''When Law Firms Turn Mean''

One of the more interesting aspects of the current economic slowdown is the fact that many firms have become increasingly ''meaner'' to their associates. Not that all firms are mean, however, attorneys often need to be aware of the conditions within firms to survive. As this article will demonstrate, firms that are doing well economically are often not mean, and it is important for attorneys to seek out firms that consistently perform well economically.

The best way to study this phenomenon is to contrast differing economic conditions at different points in time-in a good climate and in a poor one. For example, in the Year 2001 there were numerous associate layoffs throughout the United States. This contrasts with the massive hiring binge at firms in between 1998 and most of 2000.

When Firms Were Nice

Between 1998 and 2000, most attorneys who worked in these firms did not believe their firms were mean at all. In fact, in order to try and get associates to stay (so they could do all the work), firms tended to be extremely lenient in performance reviews. Interviews of potential hires were often quite casual and not too stressful. Bonuses were large. Firm perks were abundant. For many associates practicing at large firms, their biggest complaint was often that they had far too much work to do. Nevertheless, associates with strong credentials could easily switch firms if they thought their firm was not a pleasant place to work.

For associates working at "nice" firms between 1998 and 2000, they often believed they could do no wrong. When looking for positions, associates were often very arrogant about the number of opportunities they had. In associate interviews, many law students associates would often grill hiring partners about what the firm could do for them and not vice versa. Things were very good for associates.

When Firms Turned Mean

In the Year 2001, many law firms became extremely unpleasant places to work. Performance reviews suddenly turned "nasty" when there had been no apparent change in the quality of the associates work. At many performance reviews associates were outright fired, or simply laid off. For corporate associates seeking to lateral into another law firm - in contrast to what occurred in the "boom years" - there were virtually no recruiter opportunities. With respect to the few interviews some of these associates received, the firms grilled them aggressively and were slow to hire. Bonuses? At many firms there were no bonuses. Perks were cancelled or dramatically scaled back. As for complaints about too much work, many associates were complaining about the exact opposite.

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What the Mean vs. Nice Dichotomy Means

The obvious meaning of all this is that when economic times are good, associates make firms a great deal of money and are treated well. When economic times are bad, associates may cost their firms money and their careers will be in jeopardy. Accordingly, economic forces beyond an attorney's immediate control often shape their futures.

However, for all of the criticisms of firms during bad economic times, attorneys at all levels do have control over their destinies and how they can confront economic situations. *For example, even during the worst economic times there are firms that treat associates well and post high profits.* Many of these firms never turn mean. Even during recession periods, some firms are aggressively hiring attorneys. It is also the firms that grow during poor economic climates that are also most likely to offer the best future opportunities.

In law school, most students do not know what to look for in a firm. For example, during the boom years one of the most attractive law firms to many associates in the United States was Venture Law Group in Silicon Valley. This firm essentially took one aspect of a law firm's corporate department and built it into a law firm doing nothing but this certain type of corporate work. Conversely, a firm that has been around for over 100 years, such as New York's Sullivan & Cromwell, has survived so long because it has numerous departments that complement each other and help sustain it through economic cycles. Incidentally, Venture Law Group is a firm that "became mean" during the economic slowdown. According to what Legal Authority clients have said, this particular firm actually laid off several first year associates who were less than six months into the practice of law.

The essence of becoming a client of Legal Authority is that it gives you the ability to distinguish the good firms from the mean ones which is crucially important in a bad economic climate. By allowing you to survey the market for all of the opportunities that match what you are seeking to do, Legal Authority empowers you to find firms that are actually growing in a bad economic climate. If you are a corporate associate, or practicing in an area of the law that is not in demand in a bad economic climate, finding firms that are hiring is an extremely significant thing: *You have found a firm that is likely to be in even better shape when the economy turns around and where there will be opportunities.*

Conclusions

When firms turn mean, it is usually due to economic forces. Firms are set up in different ways and, as they evolve they make many economic decisions that have a significant effect on them in both good and bad economies. Finding firms that are set up to weather economic storms is no easy task. The firm could be a very large law firm, or it could as easily be a smaller one. Legal Authority clients are assisted in finding the opportunities that are set up to survive and even prosper in economic storms. By contacting all of the firms in a given city that match precisely what you are seeking to do, you can identify hiring firms and then speak with them. While results differ for Legal Authority's clients, it is not uncommon for many of our clients to get more than 10 offers even in poor economies.