



# Q&A: Navigating Your Organization

by Fellows **Jason DeJonker**, Partner at Bryan Cave Leighton Paisner LLP, and **Jaimala Pai**, Senior Legal Director, Global New Business Models & Value Based Healthcare, at Medtronic

## 1. What do you wish you had known about navigating the legal workplace that you had to learn the hard way?

**Jaimala Pai:** Avoid comparing yourself to others. Follow the adage of running your own race, which means setting goals, always looking towards those goals, and not focusing on who is next to, behind, or in front of you. While running, if you turn your head to look at others, you slow down. This holds true in the workplace. The quickest way to slow down your own progress is to compare yourself to a colleague, especially if you do so to try and show how you deserve something more, like a promotion, bigger project, or more direct reports (e.g. “John is a level higher than me, but I do more than John and handle more complex legal work so I deserve to be promoted”).

It’s also a way to negatively impact your own confidence level, especially if you feel you are “behind” a colleague. You never know where that colleague truly is in their own career or what other factors may be at play (i.e. growing practice or business area), so comparing yourself is not necessarily fair or accurate.

It’s important to advocate for yourself by building your brand through discussing your projects, achievements, and the areas you need experience in, and by requesting projects that provide visibility, all to progress in your own career. But when you are dismissive of or negative about a colleague in the process, it makes you seem less like a leader and team player.

Remember that there are numerous ways to be successful and effective, and this advice should not dissuade you from asking your colleagues for advice. By learning how others approach problem solving, you will add to your toolbox of skills.

**Jason DeJonker:** Ultimately, the people that matter are those that have recognizable, repeat business. While there may be individuals that will try to help you with your career along the way, if those people do not have strong influence within the organization, their help can only go so far.

Splitting your attention between mentors—who can provide you with advice and guidance as you consider options in your career—and sponsors—who are internal influencers or can actually influence those in positions of authority within the organization—is important. Recognizing this distinction, and finding the proper mix of mentors and sponsors, can be difficult, and is something I learned the hard way.

## **2. How do you identify and connect with people who will bring you more complex work or who have greater power within your organization?**

**DeJonker:** Generally speaking, you need to find individuals within your organization that can provide you this information and are willing to share the knowledge with you. In most occasions these folks will be older than you by at least one level, and will have trust in you as someone with whom they can confide. Much like my example above, identifying those within your organization whom you can trust and who also have the relevant information can take some time. Nevertheless, finding these people is incredibly important. As such, I always recommend attending as many internal networking events as possible, because you never know where you will get this information and who will ultimately be your trusted confidante.

## **3. How do you explore a different practice area or other roles within your organization?**

**Pai:** In my career, I've changed practice areas, roles, and industries. In the beginning of my career, I was involved in commercial litigation, then practiced employment law for three years, and finally moved into health law. I've worked for a law firm, an airline, a health insurance company, and two medical device manufacturers.

First, don't be afraid of changing your practice area, role within your organization, or industry. Being comfortable does not mean you are satisfied, and sometimes pushing yourself towards your passion means change and feeling uncomfortable. Be open to taking on assignments in a different area as a means of gaining experience and showing your willingness and eagerness to learn something new. Employers of course want smart people whose skills fit the job, but those that are most successful are enthusiastic about the organization, the team, and the work.

Second, changing practice areas, roles, or industries goes best when that change means moving towards something you are passionate about. In order to accomplish this change, it's important to show how your skills are transferrable and why you are drawn to a practice area, role, or industry. For example, although I've worked in different industries, all were regulated, so I understand how to give practical legal advice while also being aware of the highly regulated framework the business operates within. In addition, I became interested in health law a few years after my mom was diagnosed with a degenerative disease and I wanted to learn more about our health care system. After working for a health insurance plan, I wanted to work in an industry where there was a tangible product that helped improve people's lives, which is why I moved to the medical device industry. Once you figure out why you're

interested in a specific practice area, role, or industry, it's easier to sell the move to your organization and explain what you can do for them.

**DeJonker:** First, you need to make sure that you are doing a good job with respect to your current position. Without that level of trust and a good reputation within your organization, it is very difficult to get anyone to entertain the idea of you looking at or transitioning into a different role.

Once you obtain the requisite internal good will, I recommend reaching out to both your direct supervisor and the person that would supervise you if you were to make an internal transition. (Bonus points if you have a separate sponsor within your organization who would be completely separate from your current supervisor and “dream” supervisor.) If you can connect with all three on the topic, you improve your chances of success.

Of course, it is helpful if there is a need in a new area or a new role to fill. Otherwise, you just have to express interest and wait your turn. But if you are a resource to your organization, they should be helpful in assisting you in finding the right place where you can maximize your talents.

#### **4. What advice would you give to a young attorney who can't quite seem to find where they “fit” within the organization?**

**Pai:** Many of us are often the “only one” in the room, which makes it hard to feel like you belong or fit. My advice is to seek out mentors and sponsors (and know the difference between the two) at your organization. The better opportunities you receive, the more you will feel valued. And while you may never have a best friend at work, feeling valued is key to feeling like you belong.

Also, never stop networking! One way to do this and make connections is through employee resource groups at your organization, affinity bar associations, or LCLD. While you may be the only one in the room at your organization, you are not the only one in our profession. Talking and connecting with someone who understands and has experienced what you are feeling is important.

Most importantly, please know that you add significant value just by being at your organization and by being part of the legal profession.

**DeJonker:** Change jobs. I kid, I kid! In all seriousness, you may eventually need to think about moving on if you cannot make things work. Often, diverse lawyers wait too long before they make the hard decision and recognize that their current platform is not conducive to being a successful lawyer.

Before taking such a drastic step, it is important to determine whether it is you or the organization. Think about why you came to that place, what kind of work you wanted to do, and with whom you expected to work. If the answers to these questions haven't changed since you joined the organization, then the issue may be more you than the job. If, however, certain of these inputs changed—for example, the amount of work in the practice area for

which you joined the firm has decreased—then it may be more on the organization than on you.

In either case, if you still like the people and they still like you, you should be able to make some changes as it relates to the substance of the work to improve your fit. If the organization has lost faith in you, or vice versa, then it may be time for a change.

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