

Coalition Newsletter – Coach’s Corner

Dear Coach,

As a young associate, how strategic should you be in getting work? Specifically, should you look to see what practice areas are growing at that time to increase your chances of making partner down the road? Should you seek to work with people you like or try to find the work you like?

Sincerely,

Looking for Work

Dear Looking for Work,

Finding long term satisfaction in the law involves aligning your area of practice with your values, interests and talents. While it can be tempting to pick a practice area or type of work because it looks “hot” or because you like the attorneys who do the work, I recommend first examining whether this work fits with your overall interests and career aspirations. As you may have already seen, people leave their firms all the time (even established partners), and practices that are on the rise one day may not exist the next. At the same time, as you get more senior (and if your goal is to make partner), it becomes more important to be strategic about the work you take on. So how should a young associate approach finding satisfying work that will increase her chances of making partner?

When I work with lawyers who are looking to find a good practice fit or an area of specialization, I first challenge them to engage in some self-examination. This doesn’t need to involve a formal assessment or work with a coach (although these can help). But it should include an honest assessment of your strengths, areas of interest, core values (both for your career and other parts of your life), and your overall career goals. Consider what is most important to you in your career. Do you like to be constantly challenged? Is important for you to have variety in your work? A predictable schedule? Is working as part of a team important to you? Do you prefer researching and writing over engaging in negotiations? How much does compensation matter to you and what would you be willing to trade for less money? How important is it for you to have the title of partner? And how do these values stack up against each other?

In my experience, lawyers often skip the internal work or don’t realize the importance of it until a few years into their legal career when they are feeling dissatisfied. A midlevel associate I worked with realized that her most important value was having a predictable schedule and work flow, which was misaligned with her current M&A practice. After a few detours, she ended up in a corporate in house position that allowed her more predictability, and she is much happier. If you want to do more of this type of exploration, I recommend

reading and working through the exercises in *The Creative Lawyer* by fellow lawyer coach Michael Melcher (second edition now available from the ABA).

If you are in a practice area that is a good fit but are trying to decide what type of work to pursue, I suggest starting with a similar self examination. Include informal and formal feedback you've received about your work as well as your own assessment. Lawyers often focus on their areas of weakness, but I recommend focusing on and seeking out work that plays to your strengths. And if your goal is to make partner, it is wise to be strategic about the work you take on and the partners you work for. Engage your mentors in conversations about your career, including whether there are partners you should work for or types of work that are particularly valued by your practice. Speak with your group leaders about your practice's strategy and whether there are areas where you can add value.

As you get more senior and are looking at promotion, it becomes important to think about your "business case" for promotion and to align your work with what is valued by your firm/practice. I have worked with senior associates who are excellent attorneys with great reputations, but because they chose work in an area that was not a growth area in their practice, they had to "reinvent" themselves when it came time for promotion. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, although it can come as a surprise and require some retooling.

Your legal career is potentially long, so finding work you are passionate about and that is aligned with your core values and strengths will help keep you satisfied and motivated. And keeping your eye on the prize (your career goals) will help you focus on creating a game plan for getting where you want to be.

Good luck getting the work you want,

Coach Jen

Coach's Corner is a feature in our newsletter, and is authored by Coalition member Jennifer Rakstad. Jennifer is the Career Development Advisor (US) at Mayer Brown LLP and a certified coach (ACC; Hudson Institute). To submit a question, you can email Jennifer at jrakstad@mayerbrown.com or the Coalition email at Chicago@thewomenscoalition.com