

Important Questions Attorneys Need to Ask Themselves Before Searching for a New Law Firm Position

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Everyday I talk with attorneys seeking to make a lateral move. And every day I find that while people are often quick to express the reason(s) spurring their desire for change - work is slow at their firm, partnership is not looking plausible, they feel pressured by the firm to bring in business they feel they cannot, they have a personality issue with a particular partner, etc. - it is sometimes the case that the thinking and planning has ended with the attorney's conclusion: "I need/want to leave my firm." Rather than stand as a conclusion, this stance should serve as a starting point for self-evaluation. You should ask yourself two key questions: 1) What do I want from a new firm? 2) How do I plan to get there?

In my work as a recruiter, the more I can understand what is truly motivating a change, what issues really matter to an attorney, what a candidate can truthfully claim in terms of experience, and how committed the attorney is to [making a lateral move](#), the better I am able to evaluate how best I can assist attorneys in meeting their goals. In order to do this, I need to have a great deal of questions answered. [As such, my initial conversation with a potential candidate is effectively an interview.](#) The most efficient and fruitful conversations are the ones I have with attorneys who have already taken the time to do the work of asking themselves questions similar to mine. Consequently, the most successful job searches - whether a candidate is working with a recruiter or not - are the ones in which the candidate has a keen understanding of what s/he wants and why they should be able to achieve it.

For any attorney considering a firm change, [I urge you to ask yourself questions before you speak with anyone about your potential search.](#) Knowing what you want - and how you think you can get there - at the outset will help inform yourself, a recruiter working to help you, and any potential employer with whom you interview.

I. What is it you really want?

[Spend some time clarifying what it is you really want.](#) This is perhaps the most vital piece of the analysis and what informs the best strategy to finding not only a new law firm to join but, to joining the law firm at which you will be happier and at which you can be successful for the long term.

Ask yourself the following:

Is the firm the problem? If you think it is the firm itself, ask yourself what it is about the firm that is problematic. Is it the structure, compensation, reputation, people or size that is bothering you? Are friends at peer firms having similar or significantly different experiences?

[If you can identify what your firm can realistically do better, and that your target firm is already doing this,](#) than it makes sense to think that by moving you can find what you want and thus stay with your [new firm](#).

Where do you see your current firm's future, and where do you see your future with this firm if you stay? Can you change this course? You should think about what you can do to improve your experience at your current

firm. If you are convinced that the parameters are such that your experience will not be enhanced by steps you can take there, then think about what firm would enable you to develop a more positive experience.

What do you appreciate about your current firm? [Knowing this answer will enable you to weigh the pros and cons of your current situation more accurately.](#) As we all know, the grass is not always greener.

Is your practice area the problem? Is it the nature of your practice's substantive work (i.e., conducting due diligence and drafting agreements versus taking depositions and drafting motions) or is it the volume of work (or lack thereof) that is wearing you down? Do you have friends in the same practice area at other firms who are having similar experiences? When you think about your work, consider your experience level as well. Perhaps the amount of responsibility you are given and the actual type of work you do will change in a year or two. Question whether greater responsibility or more volume would increase your work satisfaction. Also consider what size firm would offer this increased responsibility.

If you decide that it is the actual practice area that is not meaningful to you - and that it will not be in the next few years as you advance in the type of product you produce - then ask yourself whether it is realistic to expect to be able to retool yourself into becoming a new type of attorney. Consider whether you can really expect to [switch practice areas](#) at your level of seniority, and where you might be able to do so in terms of firm caliber and size. Think about what transferable skills you may have or what parallels you can draw between your current practice and that to which you would like to transition. Think about what new tools you would need to acquire in order to successfully move into a new practice and what type of a firm may be willing to accept and assist with this "rebuilding". If you can identify such firms, think about what you may need to sacrifice for them - perhaps class year, compensation or even partnership track - and think about what means more to you in the end.

II. Why should a firm want you?

Think about this one from the prospective employer's perspective and ask yourself: *What value can I contribute to a firm? What are your unique selling points?*

What will a firm find appealing about your record? How have your billable hours been for the last three years? How have your evaluations gone? Think about what you can highlight on your resume and cover letter that will set you apart as stronger than other candidates while at the same time will put you in the "safe" and desirable pool of candidates for particular firms.

How attractive is your level of experience? Are you in the three-five year "sweet spot" for laterals? If not, are you off by a year (on the junior or senior side)? Consider whether you are too junior or too senior to be trying to make a move and if the former, consider how long you should wait it out; if the latter, think about what you can offer to overcome this hurdle. You might find you are willing to go lower on compensation or to consider a non-partnership track.

Is your practice area in demand? Are you in a practice area that another firm is growing, or can you fill a hole in another firm's needs? Think about how you can serve as the solution to a firm's problem. Answer their "Why you? Why now?" questions for them.

What is your value proposition? Do you have any [portable business](#)? Who are your clients today? Perhaps even if your business is not portable, you may be able to compete for the business of your prior clients at whatever firm to which you go. Consider putting together a business plan that if not presented to the prospective employer, prepares (indeed, forces) you to articulate how you can contribute to a firm.

Do you have a background that is in demand (education and experience-wise)? The importance of a practice

area can be cyclical (think of the converse relationship between corporate and bankruptcy) and particular backgrounds (i.e. electrical engineering [versus chemistry for intellectual property attorneys and patent agents](#)) can be more in demand than others depending on what industries are fueling more legal work. Ask yourself if you have what is needed now and, if not, whether you can realistically acquire what is in demand to the extent needed, or if seeking out different work at your current firm is possible.

The clearer you are about what you want and what you can offer, the more efficient your search will be as a process, and the more fruitful it will be in terms of yielding you a new position that suits your goals and needs at a firm where you can thrive and build your career for the long run. You should think of your lateral move as your next - and last move - and, as such, you want to be sure you get it just right. Arm yourself with clear objectives and an equally clear roadmap for arriving at the place at which you can achieve those objectives.

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