

Adapting To Private Practice: From Fed. Prosecutor To BigLaw

By **Michael Beckwith** (March 26, 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.

Entering private practice opened my eyes to an entirely new world. While more challenging than expected, the transition was exciting and resulted in significant professional growth.

My move to private practice came with a host of unique surprises, lessons learned and a broader legal perspective. And, of course, there was the soul-searching question that every career federal prosecutor asks — can I bring myself to become a defense lawyer?

After serving in the government for more than 15 years as an assistant U.S. attorney, there were knowns and unknowns.



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On the known side of the ledger was my knowledge of federal enforcement subject matter, particularly fraud, money laundering and the Bank Secrecy Act, as well as managing financial investigations and working with foreign enforcement authorities in cross-border investigations.

I was also familiar with federal processes and federal agencies, and I had a deep understanding of federal regulatory and enforcement priorities and setting those priorities, many of which have not changed, even today.

On the unknown side of the ledger were the uncertainties associated with client billing, client relationships and the question of how to translate effectively my investigative, litigation, trial and appellate skills to the private sector.

As chief of transnational organized crime in the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of California, I found it difficult to leave my friends, teams and the people with whom I grew up professionally. I knew I wanted to face new challenges, gain new experiences and make way for the next round of leaders in the U.S. attorney's office.

Transitioning to private practice in 2024 was a significant change nonetheless, both in the type of work and the workplace culture. One of the first challenges I faced was the shift from a mission-driven environment to a business-driven one.

In government, my work was focused largely on public safety and federal interests, including investigating global financial networks that supported transnational organized crime, a stated priority of the current administration.

While the stakes were high, there was almost no emphasis on revenue generation or business development. In contrast, private practice is inherently tied to quality client service

and client needs, as well as billable hours and maintaining profitability. I am grateful to be in an environment that places foremost the client's best interest and the opportunity to think outside the box to achieve that objective.

One surprise during this transition was the pacing of decisions. In the government, some decisions, such as charging or investigative efforts, often require extensive deliberation, stakeholder input and time to ensure service to the public interest.

By contrast, in private practice, the urgency of client demands often leads to accelerated timetables and the need to make decisions more quickly, albeit with the same amount of preparation and research. Adapting to this change of pace took time and a refocusing of my efforts.

Another challenge was adjusting to business development expectations. In the government, the primary focus was on advocacy, subject matter expertise and public service.

In private practice, by contrast, law firms expect senior attorneys to manage client case work, develop new business and network effectively, all in ways that I found initially and instinctively unfamiliar. This required a shift in mindset.

Ultimately, I found this combination of efforts fun and rewarding. Fortunately, due to referrals from within Dickinson Wright, I quickly added value as we worked across from government attorneys almost immediately.

And, I benefited directly from joining a team of former federal prosecutors and regulatory enforcers who helped guide my transition and set expectations for me and for the firm.

Navigating Professional Relationships

One of the most rewarding aspects of my government service was the camaraderie among agents and attorneys, and the close-knit relationships that developed among colleagues focused on public service. In my transition to private practice, one of my main concerns was how my relationships with former colleagues would evolve.

In the past year, I found that evolution to be positive. Notably, I am finding that there is often a mutual respect between opposing counsel with government experience and an in-depth understanding of the government's processes, practices and approach due to a shared background.

Moreover, a sense of trust often develops based on the fact that we have a similar understanding of law and policy, and speak a similar language.

Fortunately, many of the relationships I built in government continued to thrive after my move to private practice. While some lines of communication changed, they did not close. I still maintain contact with former colleagues, whether through informal meetings or professional networking.

The shared experience of work in the public sector creates a lasting bond, and it is not uncommon to have former government colleagues reach out for advice or collaboration regarding their contemplated moves to the private sector.

In the past year, whether I am working with defense attorneys — who have graciously taken me under their wings — or opposite former government colleagues, I found it

heartening that my experiences reinforced the idea that legal professionals, even when on opposing sides, share a deep respect for each other's experience.

Adapting to Workflow

A major adjustment when transitioning from government to private practice was the shift in workflow.

In government, the work often involved policy-driven cases that required careful analysis and interaction with various stakeholders, such as my work in the sanctions arena, which required coordinating with multiple agencies and federal departments.

That was also true with the international investigations on which I worked, balancing U.S. enforcement policy interests with those of foreign sovereigns. There was typically more time for research and crafting legal and policy positions. In contrast, private practice is much more client-driven.

Clients need timely, actionable advice, and much of the work revolves around meeting business deadlines and developing strategies with incomplete information about the investigations.

To me, the most significant change was the speed at which tasks needed to be completed. In the government, so long as an investigation was ongoing, I might have had several weeks or even months to craft an anticipated legal argument that would only come into play after charging a case.

In private practice, especially when handling criminal litigation or corporate investigations, the pace is much faster. Clients need delivery of legal positions and recommendations on tight deadlines that require quick yet thorough analysis.

Additionally, the billing structure in private practice necessitates a shift in how best to manage time.

In government, there were no billable hours or fee structures. Private practice, however, demands precise recordkeeping of how every minute is spent. Clients pay close attention to the cost of professional services, and ethical defense practice requires precise and fair billing.

This transition requires a new way of thinking about time and productivity.

To navigate this new workflow, I sought advice from my more experienced colleagues at Dickinson Wright, who shared valuable tips on managing deadlines while still maintaining high-quality work.

Time management and prioritization became key skills, even more than they were in the resource-limited government. I had to embrace the fact that I could not spend the same amount of time on each project. Instead, the emphasis was on providing effective solutions within given time frames.

Onboarding Support

The transition from government to private practice would have been much more difficult without a solid onboarding process at Dickinson Wright. The firm took great care to ease my

transition, starting with a detailed introduction to the firm's culture, expectations and workflows.

The firm immediately teamed me with and introduced me to three attorneys who made a similar transition, which proved invaluable. Having three partners who walked in my shoes previously was a great comfort, as they could offer practical advice on everything from managing client relationships to understanding firm billing systems.

Additionally, Dickinson Wright emphasized the importance of internal and external networking and client development from the start, which helped me understand the importance of relationship-building in private practice.

The onboarding process made it clear that, while my legal experience was valuable, my ability to foster connections within the firm and with prospective clients would be just as critical.

Advice for Others Making the Transition

We are currently at a very difficult time for government attorneys attempting to transition to private practice. Recruiters are struggling to place even the most qualified government attorneys. Law school placement offices are discouraging federal enforcement careers.

For those considering the move from government to private practice, my biggest piece of advice is to be patient and, when you do transition, expect a steep learning curve.

The skills that made you successful in government — drive, quality legal analysis, research and advocacy — will serve you well, but adapting to the private sector requires developing new skills, particularly around business development and client relations.

Moreover, it is essential to remain open to change. The pace, structure and expectations in private practice may feel overwhelming at first, but with time, you will acclimate.

Embrace the opportunity to learn and grow, and don't be afraid to ask for help or mentorship. It is important to understand that private practice does not operate in the same way as government and requires a focus on client outcomes.

Lastly, do not forget to leverage the relationships you have built. Former colleagues, whether in government or private practice, are often invaluable resources as you navigate this new chapter in your career. The connections you made during your government service may continue to provide support, advice and collaboration as you build your new practice.

Making the transition from government to private practice is no small feat, but with the right mindset, preparation, support and landing pad, it can be an incredibly rewarding experience.

The shift requires both hard work and a willingness to adapt. It is a process of growth, one that can expand your skills, challenge your assumptions and open up exciting new opportunities.

While it may be daunting, it is a transition that, with time and effort, can help you become a more well-rounded and versatile lawyer.

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