



## 4 Ways Laterals Can Spot A Toxic Law Firm Before Day 1

By [Aebra Coe](#)

Law360, New York (May 5, 2017, 3:24 PM EDT) -- Many attorneys are lured laterally to new law firms that appear placid from the outside but that they discover soon after accepting a job offer are actually plagued by toxic workplace cultures.

Getting duped by cunning recruitment officers and persuasive managers doesn't have to be an unavoidable risk of making a lateral move, though, according to several recruiters who say signs of a toxic workplace culture are usually visible during the recruitment and interview processes, and vigilant associates and partners can often identify and pass up law firms that are less than desirable.

"The importance of finding the right culture cannot be understated," said Jill Huse, co-founder of Society 54. "It's imperative that you ask the right questions that give you a full picture of the firm so that you can assess whether you would be a good fit."

Charles Volkert, executive director of [Robert Half Legal](#), said a law firm's culture is as important as the position itself.

"A law firm's culture and work environment — its vision and values, leadership principles, operating structure and practice management methods — can play a major role in a legal professional's ability to achieve career goals and ultimately be successful," he said.

Here are four red flags that a law firm may be trying to hide bad blood.

### **There's a Revolving Door**

If the firm has regularly lost talent across a number of practice areas in recent years, that's a sign there are likely firmwide issues, according to Sabina Lippman of recruiting firm [Lippman Jungers LLC](#).

If attrition is the result of a strategic move, for instance the law firm is eliminating a less profitable practice group, then there's no cause for concern, but she said

an across-the-board exodus is a big red warning light that all is not tranquil underneath the surface.

Conversely, the addition of a large number of new laterals within a short time can be a issue as well if not handled properly, according to Barbara Mayden of Young Mayden Legal Search.

"While you as a lateral may be thrilled with the opportunity this firm opening its doors wide may present, a firm composed primarily of those parachuting in may in fact be a warning sign that the culture that the firm is so proud and boasts of may not be inculcated in the current ranks," Mayden said.

Jane Howze, founder of The Alexander Group, pointed out that history is rife with examples of law firms that have grown quickly, failed to properly integrate those new faces, and then lost their collegial culture as a result.

"When firms grow that fast you have to make sure everyone is on the same page when it comes to how attorneys treat each other, how they deal with conflict and how they serve clients. All of those things are really important and they're questions a lateral candidate should ask," Howze said.

### **People Bad-Mouth Each Other**

One easy way applicants can identify a toxic law firm before accepting an offer is by paying attention to whether the people they encounter during the application process make negative comments about their colleagues, recruiters said.

That could mean an offhand comment about a recently departed lateral, a jab at a lawyer in another department or even veiled dissatisfaction with a member of management, but if negative comments leak out during the time when those in contact with a potential lateral are supposed to be selling the law firm, there could be an unhealthy level of negativity under the surface, according to Lippman.

"During the interview process you know people are coached to have positive views of the firm, and if a negative perspective leaks through, that's a danger sign," she said. "The person may be disillusioned for other reasons that may not impact you, but you'll need to do more diligence."

Another red flag appears if a candidate gets to meet with most of the team they'd be joining but a few key members are left out of the meeting, according to Huse.

"Candidates need to make sure that they are meeting with all the persons that they may be directly working with," she said. "If the firm doesn't offer this as an option during the interview process, it probably means there is a personality that they are trying to hide."

## **Lines of Communication Are Tangled**

Law firms should be able to communicate clearly and effectively both with a candidate and internally, and any signs they're not doing so should make lateral candidates wary, recruiters said.

Law firms should be able to be open enough with a candidate that they're willing to promptly share important information, including a detailed job description, salary range, billable-hour expectation, firm-specific information about culture and growth goals, attorneys in the practice group and the type of associate the firms believe would do well there, said Diane Rifkin, founder of Rifkin Consulting.

"Taking into consideration that firm hiring personnel often wear many hats and are very busy, it's nonetheless important that they show a willingness to communicate necessary information to a recruiter or candidate," Rifkin said.

Inability to communicate consistently with an outside candidate can indicate the law firm's partners are not on the same page, which is a sign of a problematic culture, Lippman said.

For instance, if one person says that the intellectual property litigation group is incredibly collaborative between the firm's offices in New York and Silicon Valley, and then a second person says that the firm tends to be a little siloed between the two, there could be an issue, she said.

"Any time there's a lack of consistency, it means that people don't have a consistent view of what the firm is. And it probably means that people aren't all rowing in the same direction," she said.

## **There Are Bad Signs in Management**

When considering a lateral move, attorneys should always check out a law firm's recent financial figures in various legal media to see what kind of shape they're in, according to Howze. If a firm has had a recent downturn in revenue or profits, the candidate should examine the reasons behind the dip, she said.

"Find out if it's just a one-off, or if it's symptomatic of deeper financial problems — too much debt, an unpopular chairman, those types of things," she said.

Other aspects of a firm's management can be warnings as well. One instance, according to Larry Watanabe of [Watanabe Nason LLC](#), is if a firm has had a recent change of leadership at the highest levels.

"Most firms experience a degree of turbulence with a recent change of senior management," he said. "Change of firm practice direction and strategy will almost

always not please everyone and can create a significant shift in firm culture as well."

Lippman pointed to management's ability to maintain diversity at the law firm as an important factor in deciding whether its management is able to promote a fully nontoxic culture.

If the law firm's diversity numbers are lower than the industry's average, women and minority candidates may have a harder time feeling as if they fit in and finding mentors, Lippman said.

"It says something about the firm's culture," she said. "Something about the culture isn't hospitable for women and diverse associates because they're not staying."

--Editing by Brian Baresch and Catherine Sum.