

## Ask the Coach

By Gary Mitchell; Managing Director, GEM Communications Inc.

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**Q.** *"I am a fifth-year associate and I hate the practice area I am in. I like the firm, though. What should I do?"*

**A.** The obvious answer is to change practice areas. So how do you go about that? I am going to answer that question under four sub-headings: permission, planning, support and implementation.

### Permission

The first thing I would recommend is to gain permission from someone inside the firm. This should be someone you trust and have a good relationship with. It could either be a member of firm management, your mentor or a senior partner. It is important you have a good relationship with this person so that they will be sympathetic to your situation.

In this meeting, once you have laid out your situation, ask the person for help. Ask for feedback about what you should do, or whom you should talk to next. I have seen both sides of the coin – firms that have supported lawyers transitioning from one practice area to another, and firms that simply show the lawyer the door.

Before you spend much time figuring out your next steps, you should find out where the firm stands on this. If firm members don't support you and you already know this, stop reading this article, pick up the phone and call a recruiter.

### Planning

The next step is to plan how you are going to transition from one area of law to another. Some of the questions you may want to consider when creating your plan: What areas of law are you interested in? What are some of the values you hold dear? Who are some of the senior lawyers you would like to work with? What types of work interest you? What are some of the emerging areas of opportunity? Where is the firm looking to expand and grow?

How will you transition your clients to other lawyers at the firm and minimize any damage to the relationship?

Other things to consider in your plan include: How much education will you need to get up to speed in your new area? How much time is it going to take? Do you have willing senior lawyers who will mentor you through the process? Is your firm really going to support you or are you pretty much on your own? It's time to get crystal clear on your career goals. Why are you a lawyer? What do you want your career to look like? What is it exactly that you don't like about your current practice area that would be different in a new one?

### Support

Once you have answered those questions, it's time to find out where and what type of support you require. I had a client a while back who did this. He went to his marketing director and asked to have a coach. And we spent a lot of time talking about the questions listed above. He had to become laser-like in his approach, effort, time, education and business development in order to make this work. Eventually he did.

***If your firm doesn't support you (or your direction) and you already know this, stop reading this article, pick up the phone and call a recruiter.***



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Flash forward and he is now happy, productive and growing his practice. You may not need that level of support. Perhaps someone within the firm mentoring you on a regular basis will be sufficient. Either way, it's very important to understand what you need in the way of support and where it is going to come from.

### Implementation

The final step is implementation. There is no point in making a change, creating a plan and then not following that plan through. So first, create your "to-do" list. Prioritize it in order of importance. Next, attach realistic timelines for you to achieve those action items. Make sure you are accountable to someone else. This could be your mentor or the person supporting you through this transition, but have someone to report to.

You have a steep hill in front of you. However, I know you can do it – I have witnessed it. And I have seen what it can do for someone's life to actually be happy in a career. Happiness leads to success.

Good luck. Be sure to e-mail me and let me know how it all works out.

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