



Attorney Relocation on the Rise

How Legal Associates Can Maximize their Career Moves

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Associate Relocation Rates Accelerate as Economy Rebounds

For decades, Associate movement from law firm to law firm has been normal practice in the legal industry. Law Firms count on—indeed plan for—a certain amount of natural attrition when making offers to First Year Associates during the On Campus Interview (OCI) process. But things changed considerably during the height of the recent recession. Associate attrition was sharply reduced. Those who specialized in practice areas that remained steady considered themselves thankful to hold onto their jobs. They didn't contemplate making a lateral move to another firm.

As the economy improves, however, Associate attrition is accelerating. Law firms are seeking to rebuild their Associate ranks from lean times and corporations are beefing up in-house staff, aggressively recruiting Associates. Both have turned their attention to recruiting and relocation. As such, Associates are in a much stronger competitive position than they were five years ago.

For many, this better positioning lends to geographic relocation—often from New York or Washington, D.C.—to smaller markets like Charlotte, Indianapolis or Denver. While these moves may stir big changes in lifestyle, they don't necessarily foretell major change in how Associates work. An Associate at a top-ranked AmLaw firm in San Antonio will have the same billable hour requirements as one in a similar practice in Los Angeles. However, the transition from large to mid-market may afford Associates a greater opportunity to make partner at a faster pace. Especially for Millennials, that speed-to-partner benefit is compelling.

It's Not Only the Economy

Economic improvements are certainly a driving force for the increasing rate of Associate relocations. But there are structural changes at work as well.

- *Mergers:* According to the Wall Street Journal, [there were 88 law firm mergers in 2013](#) and with the merger of Patton Boggs and Squire Sanders most recently capturing national attention, the trend shows little sign of abatement. Law firm mergers and failures (i.e. Dewey & LeBoeuf, the largest legal bankruptcy in history) cause attorneys to reconsider their career paths and expand horizons.
- *Millennial Movement:* Today's Associates are much less satisfied working incredibly long hours over many years in the hopes of eventually become partners. Gen Y Associates remain driven and willing to work long hours, but they are less patient waiting for a promotion. They maintain robust networks, compare salaries and working conditions through social media, and are changing firms, taking in-house positions, or moving into the non-profit sector far more frequently than their older peers.



- *Career Transitions:* An appreciable number of attorneys are leaving the practice altogether to tackle other opportunities (most notably, in finance) or to find a better work-life fit.
- *New Opportunities:* Associates are moving to boutique firms as clients demand more transparency and lower fees from (especially) large firms. Boutique firms provide successful Associates with the opportunity to focus on their specialty for often a fraction of the cost while retaining a greater percentage of their fees from the firm. These firms recruit heavily from name-brand firms and offer attorneys with high potential or a proven track record more independence at a more desirable client price point.
- *Bright Lights or Smaller Communities?* Many Associates are moving to smaller cities, often after proving themselves in the spotlight of big city practice. Here in the Southeast, firms in cities like Atlanta, Nashville, Birmingham and Charlotte are recruiting attorneys from much larger markets like New York, hoping to persuade talented Associates that practicing in more intimate, lower-cost environs are excellent career moves. In Atlanta, for instance, companies like Home Depot, Delta, Coca-Cola, UPS, Carter's and Equifax represent a few of the 28 Fortune 1000 companies in the metro area, and these corporations are well served by both strong in-house legal departments as well as outsourced counsel.

The Associate relocation trend is even more pronounced in rural areas. A recent New York Times article described [the challenges facing many seeking legal services in rural America](#). "In South Dakota, 65 percent of the lawyers live in four urban areas. In Georgia, 70 percent are in the Atlanta area. In Arizona, 94 percent are in the two largest counties, and in Texas, 83 percent are around Houston, Dallas, Austin and San Antonio." To attract more attorneys to their state, South Dakota lawmakers passed legislation that provides annual subsidies to lawyers who work in rural areas; a move that seeks to fill a talent gap made even more pronounced by recent oil and shale discoveries in the region. For Associates willing to move to the country, the market has never been better.

What You Should Consider When Contemplating Relocation

Whether down the street or across the country, relocating requires considering both strategic and logistical issues. Just as law firms and companies strongly evaluate the fit of a potential attorney within their culture, so too should you evaluate how new opportunities impact your personal and professional priorities.

Strategic

1. *Firm Dynamics:* When searching for a new opportunity, the wider the net you cast, the greater your chances of finding an ideal position, and firm dynamics are an important consideration. How comparable are the firms you're considering? Do they have multiple offices throughout the U.S. and the world? How many attorneys practice in your specialty area? Does their marketing benefit your practice area? Do they present a clear path for you to achieve Partner?
2. *Firm Culture:* Consider the cultural subtleties of a new environment, and don't move until you can definitively answer important questions like these: Are you comfortable with your new colleagues? Do you feel that your supervisor or peers are relatable? Can you discuss sensitive issues with them? Are they cohesive or do they operate autonomously? Will your Partners and Associate colleagues support your client development efforts? Can you picture yourself there being appropriately challenged as well as rewarded for your results?



3. *Billing Rates:* Moving from a large firm to a smaller firm or from a big city to a rural area? Be prepared for lower billable rates, unless you operate in a highly distinctive niche. Making a lateral move into a comparable market? Consider the practice group, work volume, client demographics and your work/life priorities as you evaluate your offers and what a relocation could mean to your financial bottom line.

Logistical

1. *Licensing:* If you are not licensed to practice in the state that you're considering moving to, you will need to negotiate whether and how much support your prospective employer will provide. This includes negotiating items like paying for and allowing you time to complete a Bar Review preparation course. You should also clarify whether or not they will pay for you to keep your current legal licenses and accompanying CLE courses.

2. *Cost of Living:* Firms here in the Southeast are actively recruiting attorneys from cities like New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. The return on investment works well for both parties. For example, a \$200,000 salary in Manhattan is the equivalent of making \$87,800 in Atlanta. Yet most top-ranked Atlanta firms offer compensation well into six figures. An excellent planning tool to use in your research is the [CNN money calculator](#), a quick resource to help you understand what to expect in a new location.

3. *Client & Competitive Conflicts:* Associates typically don't bring a robust group of clients into a new setting. Nevertheless, it's important that you discuss potential client conflicts with your new firm and thoroughly understand their conflict policies. More importantly, consider your competitive restrictions, especially if you work in intellectual property/patent law or work in a highly competitive industry.

Legal Recruiters Can Provide Critical Insight

Great websites and useful apps are no substitute for personalized, local insight. To obtain this vital knowledge, you may want to consider engaging the services of a legal recruiter. Selecting a recruiter is very similar to selecting a new firm. Not all legal recruiters are the same and it's important to set high standards when researching and evaluating their services.

As a former practicing attorney, I've managed scores of legal relocations for Associates, and there is a single statistic that explains why partnering with a recruiter is a very good idea: 2,100. That's the typical number of hours an Associate in a traditional big law firm consistently bills on an annual basis. Combine that volume of billable hours with the idea of doing all of your own research and outreach to confidentially pursue a new career opportunity, and the reality is a bit overwhelming, especially if you're considering moving to a new city about which you know very little.

I recently helped an Associate relocate from Atlanta to Columbus, Ohio. His fiancée received a highly respected fellowship in pediatric oncology at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. This Associate attended undergraduate and law school in the Southeast, and he had never even visited Ohio. He boasted an impressive resume but had no discernible Ohio connections. Had he applied to Columbus firms on his own, the chances of his resume receiving more than a cursory glance were slim.

Understanding those challenges, he chose to partner with me for his relocation. After conducting extensive research into the Columbus market, I became convinced that there were some excellent options aside from the biggest firms. I persuaded him to broaden his pursuit and consider some of Columbus' emerging boutique firms. The strategy – and his search – exceeded expectations. The research and insight we provided enabled him to obtain a position at a boutique firm he'd never heard of prior. He now calls his new professional home “a gem of a firm”.



In addition to local insight, legal recruiters can add real value to your relocation efforts by delivering three additional benefits:

- *Confidentiality:* There is no margin for error when it comes to professional integrity. Legal relocation is a highly sensitive subject. Don't tolerate a recruiter who doesn't deliver the same level of confidential trust that you provide to your clients. A lack of discretion can place you in professional jeopardy. Demand it from any recruiter with whom you work.
- *Interview Assistance:* It's important to have professional assistance when preparing for and evaluating your interviews. From tips about personal appearance to role-playing tough questions, recruiters should be a trusted partner during interview preparation. They should also be a source of insight about potential firms, ensuring you understand firm culture and appreciate the context of certain questions.
- *Candid Feedback:* Just as you may face tough questions in the interview process, so should recruiters face tough questions from you as you evaluate who can best help you achieve your career objectives. These are a few of the questions you should ask potential recruiters before you contract with them for their services:
 - How many people have you placed in this market or at this firm?
 - How long is your working relationship with them?
 - What do you know about a potential firm's turnover rate?
 - Why are they hiring in these practice areas?
 - Is this practice group profitable and respected within the firm?

Relocation is a major decision. Moving from a perceived safety of your existing firm to what may seem a daunting leap can have profound implications for your professional career as well as a deep personal impact on your life. Relocating into a new firm, a new company, a new practice group, or even a new career can be rewarding. But be prepared legally, professionally and culturally for relocation challenges. Approach the process with the same meticulousness you employ in your practice. Do your research. Understand the nuances. Engage experts as necessary. Anticipate tough questions and don't be afraid to ask your own. Thorough preparation upfront will increase your odds of a successful career verdict.