

50+ Successful Solo Practitioner Wants to Join Law Firm

Question:

I am a 53-year-old corporate lawyer who graduated from a top law school and has over 25 years of experience as a sole practitioner. I have handled large clients and very sophisticated deals. I am tired of the administrative responsibility of running my own shop, but I'm not ready to retire. I've talked to a number of recruiters, but none are willing to represent me to a firm. I'm not ready to be "put out to pasture," and I consider this age discrimination. What should I do?

Answer:

Unfortunately, I have had this discussion with a number of very frustrated attorneys over the years. While it may seem like recruiters are discriminating against you because of your age, that really has nothing to do with why they express concern over placing you in a firm.

For the recruiter, part of developing a strong relationship with a firm is having an understanding of the type of candidate the firm wants to see. Our job is to save them time and to present candidates who are exactly on point with their needs. Most firms give us guidelines to follow and ask us to stick to them; otherwise, we would not be providing them with a service.

That being said, I have never had a firm tell me not to present a candidate who is over a certain age. In fact, I have witnessed a number of attorneys who are very close to retirement transition successfully to law firms. I have also seen a number of attorneys well into their thirties or forties graduate from law school as a second career and land law firm positions. Age is not necessarily the issue for senior attorneys trying to transition into a firm. However, here are some legitimate hurdles that they may face:

[SEARCH CORPORATE JOBS ON BCG ATTORNEY SEARCH](#)

Lack of business.

Unless there is that rare opportunity where a firm has more business that it can handle and just needs someone to come in and hit the ground running, a firm almost always requires senior attorneys to bring a book of business with them. While the threshold varies, incoming attorneys should at least bring enough work to support themselves.

Firms fear the candidate will not be happy and will not be a good long-term prospect.

As you probably know, firms don't actually start to make a profit off of an attorney until a few years down the road. In an effort not to suffer a loss, then, firms hire candidates that they feel confident will be with them for the long haul. It is risky to bring in someone who has never worked in the given environment and does not know if they will be happy.

Firms do not know how to bill out a senior attorney in a lower class level. "Higher quality at a lower cost" doesn't seem to work.

Many senior attorneys are willing to take a hit in class level or title in an effort to make the transition. It would make sense that the firms would jump at the opportunity to hire an experienced lawyer without having to pay him or her for that experience. Again, though, firms fear that while this idea may seem great at the outset, ultimately the attorney will not be happy with the work and leave.

Concerns that other associates in the group will feel threatened.

Many senior attorneys are willing to come in at a senior associate or counsel level, just to get a foot in the door. However, firms have to keep their other associates happy, and often, those associates will feel threatened by an attorney who comes in at their level with significantly more experience. Naturally, they fear that the work will shift disproportionately and that they may not make their billables, which in turn threatens their future at the firm.

Firms are skeptical of senior attorneys willing to take a lower position.

All firms have been burned by bad hires in the past and so often think that if it seems too good to be true, it probably is! Firms are skeptical of senior attorneys who all of a sudden have a change of heart and offer to take a significant pay hit to do it. It's terribly pessimistic, but unfortunately, it's a chance that firms are often not willing to take.

[**Click Here to Read BCG Attorney Search's Guide to Corporate and Finance Job Search Categories for More Information.**](#)

While the reasons listed above may frustrate you more than the process itself, keep in mind that these are only hurdles. The hurdles can make your job search more difficult, but not impossible. There will be that firm that recognizes the value of your expertise and years of experience, but it may take a little time to find it. However, if the doors don't open all at once, it may be your experience level that is part of the problem, not your age.

[**Click Here to Let Us Answer Your Legal Career Question**](#)