



ATTORNEY SEARCH

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Firm culture matters most

We believe that an attorney's happiness and success in the practice of law have more to do with a particular law firm culture (which is sometimes also referred to as the personality of a firm) than with any other factor. This article discusses (a) the importance of firm culture, (b) why some attorneys do not give strong consideration to firm culture when joining a firm either during or after law school, (c) the reason a failure to seriously consider firm culture prematurely ends many legal careers, and (d) why making a lateral move provides the best opportunity to evaluate firm culture and the course of your career.

A. The Importance of Firm Culture

Just as the work, salary, and prestige level can vary from firm to firm, the cultures of firms can be very different. Consider the following examples about the cultures of various firms:

- There are firms where style is definitely valued over substance.
- There are firms where substance is definitely valued over style.
- There are firms where people wander around in Birkenstocks and call each other "dude."
- There are firms where associates are expected to call partners "Mr." and "Ms."
- There are firms where associates need to make appointments with partners before speaking with them.
- There are firms where partners chew tobacco in the office and during firm meetings.
- There are firms that value your family connections more than your work ability.
- There are firms that are extremely secretive with their associates.
- There are firms that believe everyone who puts in a solid effort over the course of six or seven years should be made partner.
- There are firms where associates bill 1,600-1,700 hours on a regular basis, which is considered a good effort.
- There are firms where associates are hired and almost universally encouraged to leave after five or six years of service.
- There are firms that have been collapsing for years, but portray themselves to associates as strong and powerful.

We could go on and on. Suffice it to say, however, that your success and happiness as an attorney may have more to do with your thoughtful and intelligent decision to join a firm that best fits you culturally than with your legal skills. People simply want to be around people they like, and when people like each other, there is a lot of benefit that comes to both sides of the relationship.

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OBSERVATION 1:

We all have certainly heard of how Albert Einstein flunked out of grade school. Perhaps Einstein was too concerned with the theoretical rather than the practical. Whatever the reason, Einstein simply did not experience success in the environment he was in at the time because the school, and the people in it, could not understand where he was coming from. Do the attorneys in your firm understand where you are coming from? In the law firm environment, when an attorney and the firm see eye to eye, success is far more likely than in situations where they do not.

B. Attorneys Sometimes Fail to Give Strong Consideration to Firm Culture When Choosing a Firm

The problem with the way some attorneys manage their careers is that they are motivated primarily by prestige and money factors more than the cultures of various firms in making their decisions between possible places to practice.

When an attorney evaluates offers based upon where he/she believes he/she fits in the best, that attorney is far more likely to find happiness and success in the practice of law. The problem, however, is that most attorneys simply do not think this way. The reason we believe this is so is because attorneys are simply competitive by nature.

In almost all respects, the largest, most prestigious, and highest-paying firms are the most difficult to get the best positions in. The pressure to join these firms typically commences when an attorney is in law school. Law students and practicing attorneys often evaluate each other based upon their abilities to get positions with these types of firms. For most attorneys, the pressure to get these types of jobs is enormous.

In many respects, this is perfectly predictable. In order to get into top law schools, many attorneys are motivated from the beginning of college to attain high levels of achievement in order to succeed. Those who succeed in college and law school at exceptionally high levels more often than not are those who make the decision to sacrifice free time and comfort in the short term to enjoy better lives in the future.

The problem with this type of thinking is that it can often lead attorneys to make horrible decisions in how they run their professional careers. If an attorney is thinking in terms of what he/she can do to look best to others, he/she may often be more focused on this thinking than on what is best for him/her individually. None of this is to say that there are not numerous advantages from being part of a truly significant law firm. The point is that this should not be the only consideration an attorney bases his/her career choices on.

OBSERVATION 2:

The stereotype much of the general public has about attorneys is not a good one. In a lot of respects, attorneys are seen by the general public as ultra-competitive, money- and power-hungry individuals. Many attorneys in fact personify these traits and have subordinated much of their happiness in life in pursuit of money, respect, power, and admiration from their peers. This perception leads many attorneys to base their presumed happiness on things like having the largest house, the most expensive car, and other traditional accoutrements of the American Dream.

C. The Failure to Consider Firm Culture Seriously Prematurely Ends Many Legal Careers That Could Have Otherwise Been Highly Successful

It is easy to find out a law firm's compensation structure or its billable hour requirements, but those are the simple and superficial distinctions to make among firms. It is not so easy to gauge a firm's prestige level. However, that can usually be accomplished as well. It is more difficult to evaluate a firm's culture and whether that culture is where you will be happy and remain so over the course of your career.

One of the largest mistakes attorneys make when evaluating competing offers among firms is believing that money is the most important factor they should be considering. While money is certainly an important component of any analysis, it is not the most important factor in determining a given attorney's happiness over the course of his/her career. If you think money is an important consideration in joining a firm, you may be making a horrible mistake. If you go to the right firm, you may be practicing law in four years and have a stable career and life. If you go to a firm

just because of monetary considerations, you may wind up so disgruntled with the practice of law that you are not working at all.

The above observation is compounded by the irony that many attorneys wind up in the largest and most prestigious firms precisely because they show so much promise and have excelled to such a degree in their legal careers. We have seen resumes of attorneys who worked in first-rate New York law firms, but ended up spending their careers as car salesmen, postmen, career contract attorneys, or on a variety of career paths that do not sound compelling to many highly educated attorneys. None of this is to say that there is anything wrong with this type of career path. The problem is that many of these same attorneys may believe they are finding happiness in jobs apart from the law, when there is a possibility they could have found happiness in practice if they had chosen a firm that matched their interests culturally.

OBSERVATION 3:

On a day-to-day basis, in each of our offices, we speak with attorneys who began their careers with ultra-prestigious, high-paying law firms. Many of these attorneys stopped practicing law two to seven years into their careers because they became so disillusioned. Most of these lawyers say things like "I would never work in another law firm. I would only go in-house." The resumes of these attorneys are sometimes littered with one firm job after another, where the next and then the next firm were virtually identical in terms of culture to the firm they joined out of law school.

Of course these attorneys are not happy practicing in a law firm: They have only worked for one type of law firm during their entire career. The problem is that these attorneys may have worked in a firm culture that was such a bad fit for them that they never got the opportunity to really find out what it was like practicing law with a group of people they like, respect, and profit emotionally from working with. Not all law firms are the same. Fitting in with the community of lawyers that make up a particular law firm is the key to long-term success and satisfaction in law firm life. Not fitting in is the key to failure or the decision to take another career path.

Consider the choice of where to live, and compare the process of making that decision with the decision to join any particular firm. Some of us prefer the lifestyle in New York to Los Angeles or prefer San Francisco to Seattle. Preference for one city or neighborhood is entirely personal and individual. The considerations are whether we feel accepted and appreciated in a community and whether we see people around us that share the same goals and aspirations. Whether that city supports and enhances our lifestyle becomes a driving force in a person's decision.

You should constantly ask yourself these questions: Is this firm a place where I will feel accepted? Will I be surrounded by people with the same values and goals? Will this firm complement my lifestyle? Boiled down, what is the culture of the firm?

We are not saying that geography is the same as culture. However, the same factors that drive us to feel happy and accepted in a particular town or city are relevant when choosing a firm. All in all, the key is to spend some time studying different firms and come to some conclusions about what type of firm you believe you are best suited to join.

D. Making a Lateral Move is Your Best Chance to Find Your Perfect Firm Culture

Many of our candidates, when preparing for an interview, want help identifying those questions that will help them unearth the true culture and environment at a firm. In short form, the question that needs to be answered for each lawyer is simply will I like it at this firm. Unfortunately, try as we may, we cannot always answer these questions as well as we would like. The culture of a firm may vary from practice group to practice group, and it is impossible to pin down with any meaningful certainty whether or not a good firm is always a good fit. Often, the only way to learn this is to actually go to the interviews and speak with the attorneys you may be working with.

It's important to remember that the interview process as a lateral is much different from when a law student interviews for a summer clerkship. This is a plus. Unlike summer associate classes that can sometimes number in excess of 100, when a law firm conducts a lateral search, many candidates are interviewing for one, or possibly two, openings. Therefore, a law firm is not so concerned with competing for any one particular candidate. In this heightened

competitiveness, it can sometimes be difficult for the lawyer interviewing for the job to get the sense of whether this particular law firm is made up of a group of lawyers with whom he/she wants to spend the rest of his/her career. Keep your best interests at heart, and do everything you possibly can to ensure that you find this firm. Obviously, your task is to get the job; however, you also need to understand the firm's culture. BCG has identified several ways in which you can evaluate whether a particular firm is right for you.

1. Preparation is the First Key to Evaluating Firm Culture

You've gotten an interview. Before the interview, research as much as possible to determine the objective factors: How big is the office? What is the salary? What are the minimum billable hour requirements? In our opinion, this objective fact gathering is helpful in determining how well the firm is doing financially and how it has grown over time. On the cultural level, though, these factors are less important. It is the less obvious criteria and subjective information that make the difference in figuring out a firm's culture.

Partner/Associate Ratio: This objective indicator can be important in determining the more subjective issue of overall satisfaction with a firm. Do you thrive in a collaborative yet competitive atmosphere? If you are the type of person who performs well in a competitive environment and enjoys having opportunities to distinguish yourself with your work product, you may very well feel comfortable in an environment where there are more associates for each partner and where the partnership track is more a function of your performance over time. Likewise, some attorneys may be more interested in a place where there are fewer associates for each partner and partnership is more a function of staying around than distinguishing yourself. Think about what type of environment is going to help you thrive as an attorney. Will you do better in a situation where you are primarily assigned to one partner or where you are free to work with a variety of individuals in a practice group?

Diversity: It may also be important for you to look at the firm's commitment to diversity. We don't know of any firm that doesn't have an anti-discrimination policy. However, some firms are more proactive in this area than others. Is it important to you that there are attorneys of color or of various sexual orientations? The firm's NALP form can provide you with that information.

Home v. Satellite Office: Where is the firm's main office located? Is it one of the laid-back, West Coast firms? In some cases, the personality of the main office carries over to each of the firm's satellite offices, regardless of where those offices may be. Frequently, satellite offices of large firms score big points in associate-satisfaction surveys. Although we don't believe that it's fair to generalize, we do believe that some of the best opportunities for personal growth exist in satellite offices.

Keep in mind that some firms may be as different from office to office as two separate firms in the same city. Can you rely on your law school friend in Dallas to tell you about life in the Los Angeles office? Maybe not. Find out about the firm as a whole and then how the offices relate to and identify with each other. Moreover, you may prefer to practice in the head office of the firm if becoming involved in firm management is important to you over time.

Conversely, however, many attorneys working in satellite offices feel less secure about their careers because management decisions may be made far away. Additionally, because management decisions are made far away, partners are often less secure in promising promotions to their associates in a satellite office. Because these decisions may be made only through the main office, satellite partners may have little idea about a particular associate's prospects for advancement. Partners in a satellite office may also be uncertain about the courses of their own careers. On rare occasion, a large firm will open a satellite office to suit one particular client or practice group, only to close that office relatively quickly based upon management decisions in the home office. These decisions may take the partners in the satellite office by surprise. None of this is to say that all satellite offices are bad. In fact, good satellite offices are the rule rather than the exception. It is just to say that you need to be careful in evaluating the culture of a satellite office. Ask yourself and your interviewers whatever questions you feel might be helpful. Does the office appear stable? Who are its clients? Does the office generate its own clients or serve those of the main office only? Does the satellite office have a history of promoting associates to partner?

Location, location, location: Where is the office located? Of all the factors, we find that this tends to be the least important factor in evaluating a firm's culture. A California firm known for having attorneys wearing Birkenstock sandals at work (not all of them are...) may have a New York office with that same type of atmosphere. The Washington, DC,

branch office of a New York firm may get the benefit of highly sophisticated corporate deal work. However, even in Hawaii or Miami, for example, there are going to be radical distinctions among the firms. This distinction is paramount and important. The city makes little difference in a lot of respects. There are laid-back firms in Chicago down the block from offices where you wouldn't think of entering without your most formal business attire. The key is understanding the various cultures of the firms themselves.

Clientele: Whom is the firm representing? Is the firm representing young Internet start-ups or large tobacco companies? Many firms represent a mix of clients, but investigating the industries that a particular firm targets can say a lot about the firm. How risk-averse is the firm? Will it undertake representation of a young company that may not be around in five years? Or will a firm forgo business in an effort to preserve a few solid relationships with long-standing clients? How much of the firm's revenue is based on any one particular client? If a law firm never allows any one particular client to represent more than a small percentage of its overall business, you know that this firm is not willing to allow its long-term economic health to rely on that of the companies it represents. Firms that represent entrepreneurial clients can also be fast-paced and exciting places to work. Smaller clients may also tend to be less conservative and crave insight.

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As firms become more institutionalized and reliant on revenue streams from larger clients, they become more conservative and more risk averse for fear of losing those clients. That's when associates and partners become really conservative, and a culture develops where people worry about saying the wrong thing, and a cover-your-rear mentality can develop. We have all heard the story-in some form-of the young associate who made some small error and cost the big firm its biggest client. These types of cultures can be good from the perspective that they carry a lot of predictability and are comforting to many associates for that reason. However, the converse is true for the associate who may not be seeking that type of client stability and is less risk-averse, for example.

As you can see from the examples above, the types of clients a firm has can help shape the culture. None of these observations apply to all firms, but there are some consistencies that merit observation. This can even carry over to the dress codes firms have. Many law firms instituted business-casual dress to attract the younger technology clients. To attract today's dressed-down industries, some law firms encourage their lawyers to wear casual clothes to the office to mirror the environments of their clients. In other cases, only white shirts and ties for men are acceptable while meeting and working with a client. Many firms try to strike a balance by staying casual during the uncomfortably hot summer months and returning to business attire for the rest of the year.

Firm Governance: How a law firm conducts its day-to-day business is important. Lawyers have to run the business of their law firm, and how they choose to structure the firm can say a lot about its culture. The business model a law firm chooses often reveals the core values of the organization. Generally, firms are governed in one of several ways.

The democratic firm allows each lawyer to become involved in the decision making, from new hires to compensation to long-term planning. For many large firms, the democracy may only include partners, so it is not necessarily realistic that a junior associate will be making high-level management decisions-or even weighing in with an opinion. However, many democratically run firms do have some level of associate involvement in the firm's governance, such as on pro bono committees or with respect to summer associate entertaining and recruiting. This type of culture is entirely inclusive, although sometimes with the result of having too much administration bogging down each individual lawyer's already heavy workload. The values reflected here are participation and integration, which may come at the cost of expediency of consistency.

Many law firms govern using a small, centralized committee of decision makers, which results in greater consistency in terms of firm vision and management. However, this culture is more exclusive in terms of firm governance, which may turn off the young attorney who wants to be a part of the decision-making and planning efforts of a firm. In this system of firm governance, it's important to find out how these leaders are chosen and the values they hold dear.

At the end of the day, however, what is more important than the method of governance is the reason behind why a particular firm chooses the business model it does. Asking a law firm's partners why things are the way they are helps define a firm's culture and vision for the future. If you hear that the goals of the business match yours, you have likely found a culture in which you will be happy and succeed.

Word on the Street: You probably know the reputation of the firm where you're interviewing. Is it known around town as a sweatshop or a quality-of-life firm? BE CAREFUL! While we believe that tracking down law school friends or colleagues at a particular firm to ask about their particular experiences has value, broad generalizations about a firm's culture are often just that: generalizations. Even if a reputation is mostly on target, you may be looking to join a practice area or work with a partner that is decidedly unlike the overall firm culture.

But what does reputation mean in terms of evaluating a firm? Although it's not necessarily wise to make assumptions about a firm based on reputation, what people say about a firm may help you define whether you fit into the culture. What does it mean to be a white-shoe firm? Historically, the term "white shoe" is associated with large New York firms with strong corporate practices. There are, however, white-shoe firms in every major legal market, including Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. Often, the clients of these firms will be Fortune 500 companies and other large institutional clients with long-standing relationships with their particular firm. One advantage of this type of firm is security. Because these firms have such strong ties to their clients (sometimes ties that date back more than 100 years!), the chances of those clients leaving, or the relationships with those clients deteriorating, may be less likely. This environment, in general, will be more formal than others and is less likely to embrace trends in business-casual apparel.

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"Lifestyle" or "quality of life" is another way the legal community may refer to a certain firm. These terms have become somewhat hackneyed of late, but still have value in terms of defining a particular firm. A quality-of-life firm is fairly self-explanatory, which is to say that the firm has placed a premium on allowing associates to have lives outside of the firm. What does that mean? Sometimes, it means a slightly lower billable hour requirement than at other firms. Other times, it may mean that the firm's management is more amenable to situations other than typical full-time associate positions, including part-time, telecommuting, flex-time, or non-partnership track. The popularity of this term has caused it to be somewhat diluted. We find that there are very few firms willing to define themselves as anything but firms that value associates' quality of life. Don't take these types of labels at face value, and investigate what that term means within a particular firm.

You may also want to look at the politics of a particular firm. Some firms actively recruit attorneys of various national origins, races, or sexual orientations. Some firms have a commitment to pro bono that rewards associates for their dedication to non-billable pursuits. Many firms are politically active and are sometimes made up of law partners who have held prestigious posts in a variety of elected offices. Some firms are famous for having ties with certain parties or administrations; other have "raised" prestigious judges or professors. Do the research to determine whether the firm in question seems to be comprised of the same kinds of attorneys as you are or as you aspire to be.

2. The absolute best way to evaluate whether a firm is right for you is to meet with the attorneys at the firm and to focus on the interview process.

When you are in an office for an interview, what is the single most important way to find out what the firm culture is like? Ask. Certainly, at the interview stage, you may feel like you are simply getting the company line. However, you are a lawyer, and you are capable of evaluating the sincerity and enthusiasm of the response. Ask each and every person to describe the culture and community in the firm, and ask them to tell you what that means to them. Ask your interviewers to compare their firm to other firms in the same market so that you can begin to make some distinctions. Remember that all of the lawyers dealt with the same decision you'll be faced with after interviewing: Why this firm? Find out how each lawyer got in front of you, and ask them how they feel about their decisions to practice at that firm. Learning the individual stories of the attorneys you meet will go a long way toward helping you make your decision. Asking this type of question will also ingratiate the interviewer to you.

Look around the office as you are directed to your interview(s). See how the partners and associates treat the support staff. You may be the type of person who enjoys being able to come into the office and crank out your work for the day, or you may enjoy spending time shooting the breeze with other lawyers. See whether individual office doors are closed or open. Pay attention to people's work styles, and compare them to yours. You may enjoy a more old-school law firm environment, or you may thrive in a more modern team approach. Notice whether people call each other by their first names or whether they are more formal. Although you should always be aware of the fact that you are being evaluated and act accordingly, keep your eyes and ears open to more than just the answers to your questions.

Again, be careful. Sometimes attorneys interviewing for a position swing too far in terms of evaluating. Spending all of your time in this process wondering, "What can the law firm do for me?" will prevent you from showing a potential employer that you are a good match for it. This is a two-way street, so showing a law firm what you are made of is just as important during an interview as evaluating it.

3. What Does an Offer Say About Firm Culture?

Here's where it gets easy. Receiving an offer from the firm with which you interviewed is the best indicator that it is a good fit for you. Although it may be difficult to imagine after going back to a law firm time and time again to interview, receiving an offer of employment means, at a minimum, that a particular firm "jelled" with you more than with any other candidate applying for that particular position. Remember, a law firm will not extend an offer to someone it doesn't like, doesn't respect, and with whom it doesn't want to spend its time.

Still don't know? Ask to go back. Sometimes a callback schedule wasn't as well rounded as it could have been in terms of including a variety of associates, partners, or different practice groups. Law firms are generally very accommodating in terms of scheduling post-offer lunches or meetings. Everyone in this process understands that accepting a new offer is a big decision, and generally, everyone will be amenable to providing you with any additional information you may need. Sometimes it's easier to evaluate your fit in a particular firm when you don't feel the pressure of having to "perform" in an interview.

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E. Conclusions

The key to true job satisfaction is determining which firm's culture suits you and your career. Finding the right culture will allow you to find a job that won't feel like work. What is going to make the difference over time is not a \$5,000 per year salary differential, it's whether or not you feel comfortable and appreciated in a particular environment. No matter what the reputation of the firm, going through the process of discovering who the people are and what they think of you and your skills will be the best indicators of long-term satisfaction and success.

Luckily, finding your place is not only up to you. BCG is knowledgeable about the various firm cultures, and we can help you determine the firm community that is right for you.