

Business & Careers

Connecting is essential when joining new firm



Warren Smith

Congratulations. After months of discussions, deliberations, and negotiations, you've finally made the move to your new firm. If you're lucky, your new firm has a robust on-boarding process, with a partner to help shepherd you and set out a clear plan for integration and outreach with your clients.

But what if the plan is less than robust? What if there is no plan at all? What if the plan is well articulated, but there is little follow-through upon arrival?

Here are some of the common steps I've seen the very best lateral partners take to ensure they have the greatest chance of success upon arrival at their new firm:

Your clients

Once you've arrived at your new firm, typically the first order of business is to reach out to your clients. Some of my most successful partner laterals have used this as an opportunity to do three things.

First, with their best clients, they take the time to speak with the firm and identify how best to present the new firm to their clients—there is a clear pitch they are making, which involves understanding



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the clients' key needs—and in particular, any areas where the former firm was perhaps not as robust, and distinguishing the new brand from the old. This can be done through marketing materials, but is obviously best served through in-person meetings. This may require some additional travel and face time on the part of the lawyer, but it is a critical step in maximizing a lateral move by any partner.

Second, top partners recognize this is an opportunity to close the door on their less desirable clients. Using a move as an opportunity to end a relationship is perhaps one

of the least appreciated opportunities a lateral move presents to lawyers, as it is often the worst 20 per cent of your practice that accounts for some of your greatest headaches and inefficiencies in your desk. Obviously, this requires a certain level of confidence on the part of the partner to let a part of their practice go, but provided they have confidence in their ability to build their practice with the new platform, this is an ideal window to make this move.

Third, top partners utilize a lateral move as an opportunity to prospect for new clients, or target clients who may have previously been reluctant to work with them at the former firm. Recognizing which clients were perhaps conflicted or resistant to the former platform, and using the move as an opportunity to reconnect, is one of the key steps successful partners take in growing their practice when making a move.

Your new partners

Equally important in the lateral move is connecting with your new partners. Typically, a lateral partner only has the opportunity to meet with a select number of partners before joining the firm—the firm leadership and/or those partners within the group they are joining. Connecting with the balance of the firm upon arrival can be key to your longer term success and happiness in the firm, and making a proactive effort to reach out can pay dividends both personally and professionally in the years ahead.

One partner I worked with made a point of walking through a different section of the firm (across the many floors of the firm) every day, with the goal of getting to know as many of his new partners as possible during his first year after joining. The result? He was one of the first lateral partners to become a member of the firm's executive committee within the first five years of joining, a rare feat which speaks to his level of integration at the firm.

Your former partners

One of the more challenging aspects of a lateral move is, of course, dealing with the partners you've left behind. Resist the

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temptation to “tell it like it is” when leaving the firm, no matter your personal opinions on the subject. Be courteous, professional, and focus on the positive reasons why you are moving.

It may be prudent to allow for a cooling-off period, though I encourage people to leave at least a few lines of communication open during the transition period, if for no other reason than to ensure the logistics of your exit and to properly address any ongoing client matters, no matter the firm they choose to retain as counsel.

Your family

Finally, one of the often overlooked aspects of a lateral move for a partner is the impact this may have on the family. In particular, your spouse may feel alienated, particularly if any part of their social circle was tied to other spouses at your former firm. Some of the best on-boarding experiences I have seen with our firm clients have been where they have recognized the importance of integrating the spouse into the new firm's social circle.

A practice-group dinner with spouses, or even simply getting together with one or two of your newest partners and their families can go a long way to ensuring your family feels included in the transition process, which will greatly assist you in ensuring both your personal and professional lives have the greatest chance of success when making such a significant career decision.

In the end, the key is to recognize that a lateral move represents both significant change and opportunity for your career. Being proactive on all fronts of your life will give you the greatest chance of success, ensuring both you and your new firm are able to make the most of your lateral move in the years ahead.

Warren Smith is managing partner of The Counsel Network, Canada's oldest lawyer recruitment and career consulting firms. He is also the first Canadian to be elected president of the National Association of Legal Search Consultants (NALSC), North America's leading legal recruitment industry association. You can follow him on twitter @lawheadhunter.



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