

MAKING A MOVE — SWITCHING PRACTICE AREAS

Often associates find that the practice area they chose after law school is not right for them. In this age of mobility many of these associates transition into a new practice area by going to a new firm. But what if you could switch practice areas within your existing firm? The benefits to doing this are many including not having to adjust to a new firm culture, not having to go through a formal job search and preserving the continuity of your resume.

At the City Bar program, "Career Decisions 2007" sponsored by the Career Advancement and Management Committee (chaired by Tanya Gill), the panel offered attendees advice on the various ways to approach, consider, and decide upon, a career move within their firm. The program was moderated by Danice Kowalczyk, Managing Director, BCG Attorney Search, New York and International Markets, and the panelists were Karen Eisen, Director, Professional Development, Sills Cummis Epstein & Gross P.C.; Meela Gill, Lateral Recruiting Specialist, Kirkland & Ellis LLP; Elena Kaspi, President, Lawscope Coaching; and Nicole Donnelly, Managing Director, SJL Attorney Search and Former Associate and Lateral Recruiter, Schulte Roth & Zabel, LLP.

The panelists presented their experiences, and shared their expertise on how to make a successful move.

Why make a move

Though making a move from one practice area to another within your existing firm can be challenging the panel agreed that it can be done. First, they advised that you think about why it is you want to make the move. You want to make sure you are switching for the right reasons or you may find yourself in the same situation a few years later. The best reasons are that your desired practice area is truly a better fit for your skills and personality. Remember, advised the panel, to ask yourself honestly if it is truly your current practice area and not the firm that you are dissatisfied with. Running to a new practice area isn't going to help if you are really trying to escape the firm.

To determine whether the new practice area is really a better fit begin by examining your skills and interests. Make a list, suggests the panel, of the skills you have learned and what it is you like and dislike about your current practice area. Are you more of a deal maker or a litigator? Do you enjoy working on your own or with others? Then make sure these skills and interests are applicable to the new practice area. If you are unsure what qualities or skills are used in the practice area, talk to attorneys practicing in that area to find out how they spend their time and what qualities and skills they use.

Be honest about the reasons that you want to make a change and whether this change would make you happy. Make sure the reasons you give yourself are compelling too. You won't be able to make the case to the firm if you can't first make the case to yourself.

How to make the move

Once you have evaluated your skills and interests and have determined that they are a good fit for the new practice area, look to see whether opportunities exist in the new practice area. Talk to or observe the lawyers in the department you would like to move into. Are they busy or are they idle? Is the practice area growing? If

the area is experiencing a slump now may not be the time to pursue a move.

Demonstrate to your firm that you have a commitment to the new practice area by taking CLE courses, engaging in pro bono work or joining the local bar association committee related to that area of practice. If you can, noted the panel, try to find a mentor in the new practice area, someone who can give you sound advice on how best to make this transition and even advocate on your behalf.

When you approach the firm about a move it is important to sell yourself since it is likely you don't have a wide breadth of experience in the new practice area. Be able to make a clear presentation of why you want to move and what you can bring to the new practice area. Highlight your work ethic and managerial skills and that you are responsible and can handle leadership. Show them that you have attained the basic lawyering skills and that you would be able to excel in either practice area. The sense to convey to the firm, the panel noted, is that you are a valuable asset to the firm and that it is to the firm's benefit to move you to this new department rather than lose you all together.

Remind the firm that this move will be a win-win situation for both of you given how destructive and expensive turn over can be. Remember, the panel advised, you are a known quantity to the firm and therefore less of a risk than an outside candidate.

Finally, assure the firm and your current department that you plan to fully discharge any obligations you have in that department before moving on to the new one.

How receptive a firm is to allowing associates to switch from one practice area to another varies from firm to firm. But if you do your preparation well and make a clear and convincing proposal to the firm, said the panel, you give yourself the greatest chance for a successful transition.