know that I have really enjoyed getting to know the corporate associates here. It's a great group."

"I'm glad to hear that Sarah. I've been hearing great things about you as well. People have been impressed with your work ethic and creativity."

"I do have one concern though. When I decided to leave Johnson & Johnson, it was because I was hoping to get involved in your technology practice."

"Hasn't that happened?"

"To tell you the truth John, since I arrived here two months ago, I have not worked on a single matter involving a technology client."

"Really? I'm surprised. There is no shortage of tech work around here."

"What can we do about this? I feel kind of bad raising this issue so soon after starting."

"You don't need to feel sorry, Sarah. You have every right to be concerned. Well, I'll make sure to speak with the assignment attorney right now and see that we get some of your work reassigned."

"Thanks."

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Moving For Better Hours

If the reason for your move was to work fewer hours, then establish the pattern of leaving at a reasonable time as soon as you can. In the first few weeks, you might need to put in more time until you get up to speed. But don't be afraid to take what you bargained for (i.e., more reasonable work demands in exchange for lower pay).

It is not always easy to make this shift when you are used to burning the midnight oil with the rest of the crew. But you will have no one to blame but yourself if you allow yourself to earn less and work just as hard.

Finally, do try to be somewhat flexible. A company or firm hires employees to get work done, not to make sure that you have a fulfilling career.

In the midst of major changes in the economy, the needs of the firm may change as well. While you should not give up on fundamental conditions of employment that were key in your decision to move, if you insist that everything be precisely as it was represented to you when you were doing your due diligence, you are likely to be disappointed and frustrated wherever you work.

Just keep in mind that if your skills are marketable, you can always make another move if it becomes clear that the job will never live up to your expectations. In the new economy, staying where you are is not necessarily the best way to advance your career.