

Don't Be Your Own Roadblock

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As attorneys, we are trained to look for problems. Being lawyers means that we look at the world differently than everyone else, and this worldview permeates every aspect of our lives. We constantly think about everything that could go wrong, in any situation. Sometimes, however, we have to make sure not to stand in the way of our own success. One of the areas in which lawyers can be too skeptical is in making a successful career transition.

While you are hunting for a new job, keep in mind your own skeptical lawyerly nature. The attorneys I speak with often walk in thinking that they have an idea what each and every potential firm or group is like, by reputation. On a similar note, many attorneys are dead set on leaving law firm life altogether and going in house, because they think they know what that life is all about. The goal of this article is singular: to encourage you to keep an open mind, and not to dismiss any opportunities out of hand, and not to hear negatives at every turn.

Do your own homework.

When I was practicing law, I knew an associate who absolutely hated her job. She had been a law school classmate of mine at Georgetown, and, while very bright, was (in my opinion) something of a rigid thinker. She joined a large law firm where, at least in her practice group, the partners resented having to tell associates which direction to take. Creative solutions were rewarded in this group, and associates were encouraged to offer ideas and strategy as soon as they walked in the door. Needless to say, not all junior associates function well this way, and my former classmate was miserable. She was exhausted from the high volume of work, and did not appreciate passing non-billable time examining every avenue. "Why won't they just tell me what they want from me?" She would complain.

Of course, she eventually left the firm with a bitter taste in her mouth, and had many nasty tales to tell about the partners and the group. Shortly after, another attorney I knew filled her slot, and she loved it there. She had come from a firm where she had been stuck on low-level projects where she billed tons of hours and did not feel she was learning anything. She couldn't have been happier to take my classmate's slot, and, I believe, she remains at the firm to this day.

Another attorney I know went in-house after four years at a large firm. He couldn't wait to put his feet up on the desk and live a comfortable in-house life. He "knew," from other attorneys who had made the change that in-house lawyers have a better lifestyle, and he was done with firms. Well, the economy tanked, several of the attorneys at his company were let go, and he worked harder and longer than he ever had at the firm. Eventually the company failed altogether, he wound it down, and went back to his former firm.

The moral of the story is this: don't believe what you hear, from anyone. Find out for yourself. Apply for the opportunity, and go in and talk to the people there. Ask questions and really listen to what they are telling you about what it is like to work there. You might decide, post-interview, that it isn't right for you. But don't throw up a roadblock sight unseen, without finding out for yourself.

Go the extra mile in the interview process.

Another way in which I've seen associates limit their own chances of landing a great job is by refusing to go the extra mile in the interview process. If a firm calls your recruiter and asks you to come in for an interview this afternoon, you should move heaven and earth to do it. Why? Because the firm is excited about you, and you want to let them know you are equally excited about them too. They have asked you for interview. Jump on the chance.

What if a firm wants you to come in from out of town on your own dime? I have seen associates react with disdain at requests from firms to let them know when they will be in town. Don't! The firm is asking you for an interview! I have seen huge firms arrange interviews this way, and I have placed attorneys with those firms after these interviews. It doesn't mean the firm is not all that interested in you. Many firms, even the biggest, are fiscally conservative, and many have rules about how far away someone needs to live before they will fly them in. I have seen it become more and more prevalent. Don't become skeptical because the firm won't pay to fly you in. Instead, do your best to say yes. Make yourself available. Stay with friends. Get in the car and drive. Do what it takes to get them to meet you.

Don't shut down the process because you hear something you don't like.

A few months back, an associate came to me after an initial interview and said, "I want to withdraw my candidacy." When I asked why, she said that one of the associates in the interview process told her that she would have to start out in an area of law that she didn't like and "do her time" in order to progress to "better" work down the road. Because she mentioned this to me, and I have a relationship with the firm, I was able to negotiate a work arrangement for her that avoided the undesirable stepping-stone work. If you hear something you don't like, that is when you begin a conversation, not when you end it.

In sum, I have seen attorneys, almost without realizing it, try to shut down their own interview process because of their skepticism. Doing this forecloses potentially excellent opportunities. Keep an open mind, and don't be the reason you don't end up in what could be a great job for you.