

How Soon Is Too Soon

Here at BCG we get no small number of inquiries from attorneys who have recently (e.g., within the past year) switched firms but, for a wide variety of reasons, find themselves wanting and/or needing to move again and thus want to resume their job search.

The reasons for this most often include the following - sometimes a spouse receives a job offer in another market. Sometimes a group of partners makes an untimely departure, leading to business in your new practice group drying up and you sitting at the mercy of a first-in-first-out policy when the inevitable downsizing occurs. Sometimes the firm turns out not to be quite what you expected in terms of opportunity, professionalism, or personality, and you soon find yourself realizing that you may have made a mistake in accepting an offer.

Regardless of the reason, it is not an ideal situation to be conducting another job search so soon after your last one. However, the chances of your success in quickly finding another job are highly dependent on your reasons for wanting or needing to leave. In this article, I will break down a few different potential reasons an attorney might be seeking to make a lateral move shortly after joining their current firm, and how law firms typically interpret them for hiring purposes.

Partner/spouse needs to relocate

This is one of the most common general reasons attorneys embark on a job search - their partner or spouse gets a job opportunity (or is accepted into a graduate program) in another city where the attorney's current firm does not have an office to which they could transfer. [Out of all the potential reasons for a quick lateral move, this is the one most likely to be interpreted charitably or favorably by a potential new employer](#), primarily because it is a circumstance that is somewhat beyond the attorney's control.

Given the current modern economy, where it is statistically likely that someone will switch careers multiple times, and also because every partner, spouse, or family member is a potential earner, it is not an unusual circumstance or a potential sign of anything negative when an attorney needs to make a move for this reason. On top of that, attorneys in this situation are typically quite happy in their current firm, have developed good working relationships, and are able to get excellent recommendations from their current partners due to the understandable nature of their departure.

The key in this situation is to thoroughly explain your need to move to a prospective employer, emphasizing that you are in good standing with your current firm and did not expect to have to switch firms and locations (assuming these are true - honesty is always best). You should also discuss the move with your current firm, and make sure that you can get strong recommendations from your current partners, as this will help ease any concerns from a prospective employer.

Your new firm's business took a dive and they need to let you go

This is another common reason for attorneys needing to relocate again shortly after joining a new firm - perhaps a key partner or client departs, and the business that led to the attorney being hired in the first place has now disappeared and the practice group is over-staffed. A lot of firms have a first-in-first-out policy if they have multiple strong attorneys in a given practice group and not enough work to go around.

The upside to this scenario is again that you are back on the market for reasons beyond your direct control. The downside is that any attorney who is let go for business reasons can be perceived as not being as "valuable" to that attorney's current/former firm, regardless of how good that attorney actually is.

To try and mitigate this, it is imperative that you clearly explain the reasons for your move to a prospective employer and make sure that you can get good recommendations from your current/recently former partners, particularly if they are willing to back up your explanation for needing to seek a new job (this can be rare, as business or a lack thereof is often a touchy subject in the law firm world, but I have seen it happen and it doesn't hurt to ask).

Your new firm turns out to be a terrible work environment

This category can include a wide variety of more specific reasons an attorney might be looking to make another lateral move shortly after a new firm. Perhaps the work assignments are entirely different than what was represented during the interview stage, a particular partner turns out to be a nightmare to work for, or you come to realize that the prospects for bonuses and career advancement are small to nonexistent.

Whatever the specific reason, this is the most difficult situation under which to embark on a job search, because prospective employers are likely to interpret this situation (fairly or unfairly) as representing one or more of the following:

You are not likely to be loyal - aside from stellar credentials and a proven ability to develop client business, the one major factor law firms look to above all else is evidence of loyalty and stability in your work history. The hiring and orientation process is time-consuming and expensive, and firms want to see evidence that you are going to stick around - jumping back into the job market shortly after a recent move stands in direct contradiction to this desired trait.

You cannot handle difficult work - any of us who have worked in a law firm have likely (and unfortunately) worked for or at least encountered partners who are not pleasant to work for, to put it as diplomatically as possible. Having to work for the wrong partner can change the entire experience of being at a particular firm, and if there is no relief in sight, it is certainly understandable as to why you would want to leave. However, the hiring partner(s) at a prospective new firm are more often than not going to interpret such a situation as you not being willing or able to handle difficult work (and they might be extremely demanding themselves). You did not do your diligence - if, after a few short months, you find yourself disliking your new firm to the extent you want to leave, it is certainly fair for a prospective employer to wonder how much homework you did on your current firm or practice group before deciding to accept their offer if it differs entirely from your expectations only after a few short months. Granted, it is not possible to discover all the potential pitfalls or issues with a prospective firm during the interview process, but we are talking about the likely perception of a potential employer when it looks like you are jumping ship because it's not the right fit - a hiring partner will worry you may do the same at his or her firm, and discard your resume accordingly.

The perceptions of a potential new employer described above may not be fair at all times, but having discussed candidates, hiring procedures, and the desired traits of lateral attorneys with countless recruiting coordinators and hiring/managing partners, it is simply something that you will have to account for in your job search process if you are looking to make a lateral move shortly after joining your current firm.

In the hyper-competitive legal hiring market, each job opening results in the submission of hundreds of resumes, many from highly-qualified attorneys. As such, the recruiting coordinators and hiring partners will often use any potential red flags to eliminate a candidate from consideration, and one major red flag is an unstable employment history.

What I typically (and highly) recommend in such a situation, even though it may not be what you want to hear, is sticking things out at your current firm and doing everything you can to remedy the issues that are fueling your desire to leave until you have been at that firm for at least a year or more to demonstrate evidence of loyalty and stability. If you do decide to proceed with a new job search, however, it is best to keep things honest and simple and you should make sure that your explanation for seeking a new position is as diplomatic as possible. The legal world is a small one, and you want to be perceived as the consummate

professional you are, which means absolutely avoiding badmouthing your current firm or partners to a prospective new employer.

Conclusion

If you do find yourself needing or wanting to make a lateral move shortly after joining a new firm, it can be a tricky situation, and hopefully the above advice will allow you to enter the process more aware of the potential pitfalls of doing so. As always, best of luck on your job search!