

dcbar.org

DC Bar - On the Move: Navigating Career Shifts Post-Government Service

By Jeremy Conrad

Brian Levine and Karen LeeIn 2025 the United States experienced the largest single-year reduction of federal government workers since World War II, shedding more than 200,000 employees as of September.

In an October court filing, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) said that more than 4,200 federal employees had received layoff notices across seven agencies. Add this to the estimated 76,000 workers who took the Trump administration's offer to resign with pay and benefits through September. In total, nearly 300,000 people — or 12 percent of the 2.4 million civilian federal positions — were projected to be eliminated in 2025 through layoffs, buyouts, and planned reductions. DOJ alone lost around a third of its roughly 320 senior career leaders, Bloomberg Law reported in September.

For former federal lawyers looking to start a new chapter in their careers, the path to opportunities now comes with some tough challenges. Normally, a former government employee might be able to seek employment at a law firm, but the widespread federal workforce reduction has undercut displaced attorneys' chances of leveraging their specialized experience.

Another challenge is that often federal employees lack the robust professional network needed to amplify their professional visibility and help market their value. Due to certain restrictions, active networking is uncommon among government workers, stifling connections that could fuel career mobility after federal employment.

"You have to keep a low profile when you are in government work, unless you are at the very top of your agency," says Brian Levine, a former cybercrime prosecutor with the Justice

Department. “You can’t do a lot on social media, you can’t do business development, so when people leave government and go to law firms or consulting firms, where they’re expected to help bring in business, they’re not necessarily in the best position to do it, having never done it before.”

While working for a consulting firm after seven years at DOJ, Levine also noticed the absence of a developed pipeline for attorneys transitioning from public service to private sector work. “I was finding it very difficult to locate people based on their formal experience,” he says. “It was hard to find someone who worked as an attorney in a specific district, or at the U.S. Attorney’s Office, even when I was directly linked to them.”

Necessary Connections

Levine’s solution to bridge the gap between public service and private opportunity is FormerGov.com, which initially functioned as a searchable directory to connect former federal, state, and local government employees with private employers looking for their expertise. Conceived in 2024, FormerGov launched in April 2025, around the time a high volume of federal workers began to reenter the private sector. Levine and his partner, marketing strategist Max Lang, pivoted their original model to accommodate this change in the market.

“Suddenly we had this huge population in need of finding employment, so we switched our model over from the more passive business development model we started out with to one more focused on their needs,” Levine says.

To accommodate emerging circumstances and incentivize use of the subscription-based service, there is no fee for employers seeking to hire former government employees. Member fees are also waived for former government employees who are out of work.

While FormerGov facilitates job matches, the platform also strengthens connections among former government workers themselves.

For example, on Tuesdays FormerGov hosts a coworking event at the Eaton House in downtown D.C., where between 30 and 50 former government attorneys gather to work on their résumés and mix with peers in a convivial environment. Levine says this kind of networking opportunity not only addresses a gap in the skill set among former government employees, but it also may prove valuable in the near future.

“People are already talking about reconstituting the government, and if each of these agencies has to find all the talent that it needs, it will be helpful if it is gathered in one place,” says Levine.

Specialized Talent Pool

Another platform that assists former federal workers with career transitions is FedsForward.com, “a comprehensive ecosystem that leverages technology and community to support public servants navigating career moves across all sectors — including back into government when needed.”

FedsForward Executive Director and Cofounder Karen F. Lee says the nonprofit is built on three key observations from her own journey in and out of government service, which included employment at the Office of Management and Budget, the Department of Defense (now Department of War), and the law firm Kirkland & Ellis LLP.

“The first is that public service can be done in any sector of the economy ... public sector or private sector,” Lee says. “The second is that service in the private sector enabled me to be a better public servant back inside the government. The ability to understand business models, incentives, disincentives, and core interests — as well as how entities outside of the government viewed and engaged with it — enabled me to align interests so that we could move toward a shared goal.”

And third, after leaving government service, Lee found that “it was very challenging ... to translate my skills, identify work on the outside that aligned with my public service values, and fit in.”

“Moving across sectors of the economy isn’t just changing jobs; it is also orienting your skills to a completely different model,” Lee adds.

FedsForward has developed a large language model trained to identify the skills of federal workers and match them with the needs of potential employers, though Lee says that the methodology involves more than simply connecting employers and applicants using AI. “We’re talking about systematic talent integration into other parts of the economy,” Lee says, with the AI system taking into account how job titles, responsibilities, and outcomes are created.

FedsForward has been developed entirely by volunteer efforts, and in the coming months the organization will be launching a virtual community platform to expand on its in-person events. Lee is also looking to establish and develop strong partnerships with employers. “We would love to partner with employers, sit down with hiring managers, and help them find talent because the talent the federal government has represents every single part of the economy,” Lee says. “I think it’s an extraordinary strategic move for businesses and other organizations to grab up that talent.”

Solo Practice Considerations

Dan Mills and Kaitlin McGeeFacing a saturated job market, some attorneys consider solo practice as a temporary stopgap or fallback while continuing to seek employment. Daniel Mills of the D.C. Bar Practice Management Advisory Service (PMAS) views this trend with some trepidation. Success in the private sector requires focus and commitment, and practical and ethical barriers make dabbling in it potentially problematic for both practitioners and their clients, Mills says.

One consideration in making this leap is the degree to which government work experience does or does not have a private sector corollary. “Some folks don’t have a skill set that lends itself to a small firm,” Mills says. “A lawyer coming out of the Department of Justice who prosecuted people might not have that issue; if they simply move to the other side of the case and do defense work, they likely know how to do that ... they’ve been to court, they’ve tried cases.” But others, while brilliant lawyers, may struggle in a small firm environment, Mills adds.

Government employment tends to offer fewer opportunities to develop the business skills that are critical to solo and small firm success. Mills says some federal attorneys planning on starting a small firm have turned to PMAS for guidance and training on launching their own practice, developing a business plan, and understanding the essentials of marketing, billing, and other business considerations.

These demands are also the reasons why Mills advises against learning a new area of law at launch. Splitting attention between learning how to run a business and practicing in an unfamiliar realm tends not to have positive results, he says.

Former government attorneys considering hanging their shingle should also think about the degree to which it suits their personality. A significant amount of research has gone into examining the kind of person that excels in private practice, says Kaitlin McGee, PMAS advisor. “Dr. Larry Richard studied people who are rainmakers at law firms versus those that aren’t. There are three characteristics that are present in people who are good at generating legal business: ego drive, empathy, and resilience,” McGee says.

Work within the government commonly involves a very different set of character traits since most roles do not involve dealing with a customer, in the traditional sense, and offer a greater degree of stability and reliability than one finds in the ever-changing private market. Thriving in private practice involves more than just weathering some initial uncertainty, McGee says. “It doesn’t really go away. Even when you are running a successful practice and you know what you are doing, you can have a couple of slow weeks and wonder if things will dry up,” she adds.

McGee and Mills caution against going into solo practice as a temporary solution because attorney–client relationships can be complicated to wind up, and limiting one’s exposure can be harder than many people think. Attorneys have come to PMAS asking if they can circumvent issues by marketing themselves as consultants, rather than as lawyers. “You can’t consult your way out of the Rules of Professional Conduct,” McGee says. “It doesn’t matter what you call it. If you’re a lawyer and you’re providing legal advice, the rules of legal practice are going to apply.”

For attorneys who are well-suited to solo practice, PMAS offers a wealth of resources to help with the business side of law. Its two-day Basic Training & Beyond program, presented monthly, covers the essentials of starting and growing a firm in the District. Upon request, lawyers can participate in the Successful Small Firm Practice Course, an intensive, one-on-one program that provides an incubator-like experience for launching and developing a law firm.

For those in career transition, opportunities to talk to others in a similar position, network, and develop skills can provide valuable support during an emotionally and psychologically difficult time. The D.C. Bar Lawyer Assistance Program (LAP) has several free, confidential support groups that meet online, including one specifically designed for federal employees. LAP also offers clinical assessment, short-term counseling, and referrals to resources.

Reach D.C. Bar staff writer Jeremy Conrad at jconrad@dcbar.org.