



## Firm Culture *Find Your Niche*

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When deciding whether or not to accept a job offer from a law firm, there are many elements to take into account. Salary, benefits and, location top the list of factors to weigh in the balance. But there is one other thing that should be given serious consideration—the culture, or the “feel,” of a firm. More specifically, will you be happy working there? It is not a decision to be taken lightly.

### **Why Is Firm Culture So Important?**

Think about it. You will be spending anywhere from 50 to 80 hours a week with your co-workers and supervisors. That's more than half of your waking hours each week. It can be very difficult to motivate yourself to get up and go to the office each morning if you hate everyone who surrounds you. On the other hand, if you get along with the people in the office, those 80-hour workweeks might not chafe quite as badly. It is just as important that your fellow employees like you, too. The office pariah doesn't get the good assignments, much less the plum promotions. So while a high starting salary and a great location may be tempting, don't accept a job offer unless you think you'll fit in with the rest of the firm.

### **The Deciding Factors**

There is a wide variety of firm types, from the stuffy “white shoe” firms of old to the more laid-back environments where no one wears a suit unless he or she is sneaking out of the office for a job interview. A firm's size may also play a role in its culture. A list of key features that shape a firm's culture follows.

*Size*—The largest, most prestigious firm may not be the best environment for you. Generally, the larger the firm, the more bureaucratic it will be. Smaller firms tend to rely more heavily on every employee, meaning that even if you are just a first-year associate, you'll be expected to pitch in on important projects. At larger firms, if you are low on the totem pole, you'll be expected to pay your dues by working on research and analysis before you can jump into more exciting work.

While you may have less autonomy at a larger firm, you will probably be highly compensated. Those extra dollars come at a price, though. Larger firms tend to require longer hours. In fact, at some mega-firms, racking up an insanely high number of billable hours is a badge of honor. You can deduce what this means about a firm's culture. The firm is valued above all else, even mental health. However, you could wind up working just as many hours at a smaller firm. When a big case comes in and there are only a handful of attorneys in the office, everyone will have to work long and hard to get the job done. The difference is that you may feel like you are working more as part of a team and less as a cog in a vast machine.

Of course, some large firms pride themselves on nurturing their employees and involving even the most junior associates on big projects. Also, large firms tend to have more resources to devote to training, so you may end up with at least one more senior attorney being assigned to mentor you. At small firms, formal training programs may not exist.



A small firm can sometimes seem just like a big firm, though, particularly if it is a satellite office of a larger firm. In that case, the larger firm's culture will probably prevail.

Keep in mind that every firm has a different culture. Just because you worked at one large firm and hated being treated like some soulless worker doesn't mean that you will be treated that way at another large firm. Conversely, the fact that you loved the "hands-on" environment at the small firm you worked at right out of law school doesn't mean you'll have the same experience at another small firm. Different opportunities arise at firms of different sizes, as well. For instance, if you are looking for a part-time position, you would do well to consider small- and medium-sized firms, rather than only targeting the largest organizations. It is important to decide what aspects of firm culture are most important to you and then seek out a firm that embodies those traits, regardless of size.

*Location*-You may already have decided on your ideal geographic location. What you might not have considered is the role that location plays in deciding a firm's culture. East Coast firms may be more conservative than their counterparts on the West Coast. Big-city firms may be more rigid than those in smaller cities. A New York corporate law firm may have a much more aggressive attitude than a similar firm in, say, Seattle. Geography does not completely determine a firm's culture, but it does play a role. If you love the culture and the mindset of the city of Boston, you may find that you fit in well with law firms there. On the other hand, if you disdain "La-La Land," you may find that some "Left Coast" firms are too laid back for you. These are, of course, generalizations. Every large city has its share of staid, conservative, old-school law firms, and firm culture does not always mirror that of the surrounding area.

*Politics/Diversity*-Some firms have a definite political bent. If you are a bleeding-heart liberal, you probably won't fit in at a firm that prides itself on its roster of prominent GOP clients. In terms of diversity, almost every firm has a non-discrimination policy in place. However, there are some firms that are still very much "old boys' networks." Others pride themselves on maintaining a diverse workforce. Remember, though, that a firm may pay lip service to diversity by employing a few token members of different ethnicities. A better measure of diversity may be found by examining whether women, minorities, or gays and lesbians are respected and promoted to positions of power.

*Partner/Associate Ratio*-This number can tell you a lot about a firm. Are you a competitive type who is determined to dazzle the higher-ups with your outstanding work product? You may do well in a firm where the partner-to-associate ratio is low. You'll be competing against your co-workers for that partnership spot because partners are chosen based on performance. However, if you lack some of that competitive zeal, you may prefer a law firm where the partner-to-associate ratio is high. Often, these firms reward loyal employees with partnership after a set number of years. Quality of work is still valued, but competition is not as fierce. Also, keep in mind how you relate to your superiors. Do you prefer to report to just one person, or would you like to be able to interact with a variety of partners?

*Retention Rate*-This is most important if you are a new associate. Try to find out how many junior lawyers leave the firm within the first year or two. Every firm will have attrition, of course. However, when 80 or 90 percent of new associates jump ship before the two-year mark, that's a pretty clear sign that the firm doesn't inspire long-term loyalty.



*Clientele*-A firm's client list can provide you with valuable insight about firm culture. If a firm has the same clients it has had since its inception, that can signify a conservative outlook. In addition, keeping those clients may have become so important that the firm won't take any risks, for fear of losing them. Also, if a firm has only a few really big clients, what happens when one of them goes bankrupt or decides to take its business elsewhere? You can bet that will have a significant effect on the bottom line.

By contrast, a firm that has a mix of clients and is willing to take on younger, riskier companies may be less conservative and more growth-oriented. The client roster may not be as stable, but the firm might have a healthier bottom line.

*The Governing Body*-How does the firm conduct business on a daily basis? Does it have a democratic style of leadership, or is power closely held by just a few high-ranking partners? Even at a firm that models itself after a democracy, major decisions will usually be handled only by partners. However, associates may be asked to weigh in on issues like recruiting or entertainment for summer associates. This type of firm may be right for you if you like to be involved in the decision-making process.

Other firms are governed only by a small, centralized committee. Employees at firms like these are less likely to be bogged down by administrative details because the committee will handle most issues. However, you may feel that you have no voice in how the firm is run. In this case, it is important to find out how members of the governing body are chosen and what input, if any, other employees have.

*Lifestyle*-What are the minimum billable hours for the firm? Do most lawyers meet the minimum, or do they far exceed it? A firm may tout its generous vacation policy, but does anyone actually make use of his or her days off? Are employees encouraged to have a life outside the office, or does work trump all other responsibilities? Are lawyers happy and loyal to the firm, or do they jump ship within three or four years of signing on? If you can find answers to these questions, you'll have a good idea of the type of lifestyle a firm promotes. You may be pitching several people for the same job. So even if a law firm has contracted with a recruiter to find that one perfect associate, you will still have built-in competition from other candidates that the recruiter may be presenting.

### **Sizing Up a Firm**

Now that you know what factors influence a firm's culture, how do you gather your information? Martindale-Hubble and the NALP forms can provide you with a wealth of information. For more subjective issues, such as lifestyle, your best bet is to be observant while interviewing with a firm. When you interview, ask, "Why did you come to work for this firm?" or "What sets this firm apart from its competitors?" Of course, the interviewer will portray the firm in the best possible light, but you can gauge how sincere his or her answer is. Pay attention to how the attorneys interact with each other. Is everyone called by his or her first name, or are "Mr." and "Ms." the common forms of address? How is everyone dressed? Are suits practically a requirement, or does business casual rule? Are attorneys hunched over their desks behind closed doors, or do they have time to mingle with co-workers?



You might also want to solicit opinions from other attorneys. Even your friends who work at other firms might be able to give you some insight into a firm's reputation. They will have heard rumors about whether a particular firm is a slave-driver or does its best to promote office bonhomie. Of course, rumors are just that—rumors. They should not be taken at face value.

The career center at your law school can also provide you with information about a firm's culture. Many career centers keep surveys on file from students who have worked as summer associates at various firms. Even if you are not currently a student, your alumni status may entitle you to this information.

Finally, we at Legal Authority can help. We have access to a wide range of information about numerous firms, and we can help you determine which firm's culture would provide you with a satisfying working environment. We can guide you to smaller firms that you may not have considered. And, we can help you find non-traditional work arrangements, such as part-time opportunities. One of the keys to fulfillment as an attorney is finding a firm that you enjoy working at. Legal Authority can help you find your niche.