

Ask A Mentor: How Can I Successfully Switch Practices?

By **Susan Berson and Hassan Shaikh** (November 9, 2021, 4:19 PM EST)

In this installment, attorneys at Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky and Popeo PC — Susan Berson, who regularly mentors attorneys at her firm, and Hassan Shaikh, who transitioned from a private equity mergers and acquisitions practice to a health care regulatory role — offer retooling tips to associates.

Q: How can associates who recently changed practice areas get up to speed quickly, rebuild their network and successfully retool?

—Associate at BigLaw firm

As the lateral market continues to grow in earnest, associates across the country are finding themselves overwhelmed by a staggering list of options. Thus, some attorneys who have, until now, found themselves with few alternatives other than to forge a career in a practice area that leaves them unsatisfied, can now consider alternatives.

As demand across all sectors continues to grow, firms have warmed up to the idea of retooling associates to accommodate their needs — for example, hiring a former private equity M&A associate into a flourishing health law practice.

That said, associates who pivot into different practice areas, or who are in the process of doing so, might find that along with the excitement of a new career comes some apprehension. Working in unfamiliar subject areas, adapting to new internal processes, and becoming familiar with an entirely different suite of client deliverables are just some of the many factors that contribute to the anxieties of retooling.

But fear not — these and most other anxieties related to retooling one's practice are predictable and can be mitigated. As we discuss below, certain proactive steps on your part can help tame apprehension and ensure that you are able to successfully retool into a more satisfying career.

Find a valued mentor.

Mentorship is crucial to any successful career. But finding a mentor — or if you're lucky, mentors — when pivoting to a new practice area requires more initiative on your part than under other circumstances, and often, this should begin in advance of accepting a job offer.



Susan Berson



Hassan Shaikh

From the time you begin interviewing for potential jobs, you should evaluate whether the prospective teams you are looking to join will provide you with the type of valuable mentorship that is crucial to your success in retooling your practice.

Take the time to research how long others have stayed in their jobs and how they've risen through the ranks during their time there. Ask your interviewers whether they had support from senior attorneys when they started, and what types of resources related to your new practice area you can expect to receive. Also, see whether anyone on the team has ever had experience working with an associate pivoting from a different practice area.

Gathering this information early on will allow you to evaluate whether your potential new employer has a culture of mentorship, and if you'll have the necessary support to help you pivot into a new practice area.

Mentors that will help you successfully retool are more than just senior-level attorneys who work in an office near you or graduated from your alma mater.

Instead, the mentors you seek out should understand the dynamics of retooling one's practice, recognize the value in the fundamental skills you bring to the table and how they can translate into your new role, and be willing to assign you to projects that, at least initially, capitalize on the knowledge you already have, while introducing you to new subject matter in digestible quantities.

For example, by the time one of the authors of this article, Hassan, joined Mintz, he had a firm grasp on conducting effective diligence from a corporate attorney's perspective, but limited knowledge on the range of health regulatory issues our team reviews when conducting diligence of potential health care targets.

In order to get comfortable in his new role, Hassan started off with an assignment that was familiar to him (reviewing organizational documents of a target and its subsidiaries), but also took the initial pass at reviewing a crucial health regulatory issue related to organizational structures (state-imposed corporate practice of medicine prohibitions).

It gave him an opportunity to showcase skills he had already honed; familiarize himself with skills he hadn't used since law school, i.e., researching substantive issues; and introduced him to material that he hadn't yet encountered, but would soon be expected to grapple with on a regular basis.

Not only will a valued mentor find opportunities to marry your current skill set with the expertise they expect you to develop, they'll also invest time to help you grow in your new career path.

Be aware that an investment in your growth can manifest in a variety of ways, depending on your mentor's style.

Some mentors may send along helpful background materials that they've curated over the course of their career as you begin certain projects, oftentimes without you requesting them, while others may carve out time each month to discuss practice-specific goals you should aim to accomplish and your progress to date.

Almost always, an outstanding mentor will also take some time to get to know you as more than an

employee or another cog in the machine, and readily loop you into new projects and opportunities as they arise.

Developing this relationship will forge a bond where the mentor is invested in your future and your success.

Take initiative and be inquisitive.

Even with a valued mentor by your side, the determinative factor in whether you will be able to successfully retool or not is you. You must take initiative to seek out mentors and forge those bonds.

Further, keep in mind that primers aren't helpful if you don't take the time to read and understand them, precedent isn't useful if you don't review it critically, and a network isn't a resource unless you cultivate it. In the end, the job is what you make of it, so being self-motivated and curious matters.

In order to get in the habit of taking initiative, we recommend starting early and starting small. Opportunities to do so are present from your first day on the job — for example, spending an extra 30 minutes after training to get familiar with a resource specific to your new practice area — but are oftentimes easily overlooked.

In order to make sure you are making the most of your new job, make it a written goal to spend an hour or so, once or twice a week, doing something that helps you grow in your new practice area.

Spending just 45 minutes a week reading some of your colleagues' published articles or poking around the resources provided on your firm's intranet will help you round out your practice, heighten your interest and enthusiasm for the work, and ultimately pay dividends as you progress through your career.

In the same vein, don't be bashful when it comes to asking your colleagues questions and leaning in to your curiosities. Your success relies on developing a sound foundation of knowledge, so ask lots of questions and seek out multiple answers.

Getting comfortable doing so will not only underscore your commitment to becoming a stellar attorney, but it will also open up opportunities to foster relationships with colleagues and help you build a more nuanced understanding of topics that pique your interest.

Don't sell yourself short.

This can be a tough one to follow through on, given that, as someone who has recently retooled, you can't help but feel like you're showing up too late in the game to be useful.

But fight the tendency to give in to these types of doubts and insecurities. Remember, although you may not know everything you think you need to know yet, you still bring significant value to the table. In fact, it's one of the reasons you were hired in the first place.

In moments where you catch yourself wondering if you might be seeing an issue differently, speak up! Your prior experience adds a fresh perspective to the conversation, and in any event, your input is likely to help facilitate a more robust discussion that inevitably benefits everyone at the table.

Conclusion

For attorneys looking to pivot to a new practice area or who are already in the process of doing so, it is worth emphasizing that you almost certainly have the ability to successfully retool. But unlike a switch from one employer to another to do the same type of work, a successful transition to a new practice area requires an earnest and conscientious effort to learn and contribute.

Seeking out valued mentors, being willing to go the extra mile, and staying confident are proactive steps associates can take to ensure a successful transition as they begin the retooling process.

Susan Berson is a managing member and division head of the health law, communications, and antitrust practices at Mintz Levin Cohn Ferris Glovsky and Popeo PC.

Hassan Shaikh is an associate at Mintz.

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