

How Do I Know If a Small Law Firm Is Reputable?

Question:

How do I know if a small firm is reputable?

Answer:

With large firms still recovering from the economic effects of the recession, lawyers have shifted their focus from larger employers to mid-size and small firms. Many [attorneys](#) that would not have considering working for a smaller shop are changing their tune. It appears that many smaller firms have elegantly survived the recession by relying on smaller matters with more friendly billable rates and lower overhead. Given the events of the past 18 months in the legal community, this conservative and security-minded approach is increasingly appealing.

Last week, [I got a call from a lawyer who was targeting small firms, but didn't know how to tell one firm from the other](#). There is always plenty of gossip and chatter about the larger firms. [Big law firms](#) have reputations that you can do some research to uncover, if you don't know it already. But small firms may not make it to the radar screen. They may not have much of an internet presence. So how do you figure out whether you are targeting a reputable shop?

I don't think that there is too much that you can do to determine the quality of a small firm by way of reputation. Because you are less likely to know current or former employees of the firms, and even less likely to be able to identify their client base, you shouldn't be selecting and excluding small firms before you have a chance to interview with them. While all interviews are important, learning about the people who make up the roster of a small firm is paramount. There is no escape at a small firm-you will work with this discrete group of lawyers intimately.

I encourage lawyers to stay away from the question of 'what is this small firm's reputation?' and focus instead on what questions will be the most revealing at an interview. You should be asking about the firm's clients, the firm's philosophy about client service, and what direction they see the firm going. Where a firm is so small that it is not widely known, it is even more important for the lawyer interviewing to gather enough information to assure himself or herself that they are talking to a solid group that does excellent work.

Because small firms don't usually follow the same protocol as large firms in terms of their hiring, lawyers who are interested candidates need to be a bit more flexible. Interviewing with a small firm may not have the same structure that larger firms have when interviewing-you have to be prepared to roll with the punches. Candidates for smaller firms need to be prepared to take on more of the responsibility for diligence and asking all the right questions before taking a potential offer. The reward for doing the work on the front end may result in a match that provides more responsibility and more security in the long term.

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