

The Question You Need To Ask Before Jumping Ship

Law360, New York (January 09, 2015, 3:52 PM ET) -- It's the start of a new year, and you're wondering if your career needs a fresh start at a new law firm. But how do you decide whether to make such a big jump? Here, lawyers and consultants give advice on the most important question you should ask before making a move to a new firm.

Charles P. Adams Jr., Adams and Reese



"Are laterals viewed in your culture as employees or as having an opportunity to rise to the highest levels of the firm in compensation and management based on their contributions? Are there examples of how laterals have become most successful?"

Byrd F. "Biff" Marshall, GrayRobinson



"Other than the obvious ... amount of debt, growth plans and compensation issues ... the candidate should ask about the firm's track record with laterals. How many have they hired and lost over the previous three to five years? Where did the departing lawyers go, and why did they leave?"

Jesse Diner, Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney PC



"The question that all laterals should ask a new firm is 'Does the firm have an integration plan for me and will there be a point person responsible to make sure that there is follow through on the integration plan?' There are a lot of other questions (re: firm finances, diversity initiatives, etc.), but very rarely does a candidate ask how the firm plans to help integrate them and their clients, and a lot of the time, that's the biggest issues when laterals are unhappy when they join a new firm."

Kristi A. Dosh, Reputation Ink



"I think it's imperative that associates ask about the firm's philosophy on associate marketing and client development, specifically if it's encouraged and how those efforts are supported. I began my career in a firm that felt strongly about developing associates' marketing and client development skills only to move to a firm that felt those skills were unnecessary until you made partner. However, you don't magically learn how to develop clients when you become a partner. Firms should see the value in having you develop that skill set early on, and it will give you control of your career."

Ora T. Fisher, Latham & Watkins LLP



"Platforms and compensation are important matters to address, of course, and another perhaps even more important success factor for laterals is their ability to assimilate and thrive within the culture of a new firm. That involves a myriad of topics ranging from the firm's governance to its transparency, approach to collaboration and individual personalities and work styles. Latham & Watkins introduces potential laterals to partners across our global offices during the recruiting process so that the question of fit can be asked and answered early by the lateral, as well as the firm."

Mark Grannis, Harris Wiltshire & Grannis



"Collegiality is essential to professional development, particularly for young lawyers, and collegiality tends to flourish when everyone regards the firm as a special bundle of relationships — not just walls and desks and carpeting. By contrast, firms that are just like all the others attract people who don't care where they work or whom they work with. Avoid those people; they won't make you better, you won't make them better, and in the long run, none of you will be giving your clients the best you have."

Robbin L. Itkin, Liner Law



"There are many questions to ask before joining a new law firm: Most questions are obvious — 'What is the compensation, what is the culture like, what are the benefits ... ?' However, I believe that an often missed but pertinent question is 'How much interaction do partners have with the managing partner or committee members who in fact run the firm and make the decisions?' The answer to this question tells one very much about the tone and true culture of the firm, the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the partnership and management and how partners communicate with each other."

Paul L. Langer, Quarles & Brady LLP



"One of the critical questions when staring down a lateral move is the methodology in which billing credit is shared at the potential new firm. The answer impacts not only how the credit will be shared with respect to the portable business the lateral brings with him/her but also how credit is allocated with respect to business developed at the new firm. For example, at some firms, the only metric that counts at compensation time is business origination. At other firms, consideration is given to other factors, including the lawyers primarily responsible for a new matter, those assisting on the matter and those who have helped foster and/or expand the client relationship. Knowing how the 'coin of the potential new law firm realm' is divided before you join can make the difference between a smooth transition and one fraught with discord."

Joan Lukey, Choate Hall & Stewart LLP



"I believe there are two questions every attorney should ask. For the new firm, the key question is 'What are the opportunities for high-level work and growth?' If you know the work will be challenging and exciting, then the question to ask yourself is, 'Will this be a good fit for me professionally, intellectually, culturally and personally?' I've been fortunate to work at three of the top high-stakes litigation firms in the country — first at WilmerHale, then Ropes & Gray and now at Choate. Every day, I get to work with some of the smartest, most talented and savvy litigators I've ever met. If every new position takes you to this place, then it's worth making a move."

Jordan Sigale, Dunlap Codding PC



"When you ask clients why they chose to work with the firm, what do they say?' The answer actually tells me first, and most importantly, that the firm cares enough about their clients to ask them, and second, what the firm chooses to tell me about what the clients have said is very telling. In the case of the firm I joined two months ago, they told me about one client (a global food manufacturer) that had chosen Dunlap Codding because they were uniquely themselves. The answer evidenced a real self-security. It skipped the easy accolades (e.g. we are smart, sophisticated and good-looking) that can be said of most competitive firms and exposed the heart of the firm and its clients."

Evan Stone, Gardere Wynne Sewell LLP



"The key question for this lateral partner: 'Are we expected to service existing firm business, or can we leverage the firm's strengths but maintain the commitment and value proposition for our clients?' Our goal — in considering a combination — was a firm that would take us to the next level but not interfere. We were sensitive to cultures dominated by institutional clients. Gardere proved ideal, combining the best features of an institutional caliber firm — reputation, integrity and deep relationships — with a self-starter, hands-off mindset. The only feedback from management all year has been 'How can we help?'"

Elayna J. Youchah, Jackson Lewis PC



"Before accepting an offer with a new firm, it is important to understand the firm's culture. Qualifications aside, it's tough to be successful in an environment in which attorneys do not work well together or are unhappy with firm policies. Perhaps the best way to get at these issues with one question is to ask: 'Can you tell me what your favorite and least favorite things are about working here?' Listen carefully to responses, and evaluate whether they are candid or canned. Remember that what the person does not say is just as important as what he/she does say."

--Editing by Chris Yates and Christine Chun.

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