

Dealing with the Interview Taboo

Summary: *Learn how to deal with this interview question that many attorneys often answer wrong.*

One of the most common reasons why candidates seek to switch law firms is dissatisfaction with their current firm. Whether it be salary, opportunity for future advancement and promotion, lack of work, or a bad working environment due to difficult supervisors or colleagues, there are a whole host of reasons many attorneys want to seek out the proverbial greener pastures within the law firm world.

The vast majority of attorneys who have worked for firms from the smallest boutique to the largest international powerhouse firm has likely experienced at least one of the factors listed above, if not many of the others that can lead to dissatisfaction with one's firm. That being said, however, not every attorney will be understanding or sympathetic to the difficulties those factors can cause.

In fact, it is often the case that many attorneys who have overcome those factors through diligence, hard work, luck, perseverance, politicking, building their own book of business, and other notable accomplishments to become partner believe that any attorney they hire should have a similar drive and resolve to succeed in their career, even in the face of tremendous adversity, the worst work environment, or any other barriers or pitfalls that might impact a more junior attorney.

Being partner involves not only overcoming many of these factors throughout the course of developing a career, but a whole host of additional stresses and problems, such as building and maintaining a client base, pitching business, firm management and marketing, and supervising and training more junior attorneys while handling an active caseload. So while many of us wish that partners were more sympathetic to the plight of the younger attorney who is seeking to move due to being stuck in a difficult, if not intractable, work situation, it is certainly understandable why this may not be the case.

This is a long introduction, and hopefully a partial explanation, of the ultimate topic of this column, which is how to deal with the question of why you are seeking to leave your current firm when the short and sweet answer is "my current firm/partner/work situation is terrible."

For fairly obvious reasons, giving such a straightforward and honest answer is both impolitic and generally taboo in an interview setting. Bad-mouthing your current employer, even if completely justified, reflects poorly on you as a candidate. A candidate who says negative things about their current firm or partner risks being perceived as: someone with a negative attitude, someone who is difficult to work with because they are unwilling to buckle down or compromise in the face of adversity, someone who is difficult to manage, someone who may speak negatively about the firm they are interviewing with in the future, or someone who comes across as a victim rather than as a successful attorney in charge of his or her career.

On the other hand, if you give no good reason as to why you are seeking to leave your current firm, a prospective employer may not see the requisite enthusiasm or motivation to make the move. Instead, you must look to balance an honest answer with a more subtle and positive way of framing the situation.

I find the following approach to be the most helpful and successful in terms of framing an answer to the question of "why are you looking to leave your current firm" when the underlying reason is dissatisfaction with the firm or your current partners:

First, you should start out by mentioning what is positive about your experience with your current firm, whether it is solid training and work experience, the opportunity to have worked on sophisticated or interesting matters, having been challenged to develop a skill set, getting along with coworkers and staff

(hopefully you get along with at least somebody there!), etc. This is beneficial, because it will serve to demonstrate that you are not simply a negative person or complainer who will seek to find the fault in every situation.

Second, it is good to acknowledge the taboo of speaking ill of your current (or recent, if you left or were laid off) employer. Acknowledging that you are aware of this taboo shows that you at least have the social skills and judgment to handle things with politeness and grace. This can be accomplished as simply as stating something like "while there are things I do like about my current job, and it is not my intention to denigrate my current employer since that is bad form, it is obvious that I do not believe it is the right long-term place for my career, otherwise I would not be here interviewing with you and exploring my lateral options."

See [Top Ten Interview Questions](#) for more information

Again, you are framing an honest answer to the question in a way that demonstrates tact and thoughtfulness.

You can then move on to discussing your issues ("concerns" is a better word to use), although here again you have to be careful. Saying that you are overworked is not a good concern, for instance, because it implies to your interviewer that you are not willing to be a hard worker.

Better concerns are things like a top-heavy structure leaving less room to make partner or take on more responsibility on future matters (although in this example or any other, make sure a top-heavy structure is not the status quo where you are interviewing!), the departure of some key partners which you fear may lead to a decline in available work in your practice area and you want to stay busy, or perhaps a lack of flexibility on billing rates that will impact your ability to develop your own client base as a more junior attorney.

Finally, you want to be sure to demonstrate with your concerns and reasons for moving that your reasons are not the result of any problems with your own performance, but rather that you are an eager, hard-working attorney looking to advance your career, and you are simply looking for a better long-term platform to accomplish your goals, ideally the firm at which you are interviewing. Any answer that displays you are on an upward trajectory in your career and seeking to continue to develop your skills, practice, and book of business, is generally a solid answer in a law firm interview setting.

This is just a general guideline to how to handle this issue, and your own answers will obviously be unique depending on your situation, but it is very important to think this issue through before heading into an interview to make sure that you have some thoughtful and practiced answers to the question of why you are seeking to leave your current firm.

As always, best of luck with your search!

See [Interviewing Tips](#) for more information

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