

When Is the Right Time to Make a Lateral Move?

Question:

I am a third-year associate with a large law firm. I like what I do here, and I see no reason to move to another firm. Recruiters have begun calling me more and more since I became a third-year. They say this is the best time for a move to another firm because my experience level is in the greatest demand and that I shouldn't wait until I am too "senior" to make a move. Do I stand a better chance for making partner at another firm, as some of the recruiters seem to think? Things are going well here. Besides, how many associates ultimately make it all the way through the ranks to partnership at any big firm? Each year I see associates go up for partnership that have been here for years and not make it - some of them highly respected. Why would moving give me better odds? It all seems so random.

Answer:

That is a terrific question. There are several factors to take into account when viewing an attorney's career in the big picture sense. Prior to becoming an attorney search consultant, I was the manager in a recruiting office for a national law firm. Lateral attorney hiring was an integral part of my responsibilities.

Looking back at the careers of attorneys we hired laterally versus the attorneys we "home grew" - from summer associates or hired right [out of law](#) school - I have observed with interest the fact that the laterals who were hired for a specific practice area frequently made partner at a rate that was noticeably higher than that at which the "lifers" (attorneys who came to us young and stayed all the way through to partnership consideration) did.

This trend has held true with the attorneys I have placed laterally into other firms in recent years. It is harder to see from inside of a firm, but if we watch the careers of attorneys from law school graduation to the partner level, without question attorneys who make one or two well-timed lateral moves over the courses of their careers frequently attain impressive levels of success.

That is not to say there are not exceptions. Some attorneys who spend their careers with a single firm are quite successful. But more often, those who make a few educated and well-thought-out moves during the courses of their careers fare better. The explanation is simple: it is through change and transition that human beings develop their potential. The distinction is between being comfortable and stretching. And it is when we stretch that the steps can become leaps in development.

This is not because the grass is always greener somewhere else; it is because along the path to success we evolve in various ways. Staying in one place for an entire career can result in satisfaction and accomplishments. It is gratifying to build lasting relationships and to be one of the few within a [firm culture](#) that stayed at the first firm they were hired by and built their careers. And this is the way it used to be in law firms for a long time - if you stayed with a firm and did quality work, your prospects for partnership were pretty good. But the nature of the profession has shifted.

Remaining with one firm and gradually assuming responsibility no longer is an assurance that there will be room at the partnership table when the time comes. It can be a very healthy choice to "start over" at a new stage in your career on a different playing field. Here's why:

An attorney beginning his or her career with a firm directly from law school or a clerkship is building the foundation that will determine his or her future with that firm, but many attorneys do not realize it at the time. Each relationship he or she develops and the role he or she ultimately fits into within a practice group

becomes part of his or her history within that firm. Initially, perhaps, the attorney manages to project confidence on the outside, but let's be honest: even the brightest person feels intimidated and uncertain when he or she is the new kid on the block and everyone else seems to have far more experience.

There is a steep learning curve at the beginning of a legal career. In any field we learn as we gain experience, whether it is in terms of tangible professional skills or interpersonal relationships and social skills. Attorneys, like everyone, gain wisdom and knowledge that is accrued over time. Much of that comes through trial (pardon the pun) and error. It is important to periodically evaluate who we are and where we want to go.

As an associate's career goes on, the rate of development slows down and begins to level off. Working relationships and the dynamics of interactions solidify. Perceptions are formed that can be hard to shake, and shifting gears can get difficult. A huge part of development is continuing to learn by seeing things from various perspectives. It is enriching to be exposed to a broader array of legal approaches and philosophies. How much would any of us have learned if he or she had the same teacher or handful of teachers for the entirety of his or her education?

Walking through the door to a new venture can be the best place to show all that you have learned and to find out some things you don't. It can be energizing, exciting, and a great launching pad that invigorates a career. As a lateral associate you know more about legal practice, and you know what kinds of relationships you want to have with your peers and supervisors - and what makes or breaks them.

Your new colleagues see you in a different way than your old colleagues did. No one remembers you as the nervous new kid - the one you were on your first day of your career "after JD." You have cultivated valuable skills that were needed by a particular practice group and are now better able to navigate and respond to the many personalities that are found in law firms.

It is gratifying professionally to be in a position where your skills were sought out and are therefore greatly appreciated. And you have learned from that tough partner in your last firm the value of thorough research and remaining calm while articulating your conclusions. That tough partner will probably turn out to be one of your greatest teachers - because he or she taught you to know your stuff before talking about it and to stand your ground because you are sure of the work you did.

For many associates (and partners) a new beginning is the turning point when a good career becomes a great career, and they really take off.

Leaving a firm where you started out can be bittersweet. It is like leaving home and venturing out into the world on your own. It is through these rites of passage that we can sometimes be propelled forward more rapidly and can more fully realize our goals. Thank you for the excellent question, and much success to you in your legal career.

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