



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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The LL.M. Degree: Friend or Foe? The Pros and Cons of Pursuing an LL.M. in Lieu of Practicing Law

Introduction

Deciding whether to pursue a Master of Laws degree ("LL.M.") is a major decision that can have a long term impact on your legal career. This article provides some food for thought on the subject as well as a list of pros and cons one should consider when determining whether to take a hiatus from practicing law in order to pursue an advanced educational degree. It is important to note that *over 98% of United States lawyers, including those practicing in the areas of tax and international law, do not have LL.M. degrees.*

How Law Firms View LL.M. Degrees

As a legal recruiter, I work primarily with large firms and lateral attorneys where the emphasis is on experience. Academics come into play of course, but the focus is on a candidate's performance in law school. Surprisingly, an LL.M. can actually hurt a candidate's chances of getting an interview when his or her resume is heavy on education but light on experience.

Except for LL.M. degrees in tax and international law (where Georgetown and NYU are viewed as having the most prestigious programs), law firms generally view LL.M.s with suspicion and have a perception, fair or not, that LL.M.s are for those lawyers who are more comfortable in the classroom than the courtroom. This perception is especially strengthened when the candidate is a junior attorney who has not been practicing law for a significant amount of time. Jumping back into school too quickly can cast a shadow over a resume because it raises the question of whether the candidate is seriously committed to practicing law.

Firms that are paying anywhere from \$160k to \$180k for a third-year attorney want to be confident that their new hire will be able to withstand the rigorous pressures of private practice. One method firms use for making this judgment is to see whether a candidate has demonstrated an ability to withstand these pressures at a previous law firm. An LL.M. is no substitute for this type of experience.

In fact, when we are screening potential candidates with whom we may work, one of the categories that we have for rejecting candidates is "LL.M." While this may sound harsh, the reality is that the firms we work with often pass on resumes where the educational component outweighs practical experience.

However, when an attorney is more senior and already has a substantial amount of big firm experience, then an LL.M. may be able to enhance the individual's resume. It could serve as an alluring factor for business development, particularly if the individual has published widely and has made a name for himself as a leading expert in a particular area of law. That said, as noted above, *less than 2% of American attorneys have LL.M. degrees.*

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It's my guess that if LL.M.s had the ability to significantly contribute to an attorney's degree of success in terms of salary, attract top-tier clients, and enhance one's reputation in the community, then many more of us would have signed up for an LL.M. program a long time ago. But, as the percentages plainly show, that is not the case.

Whether an LL.M. is Right for You

Like all questions posed in the legal context, the answer is "it depends." Is an LL.M. right for you? Well, it depends. Are you junior? Senior? Do you plan on teaching at a law school? A college? Do you want to write? Are you fed up with big law and convinced that you want to shut that door forever? Is your practice area dynamic and cutting edge? Do you believe that an LL.M. could significantly enhance your ability to attract business? Will your firm pay for it?

Any number of factors may influence your decision to pursue an LL.M., but the one that we hear the most is that a candidate wishes to someday teach. If that is your primary reason for pursuing an LL.M., then you may be surprised to learn that it is actually better to focus on obtaining more experience at a large, prestigious law firm that has a sound reputation as a leader in your particular practice area rather than pursuing an LL.M.

Think of it this way: when you were in law school, would it be fair to say that the classes you enjoyed the most were the ones taught by professors who had actually been in the trenches, and succeeded? I know that for me, this is true. My corporations' professor came from a large New York based firm where he eventually became partner. Not only were his stories completely entertaining, but his teaching was sound and rooted in experience. Did he have an LL.M.? No. Is he now a tenured professor at a well regarded law school? Yes.

My advice, then, is to think of the professors that you had, and respected, in law school. What was their career trajectory? Call them up and ask to discuss it. They will probably be flattered and have some valuable information to share. Also, I recommend researching those professors who are currently teaching the areas of law that you are interested in. Do they have LL.M.s? Big firm experience? Both? Find out.

Pros and Cons of Pursuing an LL.M.

A. Pros

1. *Let's be honest: it's a break from practicing law.* Being a student again is fun. As lawyers, we share certain characteristics: we like to learn, problem solve, think, write, and talk. How wonderful to be able to do that without the burden of billable hours and filing deadlines. However, if it is a break that you seek, perhaps you should take a vacation.

2. *The chance to submerge yourself in a particular area of law without interruption and come away from the course as an expert via an accelerated timeline.* Currently, you are expected to multi-task and be competent in many different areas of law and procedure while balancing the non-legal demands on your time, such as being part of the numerous firm committees that seem to swell with each passing year. Partaking in an LL.M. program offers a respite from these mundane and time consuming pressures while providing a valuable opportunity for you to focus on one thing.

3. *Potential to enhance business development.* If you have your firm's blessing to do the LL.M. upon the promise that you will return, then it's very likely that your additional expertise in a particular area of law will attract clients. Under this scenario, you have not broken up your resume by going from a firm to an LL.M. to another firm, but instead have demonstrated loyalty and commitment which are two powerful pluses on a resume.

B. Cons

1. *If you are a junior attorney, it can raise the "lacking serious commitment" specter discussed above.* For those of you who have your heart set on getting an LL.M., wait until after you have garnered substantial law

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firm experience. If you pull the pin out too soon, you may find it very difficult to get back into a good firm after you have completed the degree.

2. *Law firms hire lawyers with law firm experience.* Taking a break to get an LL.M. is often viewed with suspicion, unless it is in tax or international law from Georgetown or NYU. If you think that an LL.M. degree will make you more marketable to firms, this is simply not the case. When it comes to practicing law, the best experience comes from practicing, not studying.

3. *Expense.* To make an LL.M. worthwhile you will need to apply to the top programs at the best schools, and this will cost you. It makes much better financial sense to focus and hone your expertise in a place where your firm is paying *you*.

4. *LL.M.s are a business.* Just like law schools, LL.M.s are focused on creating revenue. While it is flattering to be accepted to a prestigious program, be mindful that you are paying for the compliment.

5. *LL.M.s are largely unnecessary, even for those lawyers who wish to teach.* Again, over 98% of United States lawyers, including those practicing in the areas of tax and international law, do not have LL.M. degrees. Even if your goal is to teach in a particularly complex and dynamic area of law, it makes better financial and professional sense to read the books on your own, attend CLE's, and stay active in your local bar group. As lawyers, you are constantly teaching yourselves new concepts and principles; it's what you get paid to do.

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Conclusion

It's my hope that this article has provided those of you considering an LL.M. program with additional information to consider. Please feel free to send me an e-mail at ecurran@bcgsearch.com should you wish to discuss further. Good luck!