



Practice Areas *Finding One That Fits*

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Just as you are unlikely to remain forever with the first firm you join, you may decide that the practice area you chose right out of law school no longer suits you. Changing practice areas can be a difficult process, but it can be done. First, though, let's discuss how to make the right choice the first time.

Choose Wisely

If you are still in law school, here's how not to choose a practice area: by taking the first thing that comes along or by being dazzled by the salary one position offers. Instead, think about the classes you most enjoyed in law school. If you excelled in your tax class, you might not want to be a litigator. And if constitutional law was your passion, estate planning probably isn't for you.

Also, don't allow yourself to be blinded by the glamour quotient of a potential job. Yes, Johnnie Cochran is a great litigator who claims the media spotlight, but it takes years of hard work to achieve that level of notoriety. When you first start out in litigation, you'll be researching fine points of procedure and trying low-level cases. No matter what practice area you choose, you will have to pay your dues.

If you were a summer associate at a firm that rotated you through various practice areas, you should have a better idea of what you would like to practice. In addition to researching firms, you should also research practice areas. The practice area guides on the American Bar Associate Website

(www.abanet.org) or at JDJungle.com are good places to start.

When you are saddled with thousands of dollars in student loans, you may think it makes sense to take the most lucrative job offer you receive. However, if that means that you will start out in a practice area that you don't really like, you may want to reconsider. Once you start out in a practice area, you become associated with it, and the more years you spend in that area, the harder it will become to switch to a new specialty. Yes, the money is attractive, but will it really be worth it if you are doing a job you dislike?

Why Switch?

If you find yourself thinking that a different practice area would be a better fit for you, make sure you are switching for the right reasons. You shouldn't consider switching to another practice area just because those lawyers seem to be pulling in more business. And again, just as you shouldn't choose a practice area based on its perceived glamour, you shouldn't switch to a new area because you are experiencing a bit of boredom. Switching practice areas can be difficult, so you don't want to wind up in a new area and then find yourself wanting to switch again in a year or two.



Make sure that you aren't considering making a move because you are unhappy with the firm that you are working for. If you are dissatisfied with the firm's culture or environment, choosing a new practice area is unlikely to alleviate your unhappiness. In that case, you might want to consider staying in the same practice area, but exploring options at other firms.

After giving adequate consideration to the reasons you want to switch and assessing your skills and work personality, you may truly feel that you could be more productive in another practice area. But before jumping ship, you may want to see if there are any opportunities for you to assist in the new area that interests you. This option will probably be easiest in a smaller firm. For example, Karen specializes in employment law at a law firm of 50. Because she is not at a mega firm, she is not strictly limited to employment cases. Sometimes, she is able to assist with probate matters and other related cases. Although Karen is very happy practicing employment law, if she ever wanted to switch to another practice area, she would have a range of experience that she could draw on. Volunteering your services to other areas that interest you could provide you with a bridge into that practice area.

Your firm may be more rigid in its division of labor, however, especially if you work at a larger firm. Litigators may be expected only to litigate, while those in intellectual property stick to their specialty. Still, you can try networking with lawyers in other practice areas to make sure that you would really be fulfilled in that area.

Once you are sure that you want to make a change and you know exactly what practice area will make you happy, it's time to make your move.

How to Make the Switch

First, do some research within your firm. Is the practice area you want to join experiencing a business boom or a sudden slowdown? If business is good, then the partners may be more amenable to a job switch. But if things are tight, you probably won't be able to make the move within your firm.

Next, be sure your goals are realistic. If you have worked in intellectual property and want to switch to corporate work, many of the skills you have developed will be applicable. However, if you have spent years practicing in trusts and estates and you decide you want to become a criminal litigator, making the career change is going to be decidedly more difficult. No matter what your situation, you will need to identify the skills and experiences that can make you an asset to your new practice area.

If you feel confident that your firm can accommodate your request to switch practice areas, speak with a senior associate or a partner about your aspirations and get their input. If he/she responds positively, you can make a formal request of the managing partner.

In many cases, though, your firm may not have an opening for you in your desired practice area. In that case, you may want to think about finding a firm that has a need for an attorney like you. In order to show your commitment to your new practice area, you may want to take some seminars or enroll in a few continuing legal education courses. According to Hillary Mantis, advice columnist for



Vault.com, CLE courses can “compensate for a lack of substantive knowledge in that area.” She also suggests that recent law school graduates mention specific related courses that they took in law school. And if you want to switch into litigation, you might try doing some pro bono work. Make sure to highlight the steps you are taking to make yourself successful in a new practice area. Mention any training you are pursuing and try to find parallels between your previous practice area and your desired practice area.

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Summary

It's best to start out in a practice area you like. However, if you decide you would do better work in another practice area, follow these steps:

- Research a variety of practice areas
- Make sure you are making the switch for the right reasons
- Volunteer your services in your desired practice areas
- Research opportunities within your own firm
- If your firm can't accommodate your request to switch, look for opportunities elsewhere
- Take classes and seminars to fill in gaps in your knowledge

Legal Authority is aware of hiring trends within the legal industry, and we can help you identify firms where you can meet your career goals. In addition, we will review and rewrite your cover letter and resume in a way that will play up your strengths. Switching practice areas can present a challenge, but the Legal Authority experts can help.