

Local Offices of National Firms Offer Opportunities

Curtis B. Toll, The Legal Intelligencer

February 24, 2015 | [0 Comments](#)



Curtis B. Toll

Philadelphia offices of large national and international law firms that are headquartered outside of the city seem to be actively seeking lateral partners right now. For many, a move to an office that is not the firm's traditional "home office" feels risky, but a local office and a large national platform can be the best of both worlds for the right lawyer.

Client service is the touchstone of any lateral move. A move ought to provide a platform that will allow you to more easily and effectively serve your clients and eventually to expand your practice. If the value of what you offer goes up, good things follow. A close second among considerations in any lateral move is the fit of the new firm for your practice and your personality.

Certain characteristics of large firms with multiple offices are essential to understanding both the client service advantages and the cultural considerations of a lateral move. Many national or international firms with local offices are, for the most part, assembled, not grown. Over time, management has selectively and deliberately recruited lawyers who have track records of demonstrated success. An assembled firm that does its job well will have a high concentration of really good lawyers and a lateral joining a local office of a well-assembled firm has the opportunity to offer the services of those really good lawyers to his or her clients.

An assembled firm may also have acquired a wider variety of excellent niche practitioners than a firm that has grown organically. While many large firms try to encourage lawyers to branch away from the mainstream practices into specialties that are in high demand, that can be hard to do from within. Developing competence in a new practice area where the firm has no present expertise is time-consuming and difficult. An assembled firm finds good practices in niche specialties, and simply adds them to meet market demands. By joining an assembled firm, you can often improve your ability to offer niche services to your existing clients.

Many large firms assembled in this manner have many offices of different sizes in legal markets all over the country, and even internationally. Lawyers whose clients do business all over can benefit from a large geographic footprint.

Finally, when a client has a major case or significant transaction, a partner in a local office, no matter the size, can still bring the full resources of a big firm to bear upon the matter. From the breadth of legal expertise and human resources to staff a major matter, to technology, research tools, conference rooms in major cities and access at preferred rates, to third-party service providers, a well-functioning firm can seamlessly make all of these resources available to offices of all sizes. So if you like the collegiality and informality of a smaller setting but worry about what will happen when a client needs advice on an obscure legal point or ends up in some bet-the-company litigation, a local office of a large firm could be the solution you are looking for.

For all of these benefits to be realized, the new firm should have certain features, which should be the subject of careful diligence. The compensation system must incentivize lawyers to help on matters you originate. If the firm is "eat what you kill" rather than "eat what you work" or "eat because your partners praise you," you may find accessing the assembled excellence difficult. The firm must have made the investments in technology that will facilitate communication among attorneys and to allow lawyers in different offices to work easily in teams and to access the firm's resources. There must be systems in place to allow you to find the help your clients need and to have access to firm management when required. Some mechanism—regular retreats, encouraged visits, a well-functioning website, a mentor who will guide you through the firm—must exist.

To be fair, one also has to be diligent about oneself and one's practice. These client-service features of a move to a local office of a large international firm only matter for some practices. The lawyer has to have clients with a wide range of legal needs, often in niche areas or over a broad geographic range.

A lawyer also needs to have a certain practice style to take advantage of a national platform from a local office of a large firm. If you cannot imagine calling someone you have never met in Orlando about an Occupational Safety and Health Administration fatality problem or someone in Denver about valuing oil and gas interests, then having access to these lawyers will not help your clients much. If you are uncomfortable collaborating remotely and need to have regular office banter with your partner in order to recommend him or her to a client, then a local or regional office is limiting rather than empowering.

If a firm is looking for you, chances are the firm has clients that would benefit from your services and it cannot meet those clients' needs with its existing talent base. It is likely that you will be unique, or nearly so, when you join a local office of a large firm. That is an opportunity to expand your practice if you can exploit it, but it can be isolating for those who do not like to get around meeting their new colleagues.

And then there is the matter of distance from the traditional home office (or, in some cases, the absence of a single firm headquarters). Many lawyers enjoy the autonomy that distance provides and the chance to customize their office atmosphere to the needs of their clients and their practices. But if you like to walk the corridors of power regularly and run into the head of your department at the coffee roaster every morning, you may not have that daily casual contact in a firm where leadership is resident in multiple locations.

For the right lateral candidate with the right practice, the option of joining a local office of a large national or international firm can provide significant opportunities to better serve your existing clients and expand your practice. As with all lateral moves, careful due diligence of the new firm and a healthy amount of self-knowledge are necessary to find the best fit.

Curtis B. Toll is the operating shareholder of the Philadelphia office of Greenberg Traurig and a member of the firm's environmental practice. He focuses his work on environmental liability transfer, contaminated site redevelopment, and brownfield transactions.

Read more: <http://www.thelegalintelligencer.com/id=1202718326237/Local-Offices-of-National-Firms-Offer-Opportunities#ixzz3TEriMKCM>