

“Why Did You Leave Your Last Firm?”

Q. I was a second year associate in a large firm, and I left recently because "things weren't working out." What do I tell prospective employers when they ask me why I left?

A. You are wise to anticipate this question. Too many people go into interviews hoping they won't be asked the difficult questions. You should not only expect the difficult questions; you should prepare your response in advance.

In your case, you need to know what your previous employer will say before you can tell a prospective employer why you left. In most instances a departure by an attorney is a mutual decision. Will the partners in your old firm back you up on this? Will they support you if you said you left because you couldn't develop the type of practice you wanted? Although it may be awkward to talk to the partners at the firm you just left, you will probably need their references, particularly if you want to work in another law firm. Most likely, they will be happy to assist you in finding an appropriate new job, and will generally tell a prospective employer about your strengths.

If pressed, however, they will probably also be honest about your weaknesses. Obviously, it is essential that you know what weaknesses they would reveal. Sometimes it is helpful to have a neutral, third person call to check your references just to make sure that you can rely on them. Knowing what your references will say should help you formulate an honest, positive response.

In telling a prospective employer why you left, resist the temptation to find fault with your old firm. Instead, focus on your desire to take on greater responsibility in your chosen field and emphasize why you think that would be possible in the new setting. Of course, this requires some work on your part. You must assess your own strengths and weaknesses and research a new firm or company to determine whether you could be successful in the new environment. In my experience and that of my clients, the attorneys who are ultimately the most successful and satisfied in making a career transition are those who spend the most time and effort looking at themselves and prospective employers before making a move. It's not easy, but it's worth it!

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