

Biglaw Associate Thinking of Changing Practice Areas

Question:

I am a second year BigLaw associate. I am not sure that I have chosen the correct practice area and think that I might like to switch practice areas. What should I do?

Answer:

When you graduate and join a large firm, firms generally hire you for a specific practice area (e.g., litigation or corporate). There is a business need that justifies placing you in a particular group, and the firm is expecting that you will be able to help service specific clients in that particular group.

Practice groups within a firm often operate like separate and independent firms, and many have little or no cross-pollination among practice groups. Many junior associates have the misconception that, because a firm has numerous practice groups, they have the ability to freely switch between practice groups because they all work for the same firm. It is important to keep in mind that the firm is a business and a firm views its associates as investments. For each junior associate, a great amount of money is invested by the practice group - through both recruiting and training - and it takes a good deal of time before the firm reaps financial gains from this investment. Certainly the best time to experiment with practice areas is as a summer associate when the firm has invested less money in training you. There is more at stake (because the firm has continued its investment in your career) when you are an associate.

To make a practice switch either within your current firm or to another firm, you will need to demonstrate that this is a well-thought out decision and the new group will need to have a business need for an additional associate. In an interview, to demonstrate a well-thought out decision, you'll need to explain with clarity:

- Why you want to move to a new practice area.
- What you know about the new practice area.
- Why you will like this new practice area.

To be able to answer these questions definitively and convincingly, consider the following approaches:

1. Focus on the potential to move, gain transferable skills in your current department.
2. Befriend partners and senior associates in that new department. Speak to them about their work. If possible, ask for work in that area.
3. Make sure that you are getting exposure to that practice - even tangentially.
4. Undertake some pro bono work in the area in which you have an interest to gain some experience.
5. Research, research, research!

Please do not wait too long to make this determination. It will become infinitely more difficult for you to switch practice groups as you become more senior! Good luck!

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