

The 5 Biggest Mistakes You Can Make As A Lateral

By **Martin Bricketto**

Law360, New York (October 29, 2015, 7:40 PM ET) -- Joining a new firm can seem like the perfect marriage, but attorneys can sully that relationship or blow it up altogether by failing to do their due diligence before jumping aboard and making other key missteps.

Not making sure to understand a firm's culture before sealing the deal is just one potential pitfall. Missing opportunities to jell with colleagues, failing to have patience for hiccups in the transition, and failing to deliver on their promises are all surefire ways to torpedo what might otherwise be a perfect match between the new firm's platform and the lateral's book of business.

Here, experts share the most common mistakes that lawyers make when joining a new firm and how to avoid them.

Failing to Perform Due Diligence

One of the biggest errors on the part of a lateral can come before he or she takes the job — failing to perform due diligence ahead of time to truly understand the firm, its culture and its most important personalities.

“You just don't want to be surprised walking in the door to find out things you could have learned about the firm had you met some additional people,” said David Garber, president of Princeton Legal Search Group.

Laterals have to make sure that the firm and its existing roster are a good match, according to Garber, who offered the hypothetical scenario of a litigator looking to provide clients with a fuller menu of corporate services.

“You really need to know: Are these people top notch? Are they going to mesh and get along with your clients? Is your client going to respect them?” Garber said. “Failing to do that is a huge mistake.”

Ignoring Opportunities to Integrate

Building relationships with colleagues can plant the seeds for new business opportunities and improved services, and laterals commit a major blunder when they don't capitalize on chances to become part of their new firm's fabric.

"I hate to leave opportunities on the table, and for sure that's leaving opportunities on the table," said R. Max Crane, the managing partner of Sills Cummis & Gross PC.

"To me, even a very successful lateral who hits the ground running on day one and has a full caseload or a full client load can always benefit from getting out of their office and talking to the existing population," Crane added.

Opportunities to integrate can even come during the recruiting and interview process, according to Pamela DiCarlantonio, a partner with legal recruiter Major Lindsey & Africa.

That process can sometimes feel elaborate and onerous, but it can also shed light on synergies between attorney practices and areas for collaboration and cross-selling services, DiCarlantonio explained.

"I always remind them that this is part of the integration," she said. "If they end up joining the firm, they'll be that much further ahead. If you appreciate that, it goes a long way."

After they join the firm, laterals should find ways to educate colleagues about their practice, embrace the chance to travel to other offices, participate in firm events or retreats, and make themselves available for client meetings and pitches, according to DiCarlantonio.

"Firms don't want silos," DiCarlantonio said. "They want to bring people in who are going to be team-oriented and aligned with the culture. The faster that you appreciate that, the happier you'll be and the quicker you'll be plugged in."

Not Fulfilling Expectations

One easy way for laterals to get off on the wrong foot is to oversell the amount of business they will be bringing with them, according to Garber.

"Walking through the door, you pretty much have a target on your back to meet those figures," Garber said.

Laterals should offer realistic, not wildly optimistic, figures so high expectations don't lead to big disappointment, according to Garber.

Laterals can also create friction when they don't fulfill the overarching purpose behind a firm's decision to bring them on.

The firm may have viewed the lateral as a way to simply increase business volume or, in some instances, add expertise in a novel area, according to Howard Kailes, a partner with McCarter & English LLP who chairs the firm's growth committee.

"If someone transitions in and the main objective is to augment the volume of activity but the attorney misperceives his role and instead thinks he's there to augment the expertise, there is a disconnect in objectives between the attorney and the firm," Kailes said.

Being Impatient

A new firm can mean a learning curve with unfamiliar technology or maybe dealing with a different

process for checking conflicts. New hires might want to jump out of the gate with a flurry of new business, but it just doesn't happen at the pace that they want.

It's common for laterals to go through a "ramp up period" in which they have to get comfortable with the infrastructure that will underpin their work going forward, according to DiCarlantonio, who said it's important not to let frustration sink in.

"If you come in really impatient, you're not going to get your ducks in a row," DiCarlantonio said. "You get ahead of yourself and don't take the time to do the things you need to do to ensure your success."

Patience is also a virtue when it seems like the firm hasn't delivered on a promise from the interview process, according to DiCarlantonio.

"Discuss your concerns in a professional and diplomatic way at the earliest possible time and keep the lines of communication open," she said. "If you see something that feels amiss, then get in front of it, don't let it fester and find the right person to have a conversation with to make sure the expectations are aligned."

Pushing for Change Without Consensus

Firms often see laterals as a way of adding fresh ideas and perspectives. However, a new partner should be wary of pursuing large-scale changes without first understanding the culture of a firm and how it conducts business, according to Garber.

"It's about consensus-building and relationship-building," Garber said.

A lateral might want to make a big splash, but successful changes hinge on knowing the lay of the land, according to Crane.

"If they think they've figured it out on day one, they better give me the secret sauce to that, because I've never figured it out on day one," Crane said.

That said, experts also cautioned against laterals losing their own identity.

"Attorneys who don't do things the old-fashioned way and are innovative and creative and energetic and industrious are what we really would like to see, and that's the reason we may have transitioned them in laterally," Kailes said.

--Editing by Jeremy Barker. and Patricia K. Cole.