How Can a Partner Make a Lateral Move Without a Book of Business?

**Question:** What advice can you give to a senior associate or junior partner looking to make a move? I have been with my present firm for over seven years, but the practice is very narrow and the firm seems not to be doing as well as it once was.

I certainly do not want to be around if the business does disappear because then all of my colleagues will be on the market as well. How can I locate an appropriate search firm, and what would you advise me to tell potential employers about my reasons for leaving? What opportunities should I expect to find without a substantial book of business?

**Answer:** I would love to be able to give you a very specific answer to your question, but it is difficult for me to do so without knowing more about you. For example, are you a senior associate or are you a junior partner? Have you worked anywhere else prior to joining this firm? Is your practice area a part of most law firms or is your firm the only one offering this area of expertise?

If you’re a partner without a substantial book of business, you are going to have a difficult time finding a search firm to represent you. The law firms and corporations dictate kinds of candidates that the search firms can represent. In this day and age, when the concept of a "service partner" is becoming less and less of a reality, a partner without business is going to have a very difficult time being represented by a recruiter.

Many of you seem to think that the recruiters are only interested in the top 10 percent of the top 10 schools because those candidates produce the largest fees. But in reality, it's the law firms, not the recruiters, which determine which clients we can successfully represent. There are many people who we know are extraordinary attorneys, but if their credentials do not fit within the parameters given to us by our clients, we are simply spinning our wheels and wasting the candidate's time.

As an aside, there are many wonderful candidates that recruiters would love to take the time to represent - even pro bono - but the law firms and corporations are wary of this type of representation and would strongly prefer that these types of candidates come to them on their own. It is a lot like the practice of law: If you are an M&A attorney and your next door neighbor wants you to sue his dry cleaners, you more than likely are going to tell him that you can't do it. This simply is not the type of work that you do. It is much the same with recruiters: Representing someone that we cannot place is simply not fair to the candidate, the client or the recruiter. That is not the kind of work that we do.

Having said all of the above, I would suggest that you call a few of the headhunters that you have known over the years - recruiters with whom you have had some kind of relationship or even those that you have heard about in a positive way. Give them a brief sketch of your background. You just never know; one of those recruiters may very well have a client looking for someone just like you.

Incidentally, if your narrow practice area is in great demand, then you are probably going to have great success with a recruiter. In a situation where your practice area is very specialized and there are not enough attorneys with your expertise, you are in high demand, whether or not you are senior and whether or not you have portable business. Recruiters will know which of their clients are looking for people with this expertise and be able to refer you to these opportunities.

Absent the help of recruiters, you need to start networking like crazy. And I do agree with you - you should be looking to get out before the word is out on the street that the firm has laid off a large number of their senior
associates and junior partners. Do all of the usual things, such as contacting your law school’s career services office, getting in touch with alumni from law school working at different firms’ in your geographical area, looking up other attorneys in your particular practice area, etc.

If you have read my column before, you know that I encourage networking no matter how futile and demanding it may be. You cannot network to a few places and then give up. You must hang in there and keep it up every day until you have success.

Lastly, and probably the most important thing I will say to you, is make sure that things really are slowing down at your firm. You say that the firm seems not to be doing as well as it once did -is this just a feeling or is this reality? It just may be a slow summer. Before you jump ship, just be certain that the firm is sinking. It never hurts to get out there and explore the job market, but don’t just grab onto any job simply because you are worried about the future of the firm. You have been with one employer for a good amount of years. You don’t want to destroy what is right now a beautiful resume. Do your due diligence, not just about any potential new employer, but about your current law firm as well. I hope this advice helps.

**Summary:** If you’re a partner without a substantial book of business, you are going to have a difficult time finding a search firm to represent you.

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- The Importance of Portable Business
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