

Origin Legal International: Our Guide to Moving as a Partner

Purpose of this guide

This guide is designed as a resource for Partners who are considering a career move.

We hope you find it useful although inevitably it can't answer every question. If you would like to discuss any aspect, have further questions or suggestions for how we can improve it, please get in touch.

Where can I go?

The legal world has changed and law firm Partners have no more escaped this than anyone else. The recession led to significant shifts in the market for senior lawyers and whilst the recovery is long since underway, the scrutiny applied to any senior lateral hire remains strong.

Even now, with growth firmly back on the agenda, few Partners are being hired for their technical expertise or experience alone. Never has commercial aptitude and a strong business case been as important to a successful lateral hire, so if you don't have a following you will need to work hard to reassure your prospective Partners of your potential.

The first question to ask yourself is **do you have a portable business?** Many law firms take the view that followings are inflated and of course this does happen – it's not an exact science and in law like anywhere else there are always the eternal optimists!

But our experience is that more lawyers down play the strength of their client base, potentially ruling them out of the perfect move. So think carefully about your business, your clients, and your network of contacts, and if some of this feels like guesswork, don't worry, that's exactly what it is, an informed guess. People are naturally cautious about creating a rod for their back by over-promising and we would certainly not recommend that; a realistic estimate based on a solid business plan (more of that later) is always the best bet.

And **if you don't have a portable business**, all is not lost. The reality is that your options will be more limited but there are still opportunities for some, particularly at the more junior end of the spectrum.

City firm Partners with good credentials can find themselves in demand at smaller or mid-sized firms who will capitalise on the publicity of a high-profile hire; Tax or Employment Partners might be in demand at a firm who has a weight of Private Equity clients starting to transact; and anyone with a very niche area of expertise, Mandarin language skills, a knowledge of the African markets for example, is always likely to catch the eye of an ambitious firm.

Where can I go?

We would encourage you to ask two questions: “**where can I go?**” and “**where do I want to go?**” It is easy to assume that the only options are the obvious ones, often leaving people wondering if it is really worth the trouble.

Dealing with ‘**where can you go?**’ first. There is no hard and fast rule as every role and every firm is different, but generalising, it comes back in large part to your following and what you want to earn. The old adage that you should expect to earn a third of what you bring in still holds fast. US firms are an obvious route for a successful Partner with a big book of business, but you can expect them to look for something north of £600k and likely £1m+ for equity. The largest City firms are equally demanding as they will need convincing to bring in a lateral hire ahead of the ranks of senior associates awaiting their opportunity.

Prime target for many City lawyers is the mid-tier firms, many of whom are fiercely ambitious and have seen the market flux of recent years as an opportunity to play catch up. These firms can offer a nice combination of ambition, infrastructure, opportunity and remuneration, and typically the expectations of portable business will be a bit lower. **And what if you have the start of a following, 200k or 300k and lots of potential?** As long as you are not expecting to go into the equity or hit the jackpot with your earnings on day one, there are plenty of firms with an eye for an opportunity. Our advice - talk to a well-informed recruiter and get a good sense of what is out there before ruling anything in or out.

The question of ‘**where do you want to go?**’ is often just as taxing. It is well worth taking the time, away from the pressures of the office (and ideally not on the back of a bad day) to really think through why you want to move and what you hope to achieve with that move. Typically people are motivated by a combination of **pull factors** (the attractions of the new employer - better career prospects, improved quality of work, better remuneration, better work/life balance), and **push factors** (those driving you away from your current firm - more on this below). It is easy to go headlong into a search for a ‘step-up’ only to find that when the opportunity arises it doesn’t seem as attractive as you thought it might. Again, a good recruitment consultant should be experienced in helping people to clarify their thinking on this point.

Should I move?

Sometimes the best advice a recruiter can give you is to stay put. It doesn’t pay our bills in the short term but it certainly helps to build trust. Typically though, the thought of a career move will have been brought on by something and more often than not, that thing doesn’t change. Allied with consideration of what life might be like elsewhere, take time to analyse what it is you are not content with at the moment. This enables you to clearly judge whether the opportunities that arise are likely to address it.

These **push factors** range from the most prosaic - unhappiness with remuneration, career progression slower than you feel is merited or your department head driving you up the wall - through to complex business and strategy questions - lack of marketing support, inability to hire the right staff to grow the

practice, lack of focus on or reputation in your area of expertise. In fact, one of the most common reasons for moving amongst more senior lawyers is to 'get a better platform', especially in a market where individual practices can be held back by the under-performance of a wider firm.

Nobody can tell you whether you should or should not move and no recruiter should try, but one thing is for certain - **knowing what else is out there will never weaken your position**. Taking a look at the market and even meeting a few competitors for a coffee might feel like treachery but in truth, whilst it might lead to your departure, it might just as likely lead to the conclusion that the grass really isn't greener, leaving you to settle happily back into your current role in the knowledge that you are in the right place.

Why do I need a recruitment consultant?

Naturally we are biased, but in most cases it is difficult to see how working with **a good agent** can be anything but beneficial. Recruiters spend their entire working week immersed in the market and we wouldn't last long if we didn't know and speak to a huge number of people. Of course you need to find someone who you believe you can trust, who seems to know the market and who has contacts in the types of firms you are interested in. If you don't get that feeling - and you should always test a recruiter on their expertise - look elsewhere. There are plenty of us out there!

Once you do have a relationship, that consultant should be able to help you with the questions above - where can I go, what am I looking to achieve, should I even consider moving - as well as with the more process focused points below; from the best way to make approaches, through to writing a business plan and negotiating an offer. Not to mention the day to day processes. You are busy, and the arranging and rearranging of multiple interviews with multiple firms is challenging even for those who do it for a living!

Your consultant does of course have a vested interest - typically they don't get a fee (unless they are retained) until they are successful. But we have never seen a Partner 'persuaded' to move by a consultant so any decent operator will have long since reached the conclusion that it is far better to be frank, honest and impartial and present the best range of options to give you, and us, the best chance of success.

What should I do next?

As a Partner **you shouldn't feel under any pressure to send a CV at the outset**. Partly this is a luxury afforded by your status but it is also because there tends to be a wealth of information available online about most law firm Partners allowing a consultant to get a good enough overview of your practice to get the ball rolling. We would always recommend meeting but if you are overseas and that is not possible at least schedule a time to speak in detail over the telephone. Be prepared to ask testing questions of the consultant but also be prepared to answer some fairly detailed questions as well. A consultant's ability to represent you will be significantly enhanced if they have a full understanding of your practice and what makes you tick, so we would advise that you guard against those who seem to know everything they need to know after five minutes.

Once you have decided to work with a consultant they should agree, in consultation with you, **a plan of action and a time-frame** for executing it. A contingent recruiter will be able to discuss a range of different firms and should be able to advise you of the best way to approach them. Needless to say you should be in control of which firms reach the target list but it is always worth listening to the consultant's opinion as some firms have got a story to tell that hasn't yet reached the market. Also ensure at this stage that you are both in agreement on what happens next. Critical throughout is communication and both parties should **maintain regular contact** even if it sometimes takes a while to get feedback.

When invitations to interview start to come in, your consultant will advise you on the nature of the meeting – typically the first stage will be an 'informal' chat with a hiring Partner - and how best to prepare for it.

The Business Plan

Integral to any Partner move nowadays is the business plan. It comes in all shapes and sizes, with some firms wanting a standard form completed whilst others are happy for you to put together your own.

Consultants will have worked on plenty of these plans so whilst the core information needs to be yours, you can also capitalise on the knowledge and resources they can offer, even if only as a second opinion. Whilst there is no right or wrong format, any successful plan is likely to include the following:

Introduction:

This should summarise your core skills, your experience, an overview of your practice and what you are seeking to achieve. Aim to keep it to a few lines, half a page at most – it really should do no more than set the scene.

Keep in mind that the business plan should be understandable in its broadest sense from a quick glance at the Introduction and the Conclusion. Whilst the hiring Partner(s) will go through it with a fine tooth comb, not everyone who has the ability to influence the hiring decision will.

Practice Summary:

This should be a detailed but to the point summary of your practice. Consider factors such as:

- Core and supplementary areas of expertise (if useful, break them down by percentage)
- Geographical reach and sector specialisms of your client base
- Marketing and practice development initiatives
- Key achievements, headline deals/cases, client wins
- Work won for other departments in your firm
- Management responsibilities and where you fit into the structure at present
- Any requirements (tax capability for example) that are essential for your practice to work

Leading on neatly from the summary of your practice is the real core area, the financials. These are split into previous and projected billings and whilst people's caution in discussing this is natural, they really are

an unavoidable part of the process. Having these figures clear in your mind at this stage – rather than later on - is invaluable preparation for the interviews that follow.

Billing History:

We would suggest going back three years, including personal, client and matter billings (or your firm's equivalent), recorded hours, non-billable hours and remuneration for those years.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Billable Hours			
Hourly Rate			
Personal Billings			
Client Billings			
Matter Billings			
Compensation			

By all means include notes below the figures where anything merits further explanation.

It is worth remembering that the old adage of **billing three times your compensation** still holds firm. It is rudimentary and simplistic but most firms look at these multiples whether they admit it or not.

Projected Billings:

This is the bit that most people agonise over. Go too high and you risk being found out at interview or worse, six months into your new role. Go too low and you might never get to interview. It's a minefield but one which has to be navigated if you are to make that career change.

Start by looking at your billings and assessing which of those clients **see you as their lawyer rather than your firm as their lawyers**. Look at their historical billings, take into context the prevailing economic conditions, whether an improved platform would allow you to capitalise further or whether you would be likely to lose some work even if they as a client continued to instruct you. Then you make an educated guess, after all that is all that predicting a following can be.

You may well find it easier to categorise your client base, valuing the strength of contact by percentages or describing as hot, warm or cold for example - something like this:

	Type of Work	Annual Value	Strength of Contact
Client A			
Client B			
Client C			
Client D			

This is likely to produce figures that range from a worst case scenario X to a best case scenario of Y and your forecast should probably fall somewhere between the two (although bear in mind the risk that a cautious firm might from that point on work solely to the worst case scenario).

Going through this exercise will equip you well to answer the questions that come up in interview and should leave you confident in your answers. Remember, everyone knows it is a guess, you just need to be able to defend why it is an educated one.

And if you have **no following at all?** Talk to a recruitment consultant who can advise you on the best ways to mitigate this. If you have a niche area of expertise, a long list of contacts, are looking to 'step down' the league tables to secure partnership for the first time, or have a name that is known in the market, it is possible to get around a lack of following, but it will require a well thought out pitch.

The Fit:

Having established what you bring in your own right, now look at what your expertise combined with the prospective firm's platform could achieve. This bit really has to be **tailored** but thinking it through in advance of a meeting can only help your preparation.

Consider strengths of the firm that will be beneficial to your clients – cross selling potential could dramatically increase your value. Consider how your expertise can be cross sold into their clients, allowing you to supplement your portable business with increased business gained from the firm's platform.

This is an opportunity to **showcase the potential**. Keep your feet on the ground of course, but it pays to be ambitious. It could be what sets you apart from other potential hires.

Research is key in this area – brush up on the firm's practice, its key people, growth areas, new clients won in relevant sectors, comments from the Management about strategy... any of these could arm you with the perfect evidence of how your expertise and their plans are a match made in heaven.

Conclusions:

Time to bring it all together in **a succinct but impactful summary** of what you will bring to the table. Recap all of the key points above, your expertise, your contacts, your track record, your business, your potential, and remember – some of the people involved might only have read this bit so be confident in what you offer and make it clear that they would be crazy to miss this opportunity!

If you are considering writing a business plan, have a work in progress or even want an impartial view on an existing version please get in touch. We are happy to take a look and give our feedback and if appropriate, will work with you to complete it.

The offer

Negotiating an offer can be a fraught process at the end of a long series of meetings. Most senior lawyers will be accomplished negotiators but it can be a different matter when it's your future you're negotiating. So our advice is to **use your consultant** as a sounding board if not to handle the negotiations directly.

Some considerations:

- Recap your original motivations and make sure they're not forgotten as the focus now moves onto the financials.
- Consider the potential Year Two and Year Three compensation not just the base in Year One.
- Remember that the firm is also 'taking a risk' in making what is probably a relatively rare and expensive hire – is there room for compromise?
- If you are looking for a big uplift, be prepared to justify why you are worth more, unproven, to the new firm, than you are as a proven entity at your old firm.
- Tread carefully when juggling offers. Having a better alternative can increase the offer from your preferred firm but can also cause bad feeling if a firm feels it is being used as a bargaining chip.

Communication is key. Ask questions, agree deadlines and stick to them. Taking time to think it through is sensible but stringing people along will rarely benefit either party.

I'm going, what now?

Ideally, by now you will already have **checked your contract** and any associated documents to see what potential obstacles could come up. Think about all of the issues, notice period, confidentiality clauses and outstanding remuneration are all as important as restrictive covenants. Unless you are sure that your exit will be amicable it may be an idea at this point to get some legal advice (unless you are an employment partner of course).

Next is looking at the new contract – you are probably more expert at this than most but nonetheless check that everything you discussed is reflected in the agreement and iron out any potential grey areas. One thing we would recommend is going through the paperwork thoroughly and coming back with **a final list of issues** to be resolved, as a drip feed of 'problems' can leave a firm wondering if you are playing for time.

Only when you are happy with the paperwork, and contracts are agreed, should you make this known to your current firm. **Prepare for the worst** – even if a firm understands your reasons for leaving once the dust has settled, they might still react badly at the moment the news is broken. It's always best not to burn bridges so make clear in your own mind how you are going to approach it, and what you will give as your reasons, and then stick to them. It is always advisable to focus on the positives of the firm you are moving to rather than the negatives of the place you are leaving, even if inside you are already popping the Champagne corks!

About us

Origin Legal International is a division of Origin Legal, one of the United Kingdom's leading independent legal recruitment specialists. Formerly operating as Gladwin Law, the team has fifteen years' experience of placing lawyers into senior level appointments in London and internationally. Divisional Head **Jason Horobin** was previously head of the International Private Practice division for a major Global legal recruitment agency before founding Gladwin Law in 2011 and subsequently merging the business into Origin Legal in 2015.

We are committed to providing a personalised, pro-active service to candidates and clients, offering genuine advice and consultation, rather than the commoditised target driven approach now often seen in our industry. Our model relies heavily on developing long-term working partnerships, and we know we have to earn these. We think we do the simple things better than most. We know our markets inside out, we are always responsive, our information is accurate and our approaches are discreet and professional.

We do not assume that every Partner who contacts us has decided to move and we are happy to help with your fact-finding process with no obligations to take things further. Equally, if you have decided it is time for a change we will gladly meet you to discuss the market, options as we see them, and tell you a bit more about how we work.

Either way, please get in touch.

Contact details

If you would like any advice on the recruitment market, your options, or simply want to know what is going on out there, please do get in touch. We are happy to speak outside of working hours and will always do our best to meet at a convenient time and in a convenient location.

In the first instance please contact:

Jason Horobin on **+44 (0)7712 051 941** or by email at **jason.horobin@originlegal.co.uk**.

For more information about Origin Legal please visit our website www.originlegal.co.uk
