

How Long Does it Take to Make a Lateral Move?

Question:

What is going on with law firm hiring these days? Several of my friends have made lateral moves in the past couple of years and had multiple offers. My credentials and experience are as good or better. I have not been laid off, and I am a strong candidate. But I am not getting many interviews, and one firm I did meet with over a month ago says I am "under consideration" but has not made a decision. It has been weeks since I interviewed. What am I supposed to think? - Jim

Answer:

A majority of candidates have experienced the same phenomenon this year at some point in their process. To answer your question, it's a lot of things. Since the beginning of the year, the response rate of our law firm clients has slowed markedly.

Law firm hiring isn't a quick process in general. A relatively smooth search can take several months. Once a candidate has interviewed with an employer and there is mutual interest, it can often be four to six weeks before an offer is formally extended. [That is only if the planets align and the firm has an efficient hiring process.](#)

There are conflicts to clear and references to check. Depending on the size of the firm, an independent hiring committee may need to meet and approve the offer. Usually meetings are called when there are several candidates for various openings that are being recommended for offers. If you happen to be the first candidate that is put before the recruiting committee, sometimes the decision on your candidacy can get held up temporarily.

The previous paragraph describes my experience during the years I spent as a firm recruiting manager and during the boom market of the past four years that I have spent on this side of the industry. Unfortunately, to paraphrase from The Wizard of Oz, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

[A handful of candidates have been blessed by recruiting serendipity and have had fast-track hiring experiences. Far more attorneys who have entered the market since the beginning of the year are dealing with prolonged searches.](#) Most candidates have had their process stall or get stuck at some point. There have been fewer invitations to interview with greater gaps between rounds. It has taken longer for offers to be extended and finalized.

This is trying for the candidate and for the recruiter. A candidate who has done everything necessary, has been presented well, and is a good fit for a firm may hear little or nothing in response. The firms do not want to say "no" yet, but they aren't ready to say "yes" or set up an interview. So you hear nothing - except for the deafening roar of silence.

I've borne witness to the fact that during the best of times, law firm hiring has some disturbing similarities to sausage making. The end result may be good, but the less time one spends analyzing the ingredients, the better. We are all adjusting to finding out we are in a new land. Lateral hiring has even more variables impacting the timing and outcome for candidates. So contrary to advising you not to look too closely, now is the time when having more information may be useful. Here is a peek behind the gates:

The burden on practice group leaders to prove the necessity of every lateral hire has increased tenfold. Most firms appear to be stable financially and to have had a profitable year in 2007, but it only makes sense for

firms to respond to the best of their ability to the changes in the economy. That has caused them to be particularly careful in their recruiting, to trim fat from all of their budgets, and to look with great scrutiny at each hire being requested. There are more laterals in the market due to layoffs in several practice areas, and there is more pressure than ever on partners to originate work, with firms letting go or demoting partners that are not able to make rain.

It is easy to demonize the firms as some sort of evil entity. Yet having seen firsthand the inner workings of law firms, I do not envy the partners and administrators tasked with sustaining the success of the firms. It is their job to be sure there is adequate revenue to compete with other firms and to cover the payroll and benefits of everyone from the housekeeping staff to the chair of the firm. As painful as it is to be among the ranks of those looking for work, there is little doubt that angst has been felt by those making the tough calls.

Each component in staffing and hiring is interdependent and has bearing on the others. Changes in NALP guidelines and on-campus hiring schedules are presenting some difficulty for firms in assessing how many attorneys should be recruited for the coming year. The integration of the entering associate class can temper lateral hiring. Firms routinely try to shift work this time of year so that there are appropriate assignments for first-year associates and to allow existing mid-levels to pick up more complicated assignments, thus reducing the rush to hire laterals. All of these factors could be playing a role in your search.

It isn't easy to be a candidate playing the waiting game. Your level of tenacity needs to be high. We are looking ahead and cautiously optimistic that as things sort out this fall, there will be an uptick in the momentum of lateral hiring. Keep reminding yourself not to take it personally. It isn't you. It's just a sign of the times.

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