Adapting To Private Practice: 3 Tips On Finding The Right Job

By **Rachael Jones** (October 10, 2025)

Attorneys frequently transition from government work to private practice during changes in administration, encountering challenges and surprises as they do so. In this Expert Analysis series, attorneys who made that move in the last few years reflect on how they adapted to law firm life, and discuss tips for others. If you are interested in writing about your experience, please email expertanalysis@law360.com.

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After 23 years working as a state and federal prosecutor, I made the pivotal decision to enter private practice. My career had been dedicated exclusively to criminal law within government entities, and I had found deep fulfillment in my role as a prosecutor, so selecting the right firm and practice area was critical.

With that in mind, I recently moved to McKool Smith, where I now focus on white collar defense and civil litigation.

In this article, I will share three main lessons that this journey has taught me to ensure success for others considering a similar move: deep personal reflection, attentive listening to find the right practice and some good old-fashioned hustling.

Personal Reflection: Identifying Strengths and Desires

The most crucial factor is determining what you truly want to do and where your strengths lie, as these will guide your decision-making process.

On this journey, a friend once asked me, "Rachael, you can do a lot of things but what do you want to do?" At the time, I didn't fully grasp the difference, but now, working at a firm that is a perfect fit for me, I understand her point.

There were many paths I could have taken, but the real question was whether I would be happy pursuing them. It is easy to think, "I will be fine doing that," and you might encounter firms with available work — but does that work excite you? Settling for work you don't love is a risk, and you will be better able to serve clients doing work you love.

Being introspective and prepared to pass on opportunities that aren't the right fit is essential. If you sense that something isn't right, be honest and upfront so that partners and managers don't waste valuable billable hours interviewing you. And a word to the wise — avoid burning bridges, as firms do not appreciate offer shopping.

To determine my strengths and desires I reflected on the past two decades of my career. I loved my work as an assistant district attorney and assistant U.S. attorney, having tried nearly 100 cases to a jury. I lived for final argument, scoring points on cross-examination, making a child feel safe testifying about traumatic occurrences, and I loved the feeling when I succeeded — yes, I am a trial lawyer that enjoys winning.

My family background also shaped the person I am today. My dad maintains a booming trial

practice and my mom ran a cooking school for many years — the performance and zealous advocacy in the courtroom feels natural to me. I loved the camaraderie of working down in the trenches of a trial.

Teaching new prosecutors how to be a trial lawyer was one of the highlights of my years as a supervisor, so mentoring associates is instinctive to me. While the potential flexibility of having my own firm was attractive, I preferred the collaborative environment of having partners just down the hall.

As an extrovert, I get energy from others, so maintaining the stamina required for business development was not an issue, but it could be challenging for others. In today's legal market, there are paths that don't require building a client base, but I was excited about the prospect of doing so and supporting others in the process.

True self-reflection is often not easy, but most things that are worthwhile are not.

Finding the Right Practice and Team

My self-reflection confirmed that I was better suited for a firm environment rather than practicing solo or going in-house. This decision helped me narrow my options.

I then focused on identifying the type of firm and work that aligned with my strengths and interests. Ultimately, this led me to McKool Smith, a litigation firm known for its commitment to trial work. Associates at McKool Smith also actively participate in trials, often taking on speaking roles much earlier than other large firms. The firm's dedication to trial work resonated with my own passions.

The way a firm conducts itself during the hiring process is a strong indicator of what it will be like to work there. If a firm is enthusiastic, thoughtful and open during interviews, it's a positive sign. My firm carefully selected my interviewers beyond just the decision-makers, ensuring I had an immediate network within the firm to answer any questions.

Thoughtful touches such as office space arrangements, onboarding procedures and workplace comforts contribute significantly to quality of life. During interviews, assess whether the firm is receptive to your questions and concerns. Ask what support the firm provides for business development, what contractual guarantees are offered, and whether they are genuinely excited to have you join.

The firm's energy will be invaluable as you start and build your practice. Remember, transitioning from government work is a marathon, not a sprint — trust your instincts and don't be afraid to move on if something doesn't feel right. I learned a lot about what questions to ask by listening throughout the process.

The Power of Networking

Having a clear strategy is essential when making this transition. I did not share my plans at my U.S. attorney's office, as I didn't want to burden anyone with keeping my secret. The current market is saturated with former government lawyers, so discretion is important since the timeline and options are uncertain.

I also avoided using a headhunter, preferring to rely on my network. Once you send out a resume, you lose control of the process — leveraging personal connections felt more effective.

Networking is crucial, and I followed common advice by actively utilizing my contacts. I made a written list of my network and considered how each person could help. I arranged meetings — lunches, coffees, dinners — at their convenience, seeking their advice and recommendations. Here is where you find your hustle!

Trust is vital in these discussions, as you may need to decline certain suggestions due to personal reasons. If you cannot be candid with someone, it may be better not to involve them. Maintaining relationships is important, especially since you will rely on the same network in private practice. Each person provided valuable insights, from introductions to resume advice, firm culture, compensation structures, billable hour expectations, and internal movements.

I focused on listening and never repeated information or the source — after all, discretion in the practice of law is paramount. For those transitioning from government to private practice, every conversation can offer useful information, sometimes in unexpected ways. Each meeting helped clarify my preferences — the adage "knowledge is power" remains true. When I started meetings with my firm, I quickly knew it was what I wanted because I had done my homework!

One final word of advice — if you have a significant other, involve them at the beginning. My husband has always a supportive partner but having him part of this decision was essential. I bounced ideas, reported what I learned, discussed possibilities and appreciated his encouragement and focus.

Loved ones often remember aspects of our work history that we may forget. This is not the time for revisionist history. Having him involved from the start also eased my transition into the firm as he understood the motivations and expectations. Marital harmony can never be underestimated.

Conclusion

Leaving my career as an assistant U.S. attorney was a difficult decision, but it was the right time considering my experience, age, family dynamics and future goals. All these factors are important when contemplating such a move.

I have found my new work to be both challenging and rewarding. While I miss my former colleagues and our daily conference room brown-bag lunches, we still keep in touch. And they like it when I call to possibly come in on a case.

I have enjoyed every moment of this new chapter, and in the end, the bittersweet feeling of leaving one job you love but moving on to a new, exciting job is the best we can hope for in our professional lives. I wish the best of luck to anyone considering this transition and hope you find as much enjoyment in it as I have.

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