



Life at a Law Firm—The Ups and Downs and the Ins and Outs of Both Large and Small Firms

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Even before law school begins, many students dream of working at a law firm. Most law firms offer relatively high salaries, interesting work, prestige, and the opportunity to flex legal muscles in a courtroom setting. Three "official" categories of law firms exist: large firms, having 251 or more attorneys; medium-sized firms, having 51 to 250 attorneys; and small firms, having fewer than 50 attorneys. However, these designations are purely arbitrary. For example, a firm in New York City might have 300 attorneys and only be considered a medium-sized New York firm, while a firm in Salt Lake City might have 100 attorneys and be considered a large Salt Lake firm. Law firm stereotypes have followed these general preconceptions: large law firms are competitive, impersonal, high paying, prestigious, and hour-intensive with gradual opportunity for client contact and real responsibility for cases. Smaller law firms are collegial, family-oriented, low paying, and mentor-accessible. Additionally, small-firm attorneys work reasonable hours and have added responsibility, increased client contact, and greater opportunity for partnership. Although these stereotypes may contain a grain of truth, in the final analysis these descriptions are just broad generalizations. Law firms are as varied as the attorneys that practice in them. Small firm "sweat shops" exist where the partners seem only to care about their share of the profits, as do large firms that place family, community, and social obligations high on their list of priorities. Medium-sized firms may have characteristics of both large and small firms. Thus, it is important to look beyond the common stereotypes before deciding which law firm fits your career goals.

Advantages of Law Firm Practice

In General

Because the firm's client base is constantly changing, the type of work at a law firm is also constantly changing. Even if the firm deals primarily with one legal area, such as tax, clients bring in a constant barrage of novel legal issues. These novel issues present a challenge to even the most experienced lawyers and often demand thoughtful, imaginative arguments. Additionally, a law firm is often a great place for associates and clerks to get their feet wet. The quality of legal training at law firms is reflected on the bench, in government, in corporations, and in a wealth of other positions. Many judges, law professors, corporate counsel, and politicians began their careers at a law firm. Firms give new attorneys and summer clerks an opportunity to learn the basics of law practice—filing briefs and memoranda, meeting with clients, engaging in discovery, and addressing the court—while providing a safety-net of experienced attorneys to supervise and assist when necessary. This "hands-on" experience is critical for making contacts, learning the ropes of the legal profession, and making the transition from law student to lawyer. Finally, attorneys are never "locked-in" to a law firm. Once an attorney feels comfortable with law practice, he or she may stay with the firm; laterally transfer to another firm, to government, or to a corporation; or start a solo practice.

***Large Law Firms***

A primary advantage of large law firms is that they generally attract the most complex and challenging work. Due to the high stakes involved in major litigation and large transactions, clients in these situations often want to draw on the vast legal and administrative resources of a large firm. Because large firms attract big clients and stimulating work, large-firm attorneys often enjoy an additional advantage—namely, they often rub shoulders with nationally or locally respected attorneys, law firms, business people, companies, government employees, politicians, and government agencies. A second advantage is that because large amounts of money are often involved in litigation or transactions, clients want a well-researched, polished product. Frequently, clients are willing to pay attorneys large legal fees so that the attorneys can offer a high-quality presentation to the court, the client, or the government agency. Generally, these large-firm attorneys also have a deeper pool of resources from which to draw when working on a project. A third advantage of a large firm is that an attorney may specialize in a particular legal area. Associates and summer clerks are often encouraged to “shop around” in the firm to determine what areas interest them. Once the associate selects an area of specialization, a large firm will generally assign a mentor to make sure that the associate is well trained in that field of law. Large firms have the resources to provide superior continuing legal education; so many large firms provide in-house training on a wide variety of issues. They also often encourage young associates to gain “hands-on” experience through participation in firm-subsidized pro bono programs. Finally, large law firms pay well. It is not uncommon to find a junior associate whose annual salary is well into six figures. Summer clerks are also paid well and at some firms make \$20,000 to \$40,000 in one summer. Senior associates usually earn between \$130,000 and \$300,000 annually, and partners even more.

Small Law Firms

The primary advantage of a small firm is that a relatively new associate or intern will receive substantial responsibilities quickly. Small firms generally hire attorneys who can handle cases with a minimum amount of supervision, thus creating ample room for the demonstration of partnership potential. An additional advantage is that many small firms have become “boutiques” and limit their practice to a particular area, such as tax or real estate. This specialization allows attorneys to demonstrate their experience in a particular area when they are in the courtroom or when they are drafting documents. Finally, small firms provide an opportunity to work closely with other associates and the firm partners. Often, everyone at the firm is well acquainted. In many small firms, this informal relationship among the attorneys reflects a supportive, cooperative atmosphere.

Medium-Sized Firms

Medium-sized firms share many advantages of both the large and small firms. Often a medium-sized firm is large enough to have a variety of practice areas but small enough to allow new associates and interns to have substantial responsibility over cases.

Disadvantages of Law Firm Practice***In General***

Law firms also have their share of disadvantages. For instance, clients can be very demanding. Many



clients want their problems taken care of as quickly and as inexpensively as possible and can be impatient when they learn that the attorney has other matters that take priority. In addition, long-term clients know how to reach their attorney whether at home or at the office, and some clients exercise this privilege regularly. Late evening and weekend work are common. Firms also have the burden of finding new clients. Because institutions and repeat clients make up only one-half of all legal clients, most law firms have a very fluid client base. Firms must therefore expend time and resources to discover and attract new clients to replace previous ones. Finally, because the client base and the economy are constantly changing, law firms occasionally run into rough economic times. When this happens, firms tend to stop or slow their hiring and increase the workload of their existing associates.

Large Firms

The primary disadvantage of working for a large firm is the high billable hours requirement. Revenues must pay the entire overhead—the facilities, benefits, and employees—for legal work. To pay for this overhead, each associate must bill a minimum number of hours each year. Because larger firms tend to have more overhead than smaller firms, large firms generally require more billable hours from their attorneys. Attorneys in large firms do not work nine to five. They easily work 10 to 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week. Many of these hours may be spent doing such mundane tasks as proofreading large documents for errors or doing due diligence document review. A second disadvantage is that, because of the large size of the firm, attorneys often know only a small percentage of their colleagues in the office. The size and the rapid pace of large firms discourage attorneys from meeting one another socially. In a firm of 500 attorneys, it is not uncommon for an attorney to know only 100, or 20%, of the other lawyers in the office. The office politics (e.g., distribution of work, chance to make partner, training, and compensation) among the attorneys who do know each other can be daunting. Often partners in these firms do not even know all of the other partners. This can cause attorneys to feel isolated or unimportant within their firm structure. Finally, large firms often demand perfection. For attorneys who are not inclined to open a citation manual while writing a brief, large firm practice is difficult and frustrating. Because large firms and clients want the work to be excellent, and because the associates want to produce excellent work, associates spend many hours at the office—a significant portion of which may not be billed.

Small Firms

Partnership in a small firm often depends on how quickly the firm grows. If the firm experiences a slowdown in business or does not grow as quickly as expected, associates might be forced to look elsewhere for partnership opportunities. Another disadvantage of small firm practice is that, unless the firm specializes in a particular area, attorneys must generally be willing to take every case that comes to them. This means that an associate might work on a \$500,000 estate case one day and a trespassing cow case the next day. While this variety makes for interesting work, some attorneys might become frustrated with the “trivial” cases that are assigned to them. Finally, small firms generally do not have the level of prestige and recognition that a medium-sized or large law firm might have. If an attorney is planning a lateral move after several years at the firm, experiences at a smaller firm may not be as marketable as the same experiences at a large firm. Also, firm name recognition is often an important factor when firms and companies hire experienced attorneys.

***Medium-Sized Firms***

Medium-sized firms share many of the disadvantages of both large and small firms. Overhead might be high, requiring associates to work longer hours, but the cases might be smaller and more “trivial.”

Getting a Law Firm Job as a Law Student

Large law firms begin interviewing potential associates and summer clerks in late August and begin hiring in late September. This interviewing and hiring process continues through October and occasionally stretches into November, but students interviewing after September often have a difficult time finding a job with a large firm. It is therefore essential that second- and third-year law students apply to NALP (National Association for Law Placement) employers in August.

Students interviewing with large firms should be cautious not to limit their opportunities. Although dozens of large firms come on campus to interview, only a small percentage of students receive offers from these firms. Many large, nationally known law firms hire only those students that are at the top of the class. Large firms generally have a two- or three-tiered hiring process. Often, the student will have an initial screening interview with a member of the firm. If the student passes this screening process, he or she will then have a “callback” interview with a panel or committee made up of firm partners and associates. This interview will often include a lunch or dinner with members of the firm. In most firms, if the student passes this interview he or she will be hired. In a few firms, however, the student will be invited to interview a third time, often with one of the senior partners.

Large firms generally look for students with high grades and journal or moot court experience. Medium and small firms typically begin hiring as soon as they can forecast their future workload. These interviews may begin as early as September or as late as April. Occasionally the interviewing and hiring process for these firms will extend as late as May or June. This means that law students looking for work with medium and small firms should never give up! If a student has not received a legal job by April, he or she might still get a “dream job” in May. Students interested in working for medium and small firms should begin submitting resumes in August or September. Students should update their resumes and transcripts regularly, and with each update should include a cover letter stating that they are still interested in a position. More importantly, students should keep in constant phone contact with the employer, asking when the firm will be interviewing.