

A Career Audit for Law Firm Associates

By Stephen E. Seckler, Esq.*

In the 20 years that I have been in the legal search business, I have spoken to hundreds of associates and partners about their careers. Through these conversations, I have observed that many associates spend little time thinking critically about their jobs. Landing a job as an associate in a good law firm was the goal during law school. For those who have achieved this goal, the next step seems much less clear.

What follows is a tool that I have created to help associates who are ready to think more critically about their law-firm experience. While no test can substitute for speaking with an experienced professional, this audit will get you on your way in isolating which issues merit further exploration.

By starting down this path of self-assessment, you can begin to take more control over your destiny and ultimately build a more satisfying career.

Many associates I speak to tell me that they are interested in exploring a move in-house. If this describes you, then you may want to read [What I've Learned as In-house Counsel](http://bit.ly/2Aepb90) (<http://bit.ly/2Aepb90>). That article is a summary of career advice offered by over ten lawyers who began their careers in private practice. But if you are wondering whether you are in the "right" law firm, then this audit is for you.

The 29 statements below are intended to help you evaluate your current situation. For each statement, circle the number that best corresponds to your feelings about the firm where you work. On this scale, 1 means "not at all" and 10 means "very much."

There is some overlap in these questions, but overall they should help you get a better sense of whether you are at the right firm. Your answers will help focus on what is working well in your current situation and what needs improvement.

If you encounter a question that does not pertain to your situation, circle "N/A" (not applicable). In completing this exercise, it is best not to ponder questions for a long period of time. Rather, try and respond with your "gut" instinct.

1. I am satisfied with the overall level of professionalism demonstrated by partners and associates at my firm.

(a) by partners 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) by associates 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

2. I receive the support I need from junior associates, paralegals and support staff to get my work done in a timely fashion.

(a) from junior associates 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) from paralegals 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(c) from support staff 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

3. I feel respected and valued by my colleagues.

(a) by partners 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) by associates 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

4. I respect and value the legal work that my colleagues do and believe that our clients are well served by the lawyers in our firm.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

5. I am satisfied with the reputation that my firm holds in the legal and business communities.

(a) legal community 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) business community 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

6. I enjoy spending time with the lawyers at my firm and consider some of them to be my friends.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

7. I believe that the firm is well run and properly managed.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

8. The partners for whom I do work are approachable and willing to give me guidance.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

9. I believe that the firm provides me with clear guidelines about what it takes to become a partner and gives me periodic feedback so I know where I stand.

(a) clear guidelines 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) periodic feedback 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

10. I feel like the firm is a good fit for me culturally and that the firm is a place where I can achieve the work/life balance I desire.

(a) cultural fit 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) work/life balance I desire 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

11. I believe that it is possible to succeed at my firm without having to work "full time."

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

12. I believe that my firm places an appropriate emphasis on having "fun" and on creating a collegial work environment.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

13. I am proud to tell people where I work.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

14. I feel that I am given ample opportunity to develop my skills as a lawyer through internal and external training and that partners are available to help me develop my skills.

(a) internal and external training 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) availability of partners 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

15. I consistently receive work that I find interesting and challenging.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

16. I am satisfied with my workflow and believe that assignments are given to me with reasonable deadlines.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

17. I am given an appropriate level of responsibility and autonomy at the firm.

(a) appropriate responsibility 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) autonomy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

18. I work with the kinds of clients that I like to service.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

19. I am satisfied with my level of client contact.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

20. I feel that I am being compensated fairly (i.e. relative to the other lawyers in my firm).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

21. I am satisfied with my overall compensation and believe that my compensation is competitive with my peers at similar firms.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

22. The physical surroundings at the firm provide me with an environment where I can be productive.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

23. The firm makes a commitment to pro bono work and community service that is consistent with my own values.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

24. I am satisfied with the investment the firm has made in law office technology.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

25. I believe the firm supports the use of technology by providing appropriate technical assistance and training.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

26. The firm is committed to marketing and provides me with guidance about how I can begin to market my own legal services.

(a) committed to marketing 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) provides me with guidance 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

27. I am optimistic about the financial health of my firm and believe that the management committee is making the "right" decisions about the future.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

28. I plan to be at the firm in five years. In 10 years.

(a) in five years 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

(b) in 10 years 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

29. When I look at partners or associates who are several years ahead of me, I look forward to handling the type of work that they handle.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 N/A

Can You "Fix" Your Current Situation or Is It Time to Go Shopping?

This exercise provides a subjective picture of your current situation. More importantly, this exercise starts with the basic presumption that you like being a lawyer and plan to stay in the profession. If you have basic concerns about practicing law, then your answers to these questions may merely identify symptoms of a larger problem and career counseling may be in order.

If you are reasonably confident that you do want to continue practicing law, then go back and review the statements that you marked with a "6" or less. For each statement, consider how important that issue is to your overall career happiness.

In some instances, you will observe that you are not very satisfied with a particular aspect of your current job. But since that issue is not central to your satisfaction as a lawyer, perhaps you are willing to accept that every job involves some compromise.

If there are statements that received a "6" or less and these issues are important to your overall career happiness, then consider whether there is anything you can do to "fix" the problems or if the firm is doing anything that will be of help. Sometimes gaining more seniority will eliminate a problem.

If the problems you identified are fundamental and, in your estimation, unlikely to change, it may be time to start thinking about making a lateral move; and now that you have completed the audit, you will have more clarity about your preferences. This can only help you in making decisions that are consistent with long-term job satisfaction.

**Stephen Seckler is Director of Attorney Recruitment and Career Advancement for Marc Z Legal Staffing in Boston, MA and President of Seckler Legal Consulting and Coaching in Newton, MA. For over 20 years he has been helping lawyers who want to advance their careers. He recruits top legal talent for law firm, life sciences, technology and financial services companies. He coaches a broad mix of attorneys on how to advance their careers and how to market themselves with greater effectiveness.*