



Law School for Mature Students

I

Do any of the following scenarios sound familiar? You have been working for years in a high-level career that is not taking you where you want to go...or you have been slaving away working on your Ph.D. and are facing many more years of fairly thankless work in other peoples' labs at student wages before you see any chance for autonomy or recognition...or you have one of those degrees (such as a degree in electrical engineering, computer science, or physics) you have heard all the intellectual property law firms are seeking. If you are a sophisticated, bright individual who has done a little poking around, you may have come to the conclusion that obtaining your law degree will be the solution to all your problems—your ticket to nirvana, the inside track to wealth and prestige! And it might even lead to interesting work.

Before you start filling out **law school applications**, it is critical that you understand the legal lifestyle and the proper strategy for crafting a successful legal career. Simply earning a J.D. is not enough. Depending on your ultimate goal, making a thoughtful transition into law requires your consideration of a number of factors before you take the leap.

This article will examine what an individual with an advanced degree or an established career needs to consider when approaching a transition into law. A subsequent article will examine how to have a successful career as a law firm associate if you come to a firm with an advanced degree (or degrees) or significant career experience.

So you want to be a lawyer? How much do you know about what lawyers do? Do you have friends in the law? Have you been perusing law firm websites, reading bios, and hearing about those entry-level salaries for associates at top firms? Don't get caught up in fantasy. Do your research. Talk to people who are doing the work you think you might enjoy. Take them out to lunch. Ask about hours. Ask about how they spend their days. Ask about client contact and participation (or lack thereof) in **law firm management**. Take an inventory of what you have enjoyed in your professional life and what drives you crazy. Learn what lawyers do, and decide whether living out that reality would make you happy.

The potential salaries are seductive, but be realistic. Most of the associates earning top dollar at the big firms are billing between 2,000 and 2,300 hours per year. And that doesn't include "non-billable" hours. This can be a shock to someone over thirty who is trying to balance family needs with the demands of being a junior associate. Many firms expect you to work into the evenings and on weekends. Many firms expect you to take on rush projects with very little notice. Many associates will say, "Your life is not your own." All of this is palatable if you are doing something stimulating that you enjoy, but it can be burdensome if you are doing work just to generate a paycheck. The firms paying the top salaries will also expect you to possess top credentials in terms of your law school and your grades.



Some people choose law as a second career for philosophical reasons. They want to become advocates for people, animals, or causes. Many of these individuals choose to work for the government, nonprofits, or smaller firms where profits per partner may not be the sole criteria for judging success. If the zeal of advocacy, rather than the vision of making partner, is your driving motivation, you can take a more flexible route through law school.

Some choose law as a second career based on fascination or experience with specific subject matter. Many experienced individuals have had exposure to specific areas of the law in their professional lives, such as employment law, landlord rights, or real estate, and can further their careers by getting the J.D. Again, the route through law school can be more flexible for these individuals, depending on the sizes of the firms they hope to join.

A J.D. can open the door to a multitude of opportunities within firms, within the corporate environment, within the nonprofit sector, within government, and for individual entrepreneurs. BCG specializes in placing attorneys in law firms; thus, these recommendations will focus on the individual pursuing a J.D. with employment in a law firm as his or her immediate goal.

Before you consider where to apply to law school, it is imperative to know what type of law firm you may want to set your sights on.

Below are run-downs of some of the types of law firms you may be interested in joining.

Large, Prestigious National and International Law Firms

The top-tier national and international law firms tend to be large, with multiple offices, high-profile clients, and significant profits per partner. These firms offer access to the premier lawyers in their practice areas, sophisticated and challenging work, the prestige connected with association with a top firm, and opportunities to develop careers that may lead to national and international recognition. These are the firms that pay the top associate salaries. However, most of these firms are very rigid in their hiring criteria. Many will only consider candidates from the top 20 law schools, as ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*. Many also require GPAs in the top 10- to 20-percent range, law review experience, and, in some cases, judicial clerkship experience. Competition to get job offers for beginning associates at these firms is intense. And you need to understand the process involved.

These firms hire the majority of their associates through their summer programs. The firms conduct on-campus interviews during students' first and second years of law school to consider who they might invite to work for them as summer associates. If you have a successful on-campus interview, you will be invited to the firm for one or more call-back interviews. If you do well at these interviews, you may receive an "offer" to be a summer associate. Depending on how your experience goes during the summer, the firm may extend an offer to join them after you graduate.

If you set your sights on a prestigious firm, you need to have this process in mind when choosing your law school, approaching your studies and exams, and getting involved in extra law school activities.



Don't expect to be granted special notice or credit for life experience in law school. If you want to get into a top firm, your GPA will be a critical consideration.

3

Boutique Law Firms

Many individuals with concentrated experience in specific subject areas will set their sights on law firm boutiques that specialize in areas of the law that complement their backgrounds. A few examples include boutiques specializing in healthcare law, employment law, real estate and environmental law, municipal law, or intellectual property. Often, these boutiques may be more locally or regionally based. Attending a local law school with a decent reputation (ranked in the top 100) and having a strong background in the relevant subject matter may be enough to land you a first job. Grades will still be important, but hiring partners will probably take a broader view of what you are bringing to the table and what subjects you emphasized during law school. If you know what area of the law you want to practice in, it may be smart to consider which law schools are highly rated for programs specific to your area of interest. For example, in some cases, attending a school that is ranked highly in environmental law may be more important than attending a school in the top 20 that may not have a strong environmental program.

However, be advised that the national boutique law firms that carry prestige and serve the big-name clients will probably be as demanding as the big general practice national and *international firms*. These high-profile boutiques want to be able to flaunt top-level credentials on their attorney bio web pages, and top-notch writing skills are a prerequisite.

Smaller Regional and Local Firms

Firms with 50 attorneys or fewer are incredibly variable in terms of their practice mixes and the types of junior attorneys they may want to hire. Some smaller firms are just as elite and particular as the large international firms. A good rule of thumb is to explore a firm's website and look at the attorneys' backgrounds and academic pedigrees. The firm will be looking for junior associates with the same types of backgrounds. If you find a small firm that emphasizes the practice that interests you, make contact with one of its attorneys and find out if and how they bring in new attorneys. Most attorneys enjoy speaking with people who want to learn about what they do, as long as they are not asking for anything more than information. The process of hiring junior associates in these firms can be informal, based on word of mouth referrals or Internet advertising, or it can be based on a summer associate program as rigid and formal as those at the larger firms.

The Special Case of Intellectual Property

Those individuals with strong science or engineering backgrounds make up a unique group. In some markets, intellectual property law firms are aggressively recruiting junior associates from among first-year law students who claim these credentials. If you have an electrical engineering degree, a computer science degree, a physics degree or a Ph.D. in the bio arts, as well as significant industry experience, a recruiter may be able to represent you as a new graduate. The top intellectual property



firms are selective and expect students from top-20 law schools, although students from law schools in the top 50 with strong intellectual property programs may be considered. Grades are important, but extracurricular activities related to intellectual property are also weighed heavily. Speaking to a BCG recruiter with expertise in the intellectual property market while charting your course through law school will keep your options open, as you plan submissions to firms and progress through the associate ranks. A legal recruiter can be incredibly helpful long before you need him or her to help you find a job.

4

Conclusion

Do your research. Have some idea of where you are headed before you jump into law school. As a first-year law student, I had a sudden awakening. I thought I was taking time off from life to contemplate a new career, try things out, enjoy the luxury of simply being a student, and explore whatever might interest me. I was jolted out of this reverie by the law school career counselor who gave the first-year students their October orientation. She stressed that we were not allowed to submit resumes to law firms in pursuit of summer associate jobs until December of our first year. I seemed to be the only student surprised that we were expected to start approaching potential employers only 12 weeks after beginning law school. I remember walking out of that meeting dumbfounded, thinking about how I had no idea what I wanted to do after law school. How was I to know where to submit resumes?

Although not knowing what you want to do is not a terminal condition in your first year, if you end up setting your sights on the top-level firms, you will be behind in the game if you did not enter law school knowing that was your goal from the beginning.

Other considerations for the older student include the debt load you are willing to shoulder to achieve your goals in the law, the issue of geographic relocation, and how well you will be able to balance law school and the legal lifestyle with your current lifestyle. I will explore these topics, as well as day-to-day strategies for “older” associates in sophisticated law firms, in future articles.