

# ABOVE THE LAW

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## Your Second Job Out Of Law School

By JOSHUA STEIN

If and when you decide to leave your first job out of law school, finding your next job will differ in huge ways from the law school recruiting process. The search will give you all sorts of new opportunities to screw things up. This article, however, will arm you with some strategies for success. It starts from the assumption you want to move from one law firm to another. Many suggestions here also apply to other moves, but you will need to adjust them as appropriate.

From the very beginning, proceed with care. If you use headhunters, just use one or two, chosen thoughtfully long before you start your search. Your resume should never go to a firm without your knowledge and approval. If it gets passed around too much, the marketplace will soon perceive you as damaged goods.

If you have a good relationship with an attorney at a firm that might interest you, consider getting on the phone (don't send an email!) to see if they might have a position for you. If you're doing any legal work involving that firm, though, watch out for any ethical limitations on discussing employment.

You might decide to apply online. If you do that, first try to figure out who you know who has a connection to that firm. Then, as soon as you finish submitting your application, try to have that person immediately make a phone call to prevent your application from falling through the cracks. That personal referral can make a huge difference. I've recently helped many people find new positions, and we've found that this approach – an online application accompanied by a targeted phone call – works well.

What about going in-house? Usually the "sweet spot" for that comes after three to five years of practice. But in-house positions tend to be few and far between – often the chance result of the right conversation with the right person at the right place and time. Sports leagues seem to help. Realistically, the odds of finding an in-house position through a deliberate job search are low, particularly if you want a quick move. If you want to head that way, you need to lay the groundwork well before you actually decide it's time to go. Ideally, and typically, the position will come to you rather than the other way around.

Your colleagues may hear of in-house opportunities before you do. This might be the rare case where you can mention that you're thinking of leaving the firm, as long as you make it clear that you're looking to go in-house. Your current firm

probably won't mind helping you find an in-house job with a client, because that might help the firm cement its relationship with that client. As always, proceed with care. Don't assume every firm thinks that way.

By the way, don't assume you'll enjoy in-house life any more than firm life. You'll still work long hours. Your clients will always know how to find you. You might even have to do timesheets.

You probably already know that the best interviews just feel like good conversations. Try to steer the interview that way. You don't necessarily need to discuss the firm, the job, or you. Keep the conversation going. Ask about the person across the desk. If necessary, look around the interviewer's office for potential conversation starters.

Sooner or later, most interviewers will ask if you have any more questions about the firm. The question might seem trite and even annoying after even just a few interviews, but please cut the interviewer some slack. That question usually signals that he's running out of things to discuss. Help him out! Come up with something to talk about, even if not strictly related to the firm.

As you interview, remember this probably won't be the last time you encounter the people you meet, whether or not you join the firm. It's networking. That's true even if you don't join that particular firm. Some of the lawyers I met when I interviewed for my second job out of law school, even at firms that didn't hire me, later became good friends and great professional resources.

Each time you interview, you'll hear all about the firm's great qualities. Each firm is full of brilliant and interesting people, with a terrific working environment, amazing opportunities, and so on. It definitely sounds much better than your current job. Don't necessarily believe it. Law firms are not likely to be kind, gentle, or nice organizations that care a lot about their associates. Why should this one be any different? You'll probably like any "new" firm more in some ways and less in others. Before you make the move, think seriously about whether the new job will, overall, really deliver a change for the better.

If you find yourself falling in love with a firm, track down some lawyers who recently left it. If you can't find any through word of mouth, try LinkedIn. The firm's alumni may have useful information. Of course, you must consider the source. A former employee will often be disgruntled for reasons that aren't the firm's fault.

As you start your search, think about how your resume will look in, say, three to five years. Don't let it get ugly. As an employer, I get concerned whenever I see a resume with a lot of moves on it. So if you move now, try to stay put for a while. If you don't, your resume will start to look bad. It doesn't matter if every move had a perfectly legitimate explanation – even if it was someone else's fault, or driven by circumstances beyond your control. Your potential employer may still wonder why you got it wrong so many times. You can mitigate some of these concerns if you go back to a firm you left, or even just take a job with someone you previously worked with at that firm.

When you think about your employment history, look back too. Potential employers will want to know what you've done. Keep an experience list, starting with the first matter you handled. Keep samples of written work whenever you can properly do so. Keep them in a condition appropriate to show potential future employers on a moment's notice. You'll need to sanitize them – not just the text of the document but also any metadata. If you don't make a habit of collecting and organizing work product as you go, you may find yourself scrambling or unable to pull it together when you need it.

Read and reread your resume for errors of any kind, even tiny ones. Don't overstate anything. Someone will figure it out. The overstatement probably wouldn't have helped you much anyway, but if it's discovered it will almost certainly do serious damage.

Updating or editing your resume has a bizarre tendency to almost always create typos or inconsistencies in formatting. In two decades of interviewing lawyers for jobs, I have seen perhaps a half dozen resumes that had no visible mistakes in them. I guess this may mean you are in good company if your resume is imperfect, but it's really not good company. If you make even the tiniest change in your resume, print it out and read it several times, each time as if you've never seen it before.

A little paranoia goes a long way. Don't use your firm email account for anything related to your job search. Don't keep your resume, cover letters, or other search-related written material in the firm's document management system or even on your local hard drive at work. Avoid using the firm's telephone system, especially for calls to and from headhunters. Conversations with other firms create less risk. All these precautions might seem obvious, but I know plenty of smart people who never even considered them.

Once you get close to leaving, plan your departure carefully. You are not supposed to tell clients you plan to leave. Give at least two weeks' notice, a month's if at all possible. Your new employer will just need to wait a bit, and (if you're going to a high quality place) will notice that you are doing the "right thing." If circumstances allow, which they usually don't, consider taking a long vacation between jobs. You may not get to take another vacation for years. Long before you give notice, download a copy of your contacts and any other personal data you want to take with you when you leave. Once you give notice, you may find it difficult or even impossible to do that. You don't want to lose that information. Keep it in electronic form rather than on paper.

No matter how much your soon-to-be former firm has disappointed you, keep it to yourself. However inconceivable or even absurd as it may seem, consider the bizarre possibility that, to some infinitesimal degree, you might bear some of the blame for the fact that your first job didn't work out. Keep your mouth shut. Don't burn bridges. Even though you're leaving the firm, your colleagues may be good people to know as you move forward. Many will go do other interesting things. Some might even remain or become your friends. Say only nice things, mean them, and stay in touch.

Once you move, use that as an opportunity to reach out to your entire network. Let people know about your move. It's not often that a lawyer has genuine "news" to communicate. Take advantage of that rare opportunity.

When you start your new position, think seriously about what you should have done differently at your first job, and try to proceed accordingly. But you won't have the benefit of an organized first-year orientation program. You'll need to do your own orientation. Reach out to your new colleagues, get to know them, and try to become part of the group. That all works best if you start it the minute you walk in the door.

Once you make your move, try not to think about moving again for a long time.