

Too Many Transitions Without Ever Having Moved

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But what do you do when your law firm has transitioned while you have literally "stayed put?" This dilemma came to mind today when I received an updated v-card from a very skilled senior associate. The only change from his previous contact information was the name of the firm and the email domain. Same address. Same phone. Same fax. And this was the third time this had happened in the last four years.

The Bay Area market may be at the forefront of this phenomena. It seems every week a new out of state firm is setting up shop in the Silicon Valley, usually by acquiring practice groups or taking on a another firm's regional office that was unable to reach critical mass. When presenting resumes to Silicon Valley hiring personnel, especially in the areas of corporate practice and IP, there is some forgiveness for many "apparent transitions" if the "merger or acquisition" between firms is still relatively fresh in everyone's mind. Candidates have developed the asterisk technique on resumes to label the current firm and then in a footnote name the prior firm who was acquired. Unfortunately, the "chain of title" on some of these resumes is getting long and the footnotes are beginning to distract.

What do you do if you are in this position? First, make sure you are aligned with strong senior attorneys in your group. Is there a reason for this lack of stability? What is the personality of your supervising partner? Why has the group been vulnerable to takeover? A multitude of factors can help you decide whether you are still on a positive career trajectory or whether the dynamics may cause this to repeat and repeat. You can get advice from many people in this regard, including your legal recruiter who is familiar with the "word on the street."

Second, don't be too complacent and assume the firm coming in is the correct firm for you if you were part of a "package deal." Each firm has a personality. Each has a unique management system. Each operates with their own set of assumptions. Make sure that your goals and style are compatible with the new firm. It can be exhausting to have to go through this uncertainty every couple of years. The path of least resistance and driving to the same office each day can be attractive. But, are you poised to achieve your goals? You must do your own diligence as proactively as the acquiring firm has done theirs.

Third, if you see yourself moving into a market where these "footnotes" will be seen as career transitions, it behooves you to do everything in your power to limit more entries on your resume. It may be wise strategically to align yourself with a very established practice group that will be here in ten years if you plan to move to a new market in eight. And when you choose a legal recruiter who will represent you in the new market, make sure to choose someone who understands at the gut level your role or lack of a role in the transition. Find someone who knows how to explain the change of firms factually and in the best possible light to potential employers.

Mobility is a major theme in these times. In this market, it is not just candidates who are mobile, it is also law firms. When dealing with these forces, keep a sharp eye on your goals, don't "just go along for the ride," and use all the resources at hand to evaluate your options, including a savvy legal recruiter.

May your transitions be few and positive!

