

Make a Lateral Move Wisely, Infrequently and with Good Reason

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Your every move is a calculated step. These words may very well be those of a rapper and not an attorney but, [as a legal recruiter](#), I can tell you they ring true (and loud!) in the legal field. Every day I speak with attorneys - many of whom are well-credentialed and with impressive academic and professional backgrounds - who, for any number of reasons, left one law firm for another. Indeed, if you visit the careers section of any law firm website, you will find a whole section dedicated to lateral hiring. Move more than once in the first three to five years of practice, however, and you might be signaling a problem to potential employers. As such, I counsel attorneys to think long and hard about how each move could be perceived by a hiring committee in the future. Once you've made a move, it is irreversible and will forever remain a critical part of your record. Thus, your every move should be a calculated step.

Making one move too many can color your otherwise stellar standing so much that your resume is passed upon simply for evidencing this kind of a history. [Law firms might question your acceptance of and ability to thrive in a law firm](#), or even your long-term commitment to the practice of law itself. Additionally, numerous moves can prompt firms to question your work and whether it was your own weaknesses that forced you to change firms.

In addition to the number of [lateral moves you make](#), you should also consider how your reasons for moving will be perceived by a target employer. As a legal recruiter, often the first question I answer on behalf of my candidates is why they want to move, and I need to be able to provide an acceptable reason to the firm. So if you're considering making a lateral move, I urge you to consider the real driving force behind your desire, and how you will explain these reasons to future employers. Here, I name two reasons that are more palatable to firms than others, and the accompanying issues of which to be aware.

Your Work

It is generally considered acceptable for attorneys to switch firms in order to find higher quality work, or to change practice areas. For example, I changed firms because I wanted to transition from practicing corporate law to doing business immigration work. If you similarly want to switch practices, such a move makes sense, [and the potential employer must then consider what retraining or retooling you will need](#). If you want to stay in your practice area but you seek more sophisticated work, that also makes sense. For instance, an attorney doing transactional work at a smaller law firm may want to move to a larger firm in order to work on larger, more complex deals, or to get more public company experience. This is acceptable. Firms will evaluate your academic credentials and the experience you have picked up at a smaller shop to see what is transferable and what gaps remain. When articulated properly, a desire to work on more sophisticated matters, or to be able to practice in a different area, can speak to your ambition and need for continual growth.

Frequently, attorneys tell me they are seeking to move because their workflow is slow. The problem with communicating this to an employer is that it invites assumptions that paint you in a negative light: you're not getting good work because you haven't performed well in the past; you're not proactively seeking work, or maybe even that you are not well-liked. If you are going to tell a firm that your work has slowed, you need to be able to also communicate that the issue is not unique to you, but that there is not enough work for any of the associates in your department (at least at your experience level). Be able to articulate why the situation is as it is - perhaps matters that have dominated your time for a long stretch of time have now settled or closed. Maybe your firm recently lost some major clients, or some key partners have departed. However you explain

your situation, you need to be sure to describe the totality of the circumstances while remaining respectful to your firm.

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Firm Changes

If you keep up with law firms, you know that one consistency across the board is that firms are constantly changing. Over the past few years, even some of the largest firms have undergone mergers, closed offices, and lost key players. With social media being so prevalent, these changes quickly become common knowledge. So while associates typically have no control over such changes, and often are negatively affected by them, one positive here is the public nature of these changes can help to lay the groundwork for your effective communication of why you are seeking a change.

When a key partner leaves, the associates at the firm often reasonably worry about their chances for making partner. This is especially so if the partner left a relatively small practice group, and took with him/her a significant portion of the client base. Presumably, with the departure of these clients, the amount of available work for the associates who remain will decrease quite dramatically, and unless an associate already had a substantial book of business, or the partners that remain have enough business to promote the associate, a key partner departure can greatly decrease the chances for the remaining associates to make partner. In this situation, an associate seeking to move to a place with greater opportunity to make partner makes sense.

While everyone understands that firms undergo changes, you should know that potential employers will look for warning signs that signal something problematic about those "left behind." If a key partner leaves, employers will want to know why the partner did not take you with him/her. Similarly, if a firm's merger with another put your position at risk, employers will ask why there was no one to protect you. Was your work not valued? Firms assume that the associates who fare well in times of change are those whose work is the best. You should keep this in mind when explaining why you did not join those who left.

Takeaway

While I named two reasons for moving to which law firms are generally receptive, you should keep in mind what I suggested at the outset: no matter what your reasons may be, few firms will be willing to consider them if you have moved too many times in your first few years of practicing. The moves evidence instability to firms, which is quite the opposite of what any firm seeks. Do not be hasty in your decision to leave your firm because your ability to lateral to a new one may very well depend on how and why you left. [Exit well for a successful entry.](#)

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