



## Beyond Borders—International Legal Employment

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International legal employment is extraordinarily diverse, ranging from jobs with multinational corporations to law firms to Peace Corps–related activities. Foreign legal experiences extend from living in Seoul and working for a South Korean law firm to living in Los Angeles and flying out to IBM branch offices throughout the world. Traveling abroad is common. Law students with unique foreign language skills and with experience living abroad may have an advantage in getting hired.

Most international legal work falls into the area of international business transactions and business litigation, which are often governed by US or British law. Thus, an attorney's best chance of doing international legal work is found at a US or British law firm or company. International legal employment often involves working with contrasting laws from two separate countries to accomplish the client's objectives. It can be helpful if an attorney is familiar with the language and the customs of the countries involved. Foreign legal opportunities fall into four general categories: foreign law firms, United States law firms, multinational corporations, and public interest work.

### **Types of International Employers**

#### ***Foreign Law Firms***

Overseas law firms, with the exception, at least of British law firms, usually limit their formal recruiting to a search for experienced attorneys. However, some firms offer internship positions and new associate positions to students that show exceptional language skills and express a genuine interest in living and working in their country. Foreign firms typically hire American attorneys who have specialized in corporate law or litigation. Foreign firms tend to want many of the same characteristics that American firms seek: high grades, journal or moot court experience, a good legal background, and strong writing skills. However, foreign firms also look at other characteristics such as language fluency, intent to practice in the country, an understanding of the culture, and some understanding of that country's laws. Large British law firms offer US law students the best opportunity to practice at a foreign law firm in an international setting. This is because, with the sole exception of US law, British law governs most international business transactions. Large British law firms may have offices worldwide and tend to be structured and pay their US attorneys similarly to their US law-firm counterparts. From the start of their careers, young associates at large British firms often have the opportunity to practice law in offices all over the world.

#### ***United States Law Firms***

A large US law firm is the most likely place for a law student to find international legal work. An increasing number of US firms, especially the top 200 US law firms, operate offices in other countries. Some of these firms have dozens of foreign offices. These firms occasionally have openings for interns or new associates in their overseas offices, but generally new associates have to work one to four years in the firm's US office and then transfer overseas. Attorneys at these firms



frequently deal with litigation or transactions involving one or more US citizens or corporations. Many large domestic firms work with foreign clients who do business in the United States (e.g., German, Brazilian, or Japanese clients coming to New York or Los Angeles to seek advice on international business transactions).

***Multinational Corporations***

General counsel for a multinational corporation, such as IBM or General Motors, will often travel internationally and may occasionally be assigned to live in a foreign country. These corporations tend to hire experienced attorneys but will periodically hire new associates and interns.

***International Public Interest Work***

The Peace Corps is one example of a public interest employer that seeks applications from attorneys who want to live abroad and work in service-oriented legal positions. This program has many openings each year and hires new attorneys as well as experienced attorneys.

**Advantages of International Law Jobs**

For some attorneys, a job in the international legal field gives them an opportunity to simultaneously do two things that they enjoy—practice law and see the world. Many international attorneys work in countries where they made connections before law school through military service, church service, or Peace Corps service. By working internationally, these attorneys are able to return to a country in which they enjoyed living, keep their foreign language skills up-to-date, and use their legal skills to deal with interesting and unique issues.

For attorneys who enjoy traveling, international work gives them an opportunity to see the world. International attorneys are often able to mix business and pleasure in their travels — attending to client needs in the morning and touring the Louvers in the afternoon. An additional advantage of international legal work is that it allows attorneys to experience a language and culture different from their own. Whether it is a one-week trip to Germany or a 10-year stay in Brazil, attorneys are able to see what lies beyond the borders of the United States.

**Disadvantages of International Law Jobs**

The primary disadvantage of international legal work is that some attorneys who practice it must live outside of the United States or travel a great deal of the time. For attorneys who are single, this might not be a significant disadvantage. However, for attorneys who are married or have children, international work might be difficult. Some foreign countries have unstable political systems, inadequate healthcare facilities, or poor educational programs. Even in those countries with high standards of living, an international lifestyle can be difficult for a family member unfamiliar with the language or culture of the foreign country. Most US attorneys practicing law on an international scale, however, are able to live in the United States. Another disadvantage is that skills developed in the international legal arena may not be easily transferable if an attorney decides to return to the United States. Although globalization reduces this concern, it does not entirely eliminate the problem. For instance, while an attorney working in Japan might quickly find work at a law firm in



the United States, an attorney working in Turkey may have skills and specialized knowledge that appeals to only a small number of US firms.

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### **Getting an International Legal Job**

Networking is important when trying to find any job, but it is essential when looking for an international job, especially for an international corporate position. Students interested in international work should contact anyone they know in the foreign country of interest and ask for names of attorneys and law firms in that country. The cliché “it’s not what you know, but who you know” holds true.

A few foreign law firms will pay for airfare and lodging when they are interviewing US attorneys, but generally these arrangements will be the responsibility of the applicant. Additionally, while some firms will arrange for visas and currency exchange, these arrangements are also typically left to the applicant.

Some Internet sources include:

- American Foreign Service Association ([www.afsa.org](http://www.afsa.org))
- Central Intelligence Agency ([www.cia.gov](http://www.cia.gov))
- US State Department ([www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov))