

How Attorneys Can Ensure Their Lateral Move to a New Law Firm is a Success

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

You have spent many hours planning your job search with your recruiter, picking the right firms, and researching them with every spare moment. You have interviewed like crazy for months, while staying up late at night trying to hold down your current job. But it's all been worth it: You finally got the perfect job offer at the firm of your dreams. Congratulations, time to take a deep breath, relax, and enjoy the new change in your career. But don't get too comfortable, you still have a lot of important challenges ahead of you if you are going to make this new job a success.

Choosing the perfect opportunity is important. However, that is simply not the end of the equation. The fact that you are now with a firm that suits your **career goals** and personality will not, in and of itself, support the type of professional situation you want over time. After making the decision to take a new position, your focus should be on how you can ensure that the change is everything you want it to be.

Why is this important? As recruiters and as lawyers, we have encountered many attorneys with excellent records-except that their resumes reflect 2, 3, or 4 job changes. We can tell you that making a significant number of moves from firm to firm, in and of itself, will often prevent an attorney from getting to interview with certain firms. Why? Because some firms want loyalty and long-term dedication. Often, the law firms with whom we work are hiring associates they suspect will become lifetime partners in the firm. Therefore, the likelihood that you will leave one position for another could become a major hurdle in finding a job. It is for this reason that upon a move to a **new firm**, lawyers should do everything they can to make it work with that firm. BCG strongly encourages lawyers to avoid the mentality that "if this doesn't work, I'll find something else."

And what better opportunity to make a relationship with a firm work than from day one on the job. You have enthusiasm and a clean slate on your side. The possibilities at the new job are unlimited; you have been given a new chance to reshape yourself and your career. Make the most of it by preparing yourself to adapt and succeed at the new firm.

Learn From Your Mistakes

Maybe there are things you could have done at your old job to make your time there more successful and fulfilling. Before you start the next job, take the time to reflect on the mistakes you made in your old job and the things you could have done to better your performance. Take a hard look at any bad habits you might have developed, and make it your personal goal to change them. This is a perfect opportunity to retool your work habits.

To that end, you may want to take the time to sit down with more senior lawyers at your old firm and ask them candid questions about your job performance and how you might improve. Many firms are reticent to give young lawyers detailed evaluations of their performances during the course of their time at the firm because the firm does not want to risk alienating the associates. Now that you are going, those lawyers who worked closely with you may be more willing to give you more specific feedback on how you could improve yourself as a lawyer. If you are really committed to making the most of your new job, early on, you should focus substantial energy on strengthening your weak points.

Manage Your Expectations

You have improved your situation with your lateral move. However, that does not mean that your job will be perfect all of the time. Work is still work, and preparing yourself to handle difficult situations is still important. [You've been promised a position in the employment litigation section, for instance, but spent three weeks doing document review on a securities case.](#) Remember that in addition to your goals, you are still a part of an overall team. Your participation and enthusiasm for projects you may not have expected will be appreciated and rewarded in the long run.

Know Your Environment

We encourage [lateral associates to be proactive in jumping into their new professional communities](#). While most law firms are good at recruiting and training associates, many fall short at integrating laterals after they come aboard. Remember that you are jumping aboard "midstream," so it will be difficult for any one partner to put the brakes on to painstakingly mentor you through the process. Do not expect your firm to provide you with a list of "dos" and "don'ts" on day one; you may have to learn the unwritten rules yourself-and the quicker, the better.

Early on, spend time learning about the firm's people, its culture, political system, and history. You should take the lead and introduce yourself to the lawyers and staff at your new firm. Be nice to everyone, lawyers and staff alike. Although you may have been nice to the important partner, you could quickly alienate him/her if you are not polite to his/her favorite secretary or staff person.

Take it upon yourself to learn what the lawyers do, and show them how you can help their practice. Study the personal backgrounds of the firm's leaders, particularly in your practice area. Find out where the alliances and conflicts may lie between the partners and how the pecking order works. Figure out which associates are the most successful and what they have done to achieve that success. Fellow lawyers may be the most useful resource you have in getting the inside scoop on the firm and its lawyers.

Good First Impressions

The first several months at a new firm are critical. You need to show the lawyers that you do good work, are a team player, and are an enjoyable person to be around. Try to make yourself feel at home in your new firm as quickly as you can. Although your first reaction may be to devote all your energies to producing good work product, you must allow time for socializing. Indeed, you should attend social functions of any kind, such as receptions, parties, group meetings, training seminars, and recruiting lunches. Any of these events can afford you good opportunities for one-on-one conversations with other lawyers. Make sure to listen attentively and ask questions that show your interest and enthusiasm.

After you meet a lawyer, keep track of that contact and follow up later with a visit or phone call. This will fix in that lawyer's mind that you are part of the firm and that you are interested in working with him/her. These encounters provide you with a good forum to build relationships to support your growth in the firm. Some of these lawyers will even give you work assignments.

If there are not many social occasions, do not be afraid to make some. Ask junior members of your work group out to lunch or coffee. Getting to know them can be instrumental in understanding the more senior lawyers and the political makeup of the firm as a whole. Just like anything in life, be careful about the motivations of some lawyers you befriend. Some associates may just want to complain about the conditions of the firm. You should avoid the complainers because they may give you an unfairly negative view of the firm and prevent you from exploring it with an open mind. Plus, you also do not want to align yourself with people known to be complainers or malcontents.

When more senior lawyers or firm staff people ask for volunteers, volunteer yourself. Your involvement in recruiting or firm-management committees is a great way to meet other lawyers and shows your commitment to the success of the organization. If your firm has a strong cultural commitment to a particular charity or *pro bono* activity, you should try to get involved with that. Another great way to get exposure to the lawyers you work with is to help plan or make a presentation to your practice group. Many practice groups have regular meetings at which one or more of their lawyers speak to the group on a topic of mutual interest. These are good opportunities to demonstrate your legal acumen before many or all of your peers.

The Important Part

Perhaps the single most important aspect of your first few months at the firm will be the working relationships you form. You will want to try to build close relationships with the partners and senior associates, who will ultimately play the largest roles in shaping your career at the firm.

For the most part, senior lawyers are most likely to choose junior lawyers with whom they are comfortable. Because you do not have a history with these lawyers, you will need to exceed expectations in your early contacts with them. Make sure you create an impression that you do good work and add value to each project. Pay close attention to details, and be available to work on projects at all times. Make sure to regularly report back to more senior lawyers. Being very organized will help you do better work and will make senior lawyers more likely to rely on you for more important projects.

Realize before you start that there is not one right way to do things. Your new firm will likely do certain things differently than your old one, just as certain partners within any firm have varied legal styles and preferences. Do not be set in your ways; go into the new job with your mind set on tailoring your own way of practicing to fit the firm. If you keep an open mind, you might even learn there is a better way to do things. And if you think the new firm does not quite do things the right way, be careful not to rock the boat too hard too early. Try it the usual way in the early stages, or kindly suggest your alternative, and see how those above you respond.

Be aware of the impression you leave on clients, as well. There is no easier way to get yourself in hot water than to upset a key client. Particular clients have particular needs. Do not be shy to ask questions of more senior lawyers about these needs, as they may forget that you are new and do not know the "rules" for that client. Some clients are cost-conscious, while some are not happy unless they know that every stone has been turned over. Some clients will have a set format for how they like their **legal work** to be done.

Troubleshooting

At some point, you may find that despite all your best efforts, your entre to your new firm is not going quite as well as expected. You should be prepared to adjust your strategy in response to changes in the firm or changes in your department. Conversations with senior lawyers may help you understand where the firm is going and which partners may be best able to provide you with the work you want. You may want to shift your marketing efforts to other lawyers. If the department you are in is having trouble, be open to taking assignments from other departments. But most important, be prepared to adjust your expectations by taking assignments that are not so interesting or desirable. You may find that these experiences not only give you the appearance of a team player, but they also expose you to new legal concepts that will make you a more rounded lawyer.

As time goes on, you will find that you are getting more significant assignments, that senior lawyers increasingly rely on you, and that junior lawyers are coming to you with questions. Congratulations, you have arrived. But do not let the success get the best of you. The difference between lawyers who enjoy long-term

success and those who do not is the successful lawyer's ability to keep growing and developing. Do not ease up on the standards you have set for yourself; success in the law is as much about maintaining a constant learning process as it is about hard work. If you keep building your relationships with lawyers in your firm and with clients, you will continue to succeed.

Entering your new job with your eyes and mind open is the perfect complement to your lateral move and will help ensure that your first big-law firm move is your last. BCG is excited to help contribute to that continued success.