

ABOVE THE LAW

Career Alternatives

Life On Another Planet: Moving From A Law Firm To A Nonlegal Job In Corporate America

Enter a world where questions are actually encouraged, and concepts like ‘teamwork’ are more than a curiosity.

By [Neil Handwerker and Kimberly Fine](#) on July 23, 2025 12:14 pm

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When lawyers who have never worked in business transition to a nonlegal job, they may feel as if they have landed on another planet — in some good ways and some bad ways. Fortunately, the good far outweighs the bad.

In addition to placing job ads on the ex judicata job board, more and more companies are asking us to conduct individual searches. Typically, they are for more experienced lawyers — often a law firm partner — for a specific *nonlegal* job.

We recently placed a partner from an Am Law 10 firm with a Fortune 500 client in a non-practicing capacity. She noted two things right off the bat:

1. There was a sense of teamwork that didn't exist in the law firm
2. The employees, including senior executives, did not have “a sense

of entitlement” the way her colleagues at XYZ firm did.

Those are two very major differences. Regarding the sense of entitlement, that may or may not be the case at other elite Biglaw firms. It depends on the firm. Regarding

teamwork, however, it is almost certain that you will see far more teamwork in Corporate America.

What's the goal (mission)?

Occasionally, I'll ask friends who work in Biglaw, the last time they were called into a meeting at the start of a matter to talk about a client's goal and the different roles everyone in the room will play towards getting a favorable result. They can't remember it ever happening.

In Corporate America, on the other hand, there will be meetings (maybe too many) where there is a shared sense of purpose.

Be prepared to talk about more than your task

In Biglaw before, during, and after the pandemic, it has been very easy to feel not connected to the organization. You're given a task, and you do it well. The person two doors down may be working on another task for the same matter and you have no interaction with that person concerning the matter.

It is rarer in Corporate America because so much work is done collaboratively. So be prepared to talk about all the different aspects of the project you're working on with many different people *even if your task on that project is a relatively small one*.

What about questions?

I'm glad you asked.

In so many law firms, questions are often *not* asked because the person who requires the information doesn't want to call attention to the fact that they don't know something (and/or because asking questions would be perceived as a sign of neediness or weakness). In addition, in many law firms, unfortunately, people don't necessarily want to help, furthering the "I had to figure it out, so you need to figure it out" mentality.

Overcoming the knowledge gap

When you move from a law firm to Corporate America, in most circumstances, you will be going into a situation where many others in the company know a lot more than you do (naturally, your boss). But unlike in a law firm where seniority governs (i.e., a fifth-year associate knows more than a second-year) you may find yourself managing people who have a lot more experience than you do in a particular function. What do you do? Fake it until you make it? Or ask questions?

When transitioning from law to business, often the most pleasant surprise is questions are encouraged and people genuinely want to help. Further, one's law school training can come into play as learning to ask questions and how to ask the right questions is very much a part of the training.

David Perla, Vice Chairman of **Burford Capital**, [relayed a story](#) about his experience in moving to a business role at Monster.com when ex judicata interviewed him a while back.

“I realized I was out of my depth from the perspective of understanding financial data. I was not financially literate enough, even as an M&A lawyer. I went to our CFO assuming that I needed to take accounting classes. So, I showed him a course catalog I was looking at,” he said. “He took it out of my hand; he opened it up and he circled a program on financial statement analysis. He looked at the guy teaching it and said ‘Take this class. He will teach you what you need to know about financials at a public company.’ And he was dead right. *But I had to know who to ask and not be afraid to ask.*”

Andy Gold, formerly Senior Vice President & CHRO at **Pitney Bowes** and a member of **ex judicata’s Advisory Board**, [sheds some additional light](#): “The other thing I learned is I didn’t know everything I needed to know for my job. For example, I had never done a strategic talent review before, but now had to lead the process for a 2,000-person region. When I began to panic thinking about it, my wife asked, ‘Isn’t there somebody who knows how to do this?’ In fact, it only took me about an hour to find the right person who guided me through the process and helped me facilitate the talent conversations,” he said.

“Knowing when to ask for help was the biggest learning for me. I realized that, whether it was my team or others, there are people who know what to do and most of them are happy to help you be successful.”

Differing hierarchies

As an associate, you theoretically have 25, 50, or 500 bosses, however many partners there are at the firm. While you might spend all your time working for the same three partners, any of the other partners at the firm can come into your office and ask you to do something. It’s very different in Corporate America. You have a boss, who has a boss, who has a boss, in what is known as a *chain of command*. Only your immediate boss will ask you to do something as a rule.

Management/Leadership 101

Since you are now part of a chain of command, you will have people to manage. The question I almost always get when helping law firm associates transition to business roles is “Can you recommend a good course to take on fundamentals of management?”

I then advise them that while they are at it, they should also consider taking a course on leadership. Because if they haven’t managed, they haven’t ever led. And there is a difference.

“Management” consists of controlling a group or a set of entities to accomplish a goal.

“Leadership” refers to an individual’s ability to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward organizational success. Influence and inspiration separate leaders from managers, not power and control.

ex judicata has thought many times about creating a course: *How to Manage in Corporate America When You Have Never Managed Anyone*. But then we get busy doing other things and we put it off — temporarily.

Different Paths to Advancement

This is, perhaps, the most critical difference between working in a law firm and a nonlegal job in Corporate America. In a law, you start as a first-year associate and then are promoted in lockstep fashion to second-year associate, third-year associate, etc. At some point, if you remain and become a partner, your advancement — both in compensation and leadership roles (head of a practice area, head of an office, etc.) — is heavily dependent on your ability to bring in business, to sell.

In Corporate America, the world is quite different. Your advancement is largely based on how well you work with others — those above you and those under you. To those transitioning from a law firm, there is a steep learning curve because, as discussed above, you have little to no experience managing people and little to no experience leading people. You could be a brilliant idea person but if you don’t possess the people skills, your advancement and professional growth will be limited.

Impostor Syndrome

As if it were not hard enough transitioning from law to business, a certain percentage of attorneys find themselves suffering from impostor syndrome. It may manifest itself at any time, but the first six months — when moving from practicing attorney to business executive — is when the phenomenon is most often observed.

One day the person will be a successful attorney able to measure progress every day. It may be a brief filed, a client emergency handled, or it may be as simple as recording eight hours of billable time that day. Then they find themselves in an executive position in Corporate America where there generally is not the same kind of yardstick as seen in the practice of law. We have an article devoted to impostor syndrome, its impact, and how to overcome it on exjudicata.com, which can be accessed [here](#).

Have questions. Don’t hesitate. Contact us at info@exjudicata.com.

Neil Handwerker and Kimberly Fine are the co-founders of [ex judicata](http://exjudicata.com), a website providing information, resources, webinars, coaching, money management, and inspirational content for lawyers and law students interested in moving to nonlegal careers. This is their second startup together. Feel free to [email](#) them with any questions or suggestions or connect with them on [LinkedIn](#).

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