



ATTORNEY SEARCH

By Carey Bertolet and Joanna Joplin

## A Tale of Two Cities: New York versus London Firms

“We say tomato, and they say...”

On a daily basis, we meet lawyers who are considering not just a change of firm but a complete change of scenery. Often, a lawyer’s interest in relocating to a new city is based on his/her perception of what it’s like to live and work in the target city. Of these lawyers interested in relocation, some of the most frequent are New York-based lawyers interested in working abroad and London-based lawyers interested in practicing in a New York firm. We see these preferences often enough that it caused us to consider what it means to live and work in New York vs. London and whether there are generalizations that can be made that accurately contrast the lawyer’s law firm experience in London to that of the New York-based lawyer.

### *New York State of Mind*

To start, we interviewed lawyers at several large New York practices to see what generalizations can accurately be made regarding the city itself. Certainly, New York is commonly regarded as one of the world’s predominant cities in the global economy and is the home of the world’s largest corporations. As such, law firms thrive in New York, and associates can boast their participation in corporate deals with the most zeros and litigation with the most at stake. The New York legal market is certainly form and substance: capturing the best work demands the best credentials and fanciest resumes. It is a city that many lawyers consider the place to be for the most complex work and noteworthy representations. There are, however, hundreds of sophisticated firms in New York, causing us to cross-examine the notion that the practice in New York is fairly described as any one thing when compared to another city’s legal practice. Looking for themes that might carry through from New York firm to New York firm, we were specifically focused on the work environments for New York associates in sophisticated law firms.

**The Downtown Institution.** To begin, we interviewed a lawyer with a large multinational firm’s New York office, located in downtown Manhattan. This Wall Street-oriented firm ranks high in name-recognition and size and has a full-service, highly visible practice in New York and beyond. It is fairly described as a “white shoe” firm—a term indicating that the firm in question is considered among the elite. Generally speaking, white shoe firms are New York-based, have a long-standing presence in the New York marketplace, and often cater to institutional clients who are usually large corporations and entities with immediately recognizable names in New York and beyond.

*Environment.* This firm’s austere office is in many ways what one expects from the more traditional firm. With a conservative décor and regimented office plan, this firm’s environment encourages conservative dress and demeanor. Still, associates are attracted to this firm, often times because of a combination of the sophistication of the work and the pedigree that goes along with working at a white shoe firm. Associates tell us that as traditional as this firm is, they contribute to cases or transactions to degrees that one might find unusual at a big firm. In addition, associates travel on behalf of clients, give presentations in and out of the city, and take substantial roles in their work.

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*Community.* Associates are likely encouraged to be social animals within the firm setting, and this is “especially true during the summer.” Many relationships fostered among summer clerks and junior associates carry over to day-to-day socializing among lawyers at the firm. Although that socializing, over time, becomes more common only among colleagues in a practice area or classmates, these social relationships are often sustained.

*Hours.* The firm’s best billers frequently bill in excess of 2,500 hours per year, although many associates log closer to the 2,000-hour range. Our source tells us that this firm’s traditional foundation is a face-time culture, where many partners do appreciate seeing their associates at their desks. Having said that, the firm’s internal clock runs early. Whereas many New Yorkers don’t start their work days until 10 a.m., hours are being billed at 9 a.m. here. And you will see many of the lawyers punching out around 7, which is a bit more family friendly than some of this firm’s competitors.

Despite the old-school approach to office furnishings and hours, times are changing, even at the oldest New York firms. The advent of technology allows an associate to be more connected to partners and clients by remotely accessing voicemail. Associates are even required to be “Blackberry accessible” at all times, including on weekends. The more progressive practice groups (for example, the intellectual property transaction department) are more likely to understand that a connected associate can be just as productive and available outside the office as they are in. Associates here are required to get their vacations approved in advance, and during busy times, there may be “moratoriums on vacations for three months at a time,” and vacations do get cancelled from time to time, even when approved. Of course the firm will reimburse an associate for those missed trips, but free time is not necessarily a guarantee.

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**The Global Player.** For our second case example, we examined a firm with a slightly different picture. Though this firm certainly scores high marks regarding large-scale transactions and marquis clientele, it is not considered one of the more traditional firms in New York. In addition to an undeniable New York presence, this firm is more notable for significant growth in other major United States cities and metropolitan locations across several continents.

*Environment.* At this large multinational firm’s New York office, day-to-day existence isn’t as formal or as polished as with our downtown firm example. You are likely to “walk over boxes to get to the partner’s desk” at this office. That partner is much more likely to be interested in the files on his or her desk than how upscale the office furniture is. While one could not describe the lawyers here as flamboyant in dress or personality, the mood here is decidedly more casual, among lawyers and staff alike.

*Culture.* Our insider tells us that this firm is marked by a vibrant social scene, which can be attributed in no small part to how much time the associates spend together in the office. One of the most positive aspects of this firm’s social life (for lack of a better phrase) is that many co-workers “become like family,” and relationships created here are often important professional and personal relationships over time. Our sources remark there is a great deal of bonding among partners and associates and between practice groups. The drawback to this close-knit environment is a certain degree of politicking. An associate here does well to create strong relationship with influential partners who can drive good work and advancement opportunities their way.

*Hours.* Our insider estimates that a good lawyer is billing in the 2,200 annual billable-hour range, although busy lawyers with a lot of drive bill easily more than 2,400. Although there is variation between practice groups, this firm’s lawyers allow client needs to drive the schedule. An upcoming trial or large deal will easily keep the lawyers on that file in the office virtually around the clock. Moreover, associates are expected to be “on call” for partners and clients, and being plugged into time-sensitive work, including on weekends, is paramount.

**The Mid-sized Competition.** For our final New York sample, we chose a slightly different demographic: the up-and-coming mid-sized firm. Quite to the contrary of conventional wisdom, this mid-sized firm is not necessarily a kinder, gentler law firm. A growing but still modestly sized firm prides itself on competing with New York’s most recognizable names. Not able to or interested in resting on an institutional client base, the firm’s biggest rainmakers are active practitioners and prominent members of the community.

*Environment.* At this firm in particular, “appearance is paramount.” There is little place for the professionally awkward here: the associates and partners are as polished as the marble in the lobby of this midtown practice. They demand

as much as their large-firm counterparts regarding the types of credentials they want reflected in their attorney biographies. Nonetheless, a tour of the office quickly reveals a firm where technology is important and lawyers are generally fairly self-reliant.

*Culture.* While undoubtedly a social firm, we found that this firm is more formal. It is more uncommon here to see partners lunching with associates, and there is certainly an awareness of the firm's hierarchy. Our source describes the firm as being a place where you are encouraged to handle your work without a great deal of supervision, making it an ideal environment for someone who craves responsibility. Having said that, although associates are encouraged to seek out a partner if they feel that they are "in over their heads," ultimately, the firm does not look kindly on associates who need "bailing out."

*Hours.* Although the conventional wisdom is that mid-sized firms have lesser loads when it comes to billable hours, this firm proves that such generalizations aren't necessarily true. There are associates here who bill 2,000 hours, although the word on the street is that it takes 2,100 to feel secure in your billable hours here. Bonuses are awarded to those who exceed 2,400 billed hours, and that lofty goal becomes an important number for many associates. Although weekends aren't as much of a week-to-week occurrence as at other firms, an associate walking the halls on a Saturday will definitely not be alone.

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#### Common Traits

What are the commonalities? Not surprisingly, different firms in New York have similar hour requirements, and it is hard to find a successful associate at a top firm billing less than 2,000. Superstars in the billing department are much more likely to be over the 2,400-hour mark.

Second, regardless of the firm, there is a certain level of connectedness to the work, whether that be in the evenings or on weekends. At some firms, it may take the form of a late-night call from a partner or it may simply be the expectation that a client's questions be answered as soon as they are asked. Nonetheless, the New York associate is generally never far from their Blackberry, and they rarely stay away from the office without checking their voicemail. Although it comes in different forms, there appears to be some expectation that the New York associate will remain plugged in and responsive, even while they are physically not in the office.

#### London Calling

As in New York, we interviewed several associates in London (both UK and U.S.-qualified) to get a feel for just what it's like to practice in jolly old London. Just as there are generalizations to be drawn from the big-firm New York lawyer lifestyle, there is a shared experience amongst London lawyers practicing in the city's top firms.

So, what's it like to be a lawyer in London? Well, it may not be too different from what it would be like in New York in terms of lifestyle. Once you make it into the firm where you are comfortable, you can bet your work will be challenging and exciting, with a very international flavor. London is certainly, both culturally and professionally, an international city. You will likely be working with people of different nationalities and backgrounds, who speak two, three, or six different languages and have lived, worked, and been educated all over the world. London's legal community mirrors this diverse, international mix more so even than New York's. Plus you can spend all that money you make on weekend trips to Paris, Prague, or Rome, to name a few popular nearby destinations. And with London lawyers, when you leave the office, you tend to really leave the office behind (or at least to a greater extent than their New York counterparts). ***The Nice Guy in the Circle.*** In the first London example, we interviewed a second-year trainee at one of the top city practices in the Magic Circle. This full-service firm has a large multinational presence and is well known all over the world (including the U.S.) for its highly trained lawyers. Unlike some of its fellow Magic Circle firms, this firm is reputed to be the "friendlier" firm, where even in the economic downturn, it resisted engaging in the widespread redundancy programs that left many highly qualified associates jobless.

*Environment.* This firm's offices vary according to location. The older offices are a more traditional cellular model, while the new facilities are more modern and open-plan. The atmosphere is "dress-down casual," which lends itself to the firm's friendly reputation. Like most other large city firms, the practice groups are basically segregated, so there isn't much intermingling of associates from different groups.

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Trainees are particularly attracted to this firm for its first-class training program--widely reputed to be the best in the city. The friendly reputation is also a plus, with young and vibrant partners that help new trainees and associates feel more at ease. Plus, the firm is committed to retaining any trainee who wants to stay, although there is no guarantee that the trainee will be placed in the practice group of his or her choice, which forces many of them to look elsewhere. Competition for coveted placement spots can be fierce, which leads to some "sucking up" by trainees to get the placements they want. Thankfully, full-blown backstabbing to get ahead is avoided. But with that level of training and experience on their CVs, you can bet its trainees and associates have no trouble finding work elsewhere within or outside the Magic Circle. Which isn't a bad idea, since the prospects of ever making partner at this (or any other Magic Circle firm) are quite slim. Indeed, many senior associates leave and join smaller firms as junior partners when there is no room at the top for them at this firm.

*Culture.* While associates and trainees are less likely to socialize outside of work (at least compared to their American cousins), lawyers consider the firm to have quite a friendly culture. Partners are seen as very approachable and available to junior associates and trainees, which is not always the norm at UK and European firms. Even lawyers at other firms consider this one to be a friendly firm. But, hey, even if they can't find the time to hang out after work, there's a bar at the firm. Scary, you really never need to leave....

*Hours.* Not surprisingly, the hours can be hard. Although this firm's target hours are around the standard 1,700 for Magic Circle firms, trainees and associates work long and hard on a regular basis. Trainees have been known to pull all-nighters in their first month of work, and associates generally bill closer to the 2,000+ hours required by U.S. rival firms. The hours of course, as with all firms, depend upon the practice group, with projects and corporate groups being rumored as the busiest.

One nice aspect to this and other UK firms is that vacation time is taken very seriously. Although partners will generally be "on call" on their holidays, contacting them is generally avoided at all costs. The same is true for associates; when they are out on vacation, they are considered for the most part unavailable and are able to really leave the office behind them.

The New Kid on the Block. This firm is really only "new" to the Magic Circle by comparison to its more established rivals. However, there is no denying that it is a global corporate powerhouse, and it routinely tops the charts in a wide variety of practice areas. Its global reach is truly daunting, and for the transactional associate, it can offer fantastic opportunities for world travel, although you won't have much time for any sightseeing. It is reputed to be one of the most brutal in terms of hours, but for many associates, the work quality and experience they gain is worth the sacrifice.

*Environment.* The firm's new digs are astounding. There's a full-service gym on site with swimming pool, magnificent views over London, and even beauticians and masseurs on hand to cater to the lawyers' whims. Almost makes you want to move in....well, after all, this is the firm with the most sweatshop-like reputation, so you might as well be in a nice environment if you are going to spend loads of time there. Otherwise, the atmosphere is quite casual--which is something you would expect from a more modern (read: less stodgy) Magic Circle firm.

*Culture.* As a general rule, UK firms are notoriously snobbish about university name recognition (not to say this is unlike many top U.S. firms), and most Magic Circle firms recruit heavily from the Oxbridge graduating classes. This firm in particular seems to avoid that reputation by recruiting top graduates from a variety of institutions, which gives it a more "down to earth" atmosphere that attracts some associates. This easygoing personality is also reflected in the partner-associate relationship. Associates here generally feel that partners are "very nice and approachable" and are willing to provide insight and assistance to associates when asked. The collegial atmosphere helps keep associates at this firm, despite the long hours.

*Hours.* "On average, transactional practice associates at my firm were billing anywhere between 2,000 to 2,500 hours per year," says our associate, who admits the firm has a particularly bad reputation as far as hours were concerned. However, this reputation might not be a deserved one, as it seems associates in other top-tier firms are billing roughly the same amounts. Nonetheless, the hours still cause some turnover, as the long hours are the primary gripe of associates to choose to leave for smaller firms and markets.

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**The Mid-Sized London Firm.** As we discovered in New York, the mid-sized firm in London is also not necessarily the “greener pastures” high-powered associates are looking for. The word on the street is that some of these firms—particularly those at the top of the middle tier—can be very difficult places to work. While Magic Circle lawyers complain about hours but are generally content with their treatment, experience, and relationships with co-workers (including partners), it seems that discontent is far more widespread at these firms. These associates often find themselves working Magic Circle hours, sometimes for less pay and less international name-recognition on their CVs. Law firm hierarchy is more rigid, with partners being more aggressive and less approachable by associates. In terms of the actual experience associates receive, these lawyers are likely to gain more hands-on experience in these offices due to the smaller size; i.e., they can avoid the “cog-in-the-wheel” complaints of some Magic Circle associates. The best places to work on balance seem to be the mid-size, mid-tier firms, which are content with where they are in rank and size and are comfortable with having a select number of highly regarded practice areas.

### **Similarities**

So, what are the similarities? The Magic Circle, as well as those firms at the top of the middle tier, consistently provide their lawyers top-notch work and demand perfection from their associates. They also require long hours. On a positive note, although UK lawyers put in long hours at the office, they generally take their vacation time seriously and won't be seen checking their Blackberries every 30 seconds like the average New York associate.

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This “leave the office behind” mentality can also bleed into the after-work social life (or lack thereof) at Magic Circle firms. Indeed, as a general rule, it seems that associates at Magic Circle firms are less likely to socialize outside of the office than their American cousins. For one thing, UK firms don't provide for firm-paid social events in the same way as U.S. firms, and the over-the-top summer associate events are generally unheard of. Also, many UK lawyers at the top law firms have close university and public school friends right in London, and generally they prefer to spend their time away from the office with those “social” friends. Let's face it—it's nice to get away from the office (and from fellow lawyers) from time to time.

Finally, the way Magic Circle firms treat their associates seem to be quite uniform. While Magic Circle trainees and associates seem very happy with the way they are treated, they generally enjoy a more gradual training process and are allocated responsibility on deals according to their individual level of PQE. By contrast, Londoners view the American model as a more “baptism by fire” method of training, where junior associates are given high levels of responsibility and client contact despite their status as junior associates. “U.S. law firm culture seems to be more aggressive,” observes one Magic Circle associate, who also notes that their relative office size in London doesn't lend itself to providing much support to junior attorneys as compared to the larger Magic Circle and top-tier firms. This doesn't necessarily stop UK lawyers from seeking out super-sized paychecks from the U.S. firms in town, but they do seem generally content with getting a more gradual level of responsibility than their more “assertive” New York counterparts.

### **Conclusions.**

Ultimately, many of the qualities that define any one law firm, regardless of the city, can't be defined simply by geography. Assuming that all London firms offer one lifestyle while all New York firms do not won't scratch the surface in determining whether one city is better for you. Some differences do, however, emerge. It appears that London firms will be more rigid in terms of work assignments: first-year associates are more likely to be restricted to first year work, whereas a New York associate may easily find himself or herself doing as sophisticated a project as they are capable of taking on (or more!).

Second, New York firms are less likely to keep vacations or holidays as sacred as London firms are. A New York associate is more likely to feel constantly “on call,” as opposed to the Londoner, who will likely enjoy his/her three-day holiday weekend without attaching their Blackberry to their ski boot or scuba gear.

Finally, for those of you who count down the days until the summer associate season, the London firm may not be for you. While associates are friendly and certainly can become close to colleagues they have worked with over the years, they are generally less likely to have a thriving social life with each other outside of work. Plus, the firms foot the bill for fewer social events than their New York counterparts, which doesn't exactly foster socializing on a grand scale...

While we believe both markets are thriving legal communities, it is unlikely that one city truly trumps the other in lifestyle. As every lawyer has different goals, differences among firms in one city may be more relevant to any particular individual than differences among cities.

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