



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Jamie Bailey

Tips for First-Time Job Seekers

This year I joined the legions of die-hard Cubs fans at Wrigley Field to attend the playoff game against the Arizona D-backs. The last time I attended a Cubs playoff game was the 2003 playoff game against the Florida Marlins—the infamous Bartman game.

Watching the Cubs is like being on an emotional roller coaster. Who could have guessed that the D-backs would hit a home run on the first pitch of the game or that during the fifth inning the Cubs would come back to load the bases and the inning would end on a double play?

What could be perceived as a lack of execution and enthusiasm, blunders, and overall malaise on the part of the Cubs was astonishing. And the corresponding extreme shift in human emotion and support among people who were just a few minutes prior the most loyal Cubs fans confirmed that my emotions mirrored those of the people around me. One minute the man sitting behind me was expounding on how he knew we were headed for that “blessed World Series trophy,” and the next minute he was raising his fifth beer to the heavens, proclaiming, “Parents, take your children home to bed. They should not have to witness this terrible abyss we are about to enter.”

Making a job transition can be remarkably similar to the playoffs—unpredictable, somewhat out of your control, and emotionally draining. However, there are numerous factors in the job-transition process over which you do have control and which, if mastered, can bring about ultimate success. If you are an associate evaluating whether to leave your current firm for the first time, this article will alert you to the basic stages of making a transition to a new law firm and strategies for a successful transition.

Making the Decision to Leave

Perhaps the most difficult stage in the job-transition process is actually making the decision to leave and getting to the point where you fully commit to the process. Is this the right time in your career to make a move? You’re well liked and getting good work, but this firm is not the right place for your long-term career and will not take your career to the next level. Would you be hurting yourself in making this move? Is the grass going to be greener at the new firm? Will you be able to solve the problems you have with your current firm by moving to a new firm?

These are common struggles associates face as they contemplate leaving their current firms. Identifying the pros and cons of whether to stay or leave is a better choice than starting the process and wasting your time—and everyone else’s. There are a few strategies you can implement to help you make the right decision:

Tips for First-Time Job Seekers

- **Speak with people you can trust who have gone through the process.** Ask them how the process works, what to expect, and who and what resources can help you get to where you want to go (e.g., other attorneys with whom you can speak in confidence, research tools, career coaches, recruiters, publications, etc.). Taking the time to gather information before you make a move is very important.
- **Define your objectives and identify target firms that meet those objectives.** In order to fix what is missing in your current practice, it is extremely important that you distill what you are looking for in a new firm and define your objectives. These objectives should ultimately be used to identify target firms and drive the search process.
- **Leave at the right time and for the right reasons.** In describing his thought process regarding leaving his current firm, one candidate told me he had put in an extraordinary year, billing more than 2,500 hours, and was so upset after he got a bonus that was not reflective of the time and effort he put in that he decided to leave his firm. However, after giving it further thought, he decided that making such a life-changing decision while he was mad was not a good idea. He gave himself a few days to settle down and reflect on, assess, and think through his decision to leave. He also took steps to make discreet inquiries of the partners with whom he worked as to what the thought process was behind the bonus. The answers he received were not what he expected at all but confirmed the partners in no way believed the bonus reflected his abilities; the bonus was more reflective of the firm's overall approach to the practice. In fact, the answers gave him an accurate picture of the condition of his practice group and of the firm's overall goals for the growth of the practice. They ultimately led him to conclude that the group's and the firm's approach to the practice of law and future growth was not as aggressive and progressive as he wanted for his long-term legal career. He was able to make a well-informed decision based on good information, not negative emotion. Once he made the decision to move, his immediate concern was that he wanted to transition to a larger market but was not sure whether it was a realistic plan.
- **Evaluate moving from a submarket to a larger market.** Your credentials are great, but you are not practicing at an Am Law 100 firm and are not currently in a major legal market. Although you graduated magna cum laude, you received your J.D. from a Top 50 law school, not a Top 25 law school. You are probably asking yourself, "Will I get to interview with firms that satisfy my career goals? Are the firms going to take me seriously? Do I have a real chance, or is applying to firms in a larger legal market going to be a waste of my time?" Transitioning from a submarket to a major market is certainly doable. In fact, I often find that candidates moving from large firms in submarkets have opportunities to work on more diverse ranges of matters and gain higher levels of responsibility on matters to which they have been assigned. Get feedback from your recruiter or others who have made similar moves. Scrutinize your resume and other application materials and make your primary goal marketing the skills that you do have.
- **Evaluate moving from a larger market to a submarket.** In situations where candidates are moving from larger markets to submarkets, I often find that they have not focused on the changes that might take place in terms of the sophistication of their practice, cost of living, and compensation. These factors can become even bigger issues for candidates who are moving their families from one geographic location to another. Researching and investigating these issues before starting the process will allow you to make better decisions and avoid getting halfway through the process before realizing it's not going to work for you or your family.

Preparing Your Application Package and Identifying Target Firms

- **Preparing your package:** I often receive resumes, writing samples, and other documents from attorneys which do not reflect the standard of work product they would produce for their clients. Although they would never put out a substandard product for a client or partner with whom they work, when it comes to producing a document for themselves that will have a serious impact on their career, they don't invest the same time or effort. In order to make a successful transition to another law firm, it is absolutely imperative that you pay attention to the details—and the details include putting together the best possible application package:

- **Resume:** Resumes can be so difficult to compose, but your resume must reflect every aspect of the skills and experience you bring to the table and must be a detailed analysis of your career. Once you have a draft in hand, have a professional review it and suggest revisions.
- **Representative transactions list or representative case list:** These supplemental attachments to a resume can be prepared by associates who are at the mid-to-senior level and are less appropriate for junior associates who may not have enough experience yet to summarize on a representative list. They can serve as excellent marketing pieces, and the process of compiling them can be very beneficial, as it forces the associate to recall the specific nature of the transactions or cases on which he or she worked, his or her specific responsibilities, and the outcomes. They also are great documents to use as refreshers for interviews and to refer to during the interviewing process.
- **Writing sample:** Writing samples are often requested from litigators. They are generally 10 to 15 pages long but can be longer. They should be fully redacted where necessary and should contain no typographical errors.
- **Transcript:** Most law firms require that you submit an official law school transcript as part of their due diligence process, and you will slow the process down by not providing one with your initial application package. (If you are an IP attorney with a technical degree, law firms will typically also want to see your undergraduate transcript.)
- **References:** Begin thinking about whose names you can provide as references, from both your current employer and prior employers, and compiling their contact information. Employers usually request three references from a candidate's current employer and/or past employers. If you are providing names of references who are not at your current employer and you are able to alert them in confidence that you are embarking on a job search, do it so that they can be prepared should they receive a call.
- **Reviews:** Be ready to provide copies of your written reviews if requested, or at least be able to articulate the comments you have received from partners regarding your work.
- **Identifying target firms:** As stated previously, once you have identified your objectives, or those things you would like to see in a new firm, you should seek out firms that will meet those objectives. If you are working with a recruiter, he or she should listen carefully to your objectives, identify firms that coincide with your career objectives, and provide you additional information regarding firms that will be helpful to you during the interviewing process.

Interview Preparation

- **Anticipate what's ahead.** Anticipating what will happen next during the interviewing process is the easiest way to stay one step ahead of the process. Interviewing requires you to put in double time to get through the process, maintaining your practice while preparing for the interviews so that you can put your best foot forward. Interview preparation is very similar to practicing law because you are making a persuasive argument—but you're making it for yourself. This can be very difficult for some because they are not accustomed to or comfortable with talking about themselves. The keys are coming up with the right approach and finding a healthy balance between selling and offering proof that will not alienate the people with whom you meet.
- **Prepare, prepare, prepare.** Too many candidates who have not taken interviewing seriously and have chosen not to take the time to prepare via a mock interview live to regret the inevitable outcome: not getting the offer. Going through interview preparation prepares your mind regarding how to structure and approach answers in an interview. You must listen to your answers from the perspective of an interviewer. Are you using negative words? Based on your answers to questions, would you want to hire you? Anticipating the questions you will receive and running through a mock interview that forces you to answer questions exactly as you would in an interview (with detailed examples) is the best way to prepare

yourself to handle interviews effectively. You should also debrief with someone else (e.g., a fellow attorney, a friend, your recruiter) after your first interview and go over questions that were difficult. How could you have answered them better? You must be prepared to answer the obvious questions that will arise regarding your resume and background and anticipate questions you may encounter; speak in detail about deals or cases on which you have worked, and have good questions for the interviewers.

- **Develop stamina and manage the process efficiently.** “Yikes! Am I really going to interview with 14 people in one day?!” This was a reasonable response from a candidate I recently sent to meet with two firms in one day, but developing stamina is essential to getting through the interviewing process successfully. By treating each interviewer as if he or she is the first person you are meeting at the firm, you can maximize your time and minimize mistakes. Look at long interview days as opportunities to get all the information you need from the attorneys with whom you are meeting.
- **Know yourself and your limitations.** If you interview better in the morning, try to schedule your interviews accordingly. If you don't think meeting with two firms in one day will work for you, then try to spread interviews out. Look at your interviews as ways of maximizing your time while away and making the process seamless.
- **Maintain a positive outlook and remember that firms move at their own pace.** The interview process can start and stop and sometimes lose momentum, but this doesn't mean there is no interest on the part of the firm. Many candidates lose sight of the fact that committee meetings, internal approvals, partners out of town, workload in the department, and even the time of year can affect the interviewing process. (The fall recruiting period, holidays, the end of the year, the first quarter, and summer are particularly difficult times to get firms' attention because attorneys' energies are focused elsewhere.) These delays may have nothing to do with whether or not a firm is interested in bringing you back for interviews or extending an offer. In addition, meeting with a lot of attorneys and being called back several times should not be taken as a negative sign. It can often mean the firm likes you, is recruiting you aggressively, and believes the more people you meet, the more you will come to know and like the firm. And remember: the first interview is always the hardest, and you generally improve through practice—it only gets better from there!

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Receiving and Accepting an Offer

Receiving an offer can be very exciting but can make some candidates feel as though the process has just gotten more intense. This may be because getting an offer forces the candidate to sit down and take account of what he or she really wants. (As indicated earlier, defining your objectives early on will prevent a high level of anxiety at this stage.) A candidate who is fortunate enough to receive multiple interviews may be faced with receiving an offer before he or she has finished out the process with other firms.

Candidates should try to resist the temptation to take an offer just to be done with the process. Unless you are confident that the firm from which you have received an offer is the ideal fit for you based on your objectives, you would be better served finishing out the process with the remaining firms, gathering more information, and making a well-informed decision.

References, Conflicts, and Resigning

Making sure you perform at the top of your game during your employment at your current firm will make your resignation much easier. If you've delivered, it is likely partners will be gracious and wish you well and that you will be able to provide excellent references to a prospective firm.

Prior to resigning, you will need to provide the firm from which you have accepted an offer a conflicts form so they can clear any potential client conflicts. Since most offers extended by law firms are now contingent on clearing references and conflicts checks, you should not resign before these two matters have been addressed. If you're worried about a partner getting upset when you resign, try not to worry; partners are usually very professional and understand the importance of not burning bridges and maintaining relationships in the marketplace.

Making a job transition can be unpredictable, but if you can master some of the essentials, you should be able to successfully navigate the process—and avoid the fate of Cubs fans for the past 99 years!