

# Top 10 Ways Attorneys Can Move to a Better Law Firm and Get a Better Attorney Job

By A. Harrison Barnes



ATTORNEY SEARCH



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If I was to call any attorney in Los Angeles practicing at a "lesser firm" and tell them Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher was interested in interviewing them, most of these attorneys, regardless of their friends in their current law firm, regardless of loyalty issues, and regardless of salary issues, would agree to go on an interview. It would not matter if they were a partner or an associate.

The fact remains that many attorneys are continually interested in working for more prestigious law firms to increase both their earning potential and career prospects.

Although this is not always the case, this notion of "moving up" and working for a more renowned law firm is prevalent in the profession. I've spoken with partners who have been at the same firm for 40 years, and they have stated that they are still very interested in working for a "better" firm.

On its face, I believe there is something wrong with this trend; however, it is the way this profession works. Because of this, I can only surmise that this is incredibly important to most attorneys (it was to me at one time as well), so I am going to tell you exactly what you need to do in order to move up to a more prestigious firm. In fact, almost any attorney can wind up at one of these top firms if they follow my advice.

How common is this? I've seen some amazing things in my career, including:

- An attorney who never worked inside a law firm get hired as a partner with one of the most prestigious law firms in the world after working as an attorney inside a hospital for 20 years.
- An attorney who had only worked as a sole practitioner secure a position with one of the most prestigious law firms in the world.
- A surprising number of attorneys in niche practice areas moving from law firms with only 2 or 3 attorneys to some of the largest law firms in the world.
- Multiple attorneys getting positions inside of huge, multinational law firms due to uncontrollable market forces of supply and demand and the introduction of booming, innovative practice areas.
- An attorney who graduated from an unaccredited California law school obtaining a position with a top New York law firm in Los Angeles.
- A federal bankruptcy judge with no law firm experience filling a position with one of the largest law firms in the world.
- An attorney living in Washington, DC, who was fired and "outed" as a polygamist while working for the US government, was hired by one of the most prestigious law firms in the world.

- An attorney who spent several years selling diapers in Russia was hired by one of the most prestigious law firms in the world.

Based on my extensive experience as a recruiter, I can safely say it's not magic or parlor tricks that helped these attorneys secure these incredible opportunities. I have helped place many attorneys in prestigious law firms that, on paper, had a small probability of being hired. However, the attorneys who got these positions followed my guidelines and were able to achieve what seemed to be impossible.

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## A Special Skill and Practice Area Can Make Moving Up Very Easy

I have witnessed countless instances where attorneys are catapulted into employment for major law firms despite having limited to no experience working for major law firms.

Here are a few examples:

This morning I encountered a woman who worked as an attorney for an Indian tribe and for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This woman went to an average law school and received average grades. She is about 5 years out of law school. I am 98% confident I will get her a job with a major American law firm that has Indian tribes as clients and needs someone with her expertise. She will very likely secure an initial annual salary of \$200,000, and, if she does well, will make partner and continue

a great career. This is due in large part to her unique experiences and legal background.

I once worked with someone from the United States Department of Transportation who had experience with various bus regulations.

This person went to a below average law school and had been out of law school for nearly 12 years. Despite having lesser credentials, this person secured a \$250,000 per year position

with a major US law firm because that firm did a lot of work in the transportation industry. This major law firm was attracted to this candidate's personal knowledge and experience relating to bus regulations.

Patent attorneys, who are either sole practitioners working for small firms or working in-house, commonly make the jump to large law firms. If the recruiter is competent and the patent attorney is geographically flexible, it is very likely that many patent attorneys can work for large law firms as long as they are effective in interviews and amiable. Also, having backgrounds in specialized fields (i.e. electrical engineering or computer science) gives patent attorneys the proverbial "pick of the litter" and allows them to work for large law firms in any major American city. Even if patent attorneys with these qualifications did not receive stellar grades in law school, they still have a strong probability of working at large law firms so long as the law school they attended was not fourth tier. Every year, tons of attorneys from the US Attorney's Office make the move

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to large law firms, often becoming partners, despite having no experience working for big law firms.

The most important point here is that the more "niche" an attorney's experience, the better their chances are of moving up to a larger law firm.

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## The Longer You Practice the Better Your Chances Are of Getting Into a Better Firm

It is very common for attorneys to graduate from great law schools, get jobs with the best law firms and then either practice law for only a few years or move into a corporation, or smaller "lifestyle" firm. In order to have fewer people ultimately become eligible to be a partner in a large law firm (and therefore share the firm's profits), law firms actually encourage this sort of psychology among younger attorneys.

Another way of looking at this is that the vast majority of people who start out working for large law firms actually end up "moving down" and working for less prestigious and/or smaller firms. The fact that many attorneys who work for big law firms leave due to too much stress, becoming burned out, or being laid off, means that there are fewer attorneys available to fill positions. In my experience, when an attorney has left a large law firm and found a "lifestyle firm" or a cushy in-house job, those attorneys rarely return to working

for a large law firm. Once you demonstrate to the "powers that be" that you do not have an interest in the demands of a large law firm, you will hardly ever be welcomed back.

In contrast, large law firms prefer attorneys who are motivated, ambitious, and aspire to "move up" and work for larger and more prestigious firms. If someone starts out at a small law firm, works extremely hard, and gets into a better law firm, major law firms actually respect this. While I hate to divulge all of my secrets as a legal recruiter, it would be a huge disservice if I did not tell you that one of the most universally accepted reasons for attorneys moving firms, from a law firm's perspective, is a desire for more challenging work, to work with bigger clients

***"If someone starts out at a small law firm, works extremely hard, and gets into a better law firm, major law firms actually respect this."***

and to overall better themselves. If, as a recruiter, I can portray my job candidates as people who truly welcome the challenge of working

for bigger law firms, they will be very well-positioned to obtain employment at larger law firms. For example, law firms do not like to hear that attorneys desire to "move up" from their current employment because of:

- Trouble getting along with co-workers
- A desire to make more money
- Lethargy and boredom from working for the same law firm
- Receiving a bad review
- A likelihood of not making partner
- Believing there are no good opportunities at the current firm

If, during an interview, an attorney volunteers this information or conveys himself/herself in any of these aforementioned manners, their chances of getting hired plummet. Conversely, if the attorney conveys a persona of confidence and manifests a hunger for bigger challenges, his/her chances of being hired increase.

Large law firms see a substantial amount of turnover and are refreshed when they find job candidates who truly are optimistic about working there and who are hungry for the opportunity. Associates who leave large law firms often send out departure emails to the entire staff saying negative things about the firm. I used to work in a law firm with 500+ attorneys and I received these emails on a weekly basis. At the end of the day, large law firms have the same mentality as other employers throughout the country: they want to hire people who truly want to be there.

Although I stand strongly behind my advice, there will always be external forces out of our control. For example, from late 2000 through 2001 and from 2008 through 2009, almost every junior corporate associate at a large law firm in the United States lost his/her job. These events happened largely due to economic forces that decreased the interest of large corporations in hiring large law firms to do various transactions.

Notwithstanding such widespread layoffs, there were "pockets" of corporate attorneys who worked in small law firms, or with sole practitioners, continuing to do corporate transactional work during these recessions. Although they were forced to "downgrade" because of uncontrollable economic forces,

they did not abandon their careers. Because of their persistence in the face of adversity, a great number of these attorneys ultimately ended up working for huge international law firms. It was their ability to "survive" in the face of a recession that gave them the long-term ability to move to large law firms.

One of the more important aspects of any attorney's career is simply the ability to "hold on" during the tough times and stay in the game. Like any game, fortune favors the person who plays it the longest. The longer an attorney practices, the better the odds are of moving up the food chain as other attorneys cannot handle the pressure and are forced to drop out.

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## Business Is Important

To say business is important is an enormous understatement.

I know of one attorney who has practiced at seven "AmLaw 100" law firms in the past 10 years. He has generated about \$3,000,000 in business. Whenever he puts the word out that he is interested in moving to another law firm, his phone rings off the hook as the offers come pouring in. The takeaway is that any attorney with a large book of business is employable. If you can bring in a significant amount of business and clients, they will hire you, plain and simple. Any attorney can move up and work for a higher caliber law firm if they increase their amount of business. I know of an attorney who has wanted to work at Latham & Watkins since she graduated from law school. She initially worked at a small law firm, and was able to secure a lot of business.

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Because of her success, she ascended to larger and larger law firms because of her ability to bring in business.

Attorneys with certain personality traits or characteristics are more successful at finding clients and bringing in business. Attorneys with strong social skills, who are personable, trustworthy, and professional are more likely to impress clients. If an attorney can work diligently, gain the trust of the client, and fervently represent the client's interests, there is a strong likelihood of impressing current clients who will, in turn, refer their attorney to friends, colleagues, and clients. After a while, a network starts to build and business is generated. Attorneys who generate business are always marketable. Having the skill of being able to generate business and bring in clients is one that will always pique the interest of larger, more prestigious law firms.

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## **Your Performance with Other Attorneys Is Important**

The first law firm I worked for was Quinn Emanuel. My office was next to a tenth-year associate who had been hired from a very small law firm. The attorney had graduated from a second tier law school with average grades. At the time, Quinn was mainly hiring attorneys who had graduated from the highest ranked schools and who were at the top of their class, were on law review, and who had clerked for judges. The tenth year associate I worked with ended up getting hired by Quinn Emanuel, had represented the opposing side in a major trial against one of Quinn

Emanuel's top attorneys. The attorney was extremely impressed with him and offered him a position.

It was because of this experience that I learned attorneys who perform well against attorneys from large law firms can often be hired by these law firms.

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## **Your Outside Writing and Speaking Is Important**

Many attorneys are able to make a name for themselves because of outside speaking engagements and written accomplishments. I have seen numerous attorneys attach themselves to a cause, whether it is environmental law or some other public concern personal to them. If they become published for their work or are asked to give speeches at events or engagements, they can quickly become a "nationally recognized expert" about a given area of the law. This attention attracts large law firms who want a "national expert" working for them. Countless attorneys have moved from small to large law firms because of their status as an expert in a specialized area of law.

If an attorney is passionate about a given area of the law, they should get involved and ensure that other attorneys and the legal community at large is aware of their affiliation with the cause. Sometimes by having a passion for an unknown area of law, an attorney can suddenly be thrust into the limelight, and attorneys who hold themselves out as experts in, or are knowledgeable about this area of law, become a hot commodity

to large law firms looking to practice in this area of law. I once worked with an attorney who had never worked at a large law firm and who was extremely interested in securities law. He wrote many papers about securities law and traveled around the country lecturing about it. The work he did in this area of law got the attention of one of the richest men in the world. This billionaire had retained the services of a huge international law firm at the time, and asked the firm to hire this attorney to practice his area of specialty. You can imagine the attorney's surprise when he was hired to work in a 500+ attorney law firm at a starting salary of \$350,000 per year (plus bonuses) in a major city after struggling for 20 years working at a small practice.

Although this occurrence does not happen all the time, it behooves attorneys to find an area of law that interests them and become an expert in it, which can only increase an attorney's chances at being hired by large law firms.

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### Timing Is Important

From 1999 through late 2000, corporate associates were in staggeringly high demand throughout the United States, especially in Silicon Valley.

I remember sending out on interviews a corporate associate who had graduated from Rutgers University Law School and who had spent the past three years doing corporate and litigation work for a very small law firm in New Jersey. The first firm he interviewed with, Paul Hastings, flew him and his wife out to the Bay Area, rented them a huge suite,

and made an offer to pay him three times the amount he was earning at his current job. At the time, he was having a difficult time deciding where to work because many other firms he interviewed with wanted to hire him and provided him with enticing offers.

I noticed that many people who had gone to Pace Law School in New York had miraculously secured positions at firms like Shearman and Sterling. What was interesting was that these job candidates did not have stellar backgrounds or incredibly impressive credentials.

The legal job market often responds to areas of practice that are very lucrative, competitive, or plentiful. Over the past few years, the areas of law that have been booming are:

- ERISA litigation
- IP litigation
- IP transactional Law
- Corporate law
- Real estate law
- Law relating to the defense of banks in foreclosure law

The legal world functions in unpredictable ways. Often an attorney's ability to work for the largest and most prestigious law firms will be a product of time and place and/or supply and demand. If an attorney sticks with what they are doing long enough and really wants to move up in terms of the prestige of their firm, there are often openings that occur at some point when economic circumstances change.



## An LLM Can Help

I've written a lot about LLMs in the past. It is very common for attorneys to go to law school and also spend another \$50,000 or more to obtain an LLM a few years later. The perception is that getting an LLM will increase an attorney's marketability to larger law firms.

Getting an LLM for the sake of having an LLM is not something that will necessarily make an attorney marketable. It is my belief that some law schools are what is referred to as "LLM mills," in which law schools offer LLMs primarily to generate revenue. However, certain LLMs can increase a job candidate's ability to be hired by large law firms. For example, receiving an LLM in tax law from schools like New York University or Georgetown can help attorneys secure employment at large firms as tax attorneys. Generally speaking, an LLM does not guarantee employment for attorneys, but is still something that may be worth obtaining, depending on the job candidate.

One of the most remarkable things I have ever witnessed in my career was the story of a dyslexic attorney who went to the Thomas Jefferson Law School in San Diego, California. This was the only school of law that accepted him. After graduating from the school, the attorney went on to obtain several LLMs, including one from Harvard. He ultimately ended up working at the New York office of one of the largest law firms in the world. It is my belief that his success is due, in large part, to all of his LLMs. This case shows that the right LLM from the right school can help attorneys get into the best firms.

To learn more about how the law school you attend can factor into your success, [click here](#).

## Latching on to a Partner Likely to End Up at a More Prestigious Firm

A traditional legal career can last for at least forty years. Many partners at very large law firms either leave when their firm goes out of business or decide to start their own firm.

If a partner leaves a large law firm like Morrison & Foerster and sets up a law firm, he/she initially is going to have a difficult time attracting the best associates to come join the new firm. First off, the new firm will likely not be able to pay as much money and will not be able to offer as much potential upward mobility. Thus, the caliber of attorneys they attract initially to work for them will not be as great.

There are typically three outcomes when partners leave large firms and start their own firms: (1) the new practice fails; (2) the new firm becomes successful and grows; or (3) the new firm is acquired by or merges with a larger law firm. If the third option occurs, the partner will most likely attempt to convince their favorite associates to join them at the large law firm. Suddenly, attorneys who have never worked at large law firms are thrust into that working environment. Of the many times I have seen this process unfold, here are some examples:

I knew one attorney who did not attend a high-ranking law school because he did not receive strong grades as an undergraduate. He ended up working for a small labor and employment firm after graduating from law school with mediocre grades. He had worked



there for seven years when suddenly a huge national law firm acquired the law firm he worked for. He is now a partner at an AmLaw 200 law firm.

I placed three attorneys with average qualifications and unspectacular backgrounds at a small corporate law firm in the Bay Area. The law firm was only ten years old and was founded by some former associates from Wilson Sonsini, Fenwick & West. A large, AmLaw 100 law firm from Philadelphia decided to open an office in Palo Alto and absorbed the practice, and these attorneys were suddenly working for one of the most prestigious law firms in the world.

This process happens all the time, especially with small firms that specialize in IP, employment law, and real estate law.

Regardless of whether the partner has worked at a large or small law firm, it is in the best interest of attorneys to collaborate with ambitious co-workers. One day, that co-worker may embark on a journey to open his own firm and ask the attorneys he had befriended and worked with to join his team. It is very possible that one day, a prestigious law firm will acquire your friend's practice and you will be given the opportunity to work alongside him with a bigger and better law firm.

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## Working with a Firm on the Way Up Can Help

Law firms that are growing quickly generally become merger partners within a few years. If you join a fast-growing law firm, it is likely that the firm's growth will attract the attention

of larger, more prestigious law firms. When a merger happens, many of the attorneys will be asked to "come on board" as well.

It is worth noting that not all attorneys are asked to transfer to the larger law firm. The law firm may only take attorneys with the best reputations, who bill the most hours, or who have the strongest supporters amongst the partners in the firm being acquired. Therefore, an attorney's chance of being hired by the law firm leading the merger and/or acquisition is increased if the attorney is (within the existing law firm) well-liked, a hard worker, and someone who brings value.

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## Geography Is Important

When I was in my third year of law school, I was interviewing with law firms in Chicago; New York; and Washington, DC. I spent almost a month in **New York City collecting job offers**. The market was good then, but none of these places were my first choice to work because I had a strong urge to work in Detroit, my hometown.

The firms in Detroit, however, did not have as much work as firms in other areas of the country. In addition, the interviewing process with the Detroit firms was unpleasant. The people who interviewed me were rude and condescending. Also, I would interview with the Detroit firms for a screening interview and weeks would go by before I would receive a call back for another interview. Strangely enough, I never was explicitly rejected from the firms, but I simply heard nothing after a final interview. I called a few of the places months later, and they all said things like, "You

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are still in the running." This experience was quite frustrating.

In contrast, firms in New York and other markets were handing out job offers to me in the interviews themselves! It seemed ironic that the firms that were far more prestigious than those in Detroit were more willing to offer jobs.

At the time, I took it personally because I really wanted to work in Detroit. What I understood years later, though, was this: The law firms in Detroit did not have enough work. While I am sure I would have stood a better chance of getting hired if I had better qualifications, the fact of the matter remains that Detroit's legal market was struggling. As a result, I determined I was better off looking for a job elsewhere in a city where the legal market was prospering.

To find out more about reciprocity laws between the various 50 states, [click here](#).

If you want to be hired at a prestigious law firm, the best thing to do is go to places where employers want people more than people want jobs. One of the best legal markets in the country over the past few decades has been Silicon Valley. There is a lot of possibility and enthusiasm in Silicon Valley and the legal market is projected to maintain its level of production into the foreseeable future. The key is to not fixate on a particular geographical location. Attorneys must be flexible, open-minded, and willing to consider alternative places to practice law. Being comfortable with working at firms all over the country increases the pool of employers and signals to them that you are confident in your

ability to practice anywhere. Large law firms will very likely respond to that and appreciate attorneys who are adaptable, easygoing, and willing to work wherever the market is prospering.

To find out how to practice in states outside of the ones in which you are licensed, [click here](#).

## ***Conclusions and Thoughts about Working for "More Prestigious" Law Firms***

I live in a relatively small community, Malibu, California, and I have an office that overlooks a park that is directly at the center of the town.

Because I live in such a small town, I am constantly aware of what is taking place in various social circles (i.e. who is making friends with whom or who is considered "in" or "out"). Malibu is particularly interesting because, despite being a small community, there is a big celebrity culture here and the city is the home to many rock stars, actors, actresses and several billionaires.

Because of the presence of successful, high-profile people in Malibu, there are many people (as you can imagine) who want to be "friends" with them. It is interesting to me that many people base their own self-worth on the groups they are involved in or affiliated with. It is fascinating to me because I really do not care too much about this: I observe it, watch it and am amazed by it because of the personal transformation I observe in people who feel like their personal value is derived from their "friends".

The reality is that there are certain people in this world, attorneys included, who derive a significant amount of their identity and self-worth from the people they associate with. However, I believe that someone's self-esteem should originate from within.

This maxim, although cliché, is especially applicable to attorneys.

Attorneys are charged with providing others protection and making them feel secure when they believe they are under attack, they have been wronged, or their rights have been infringed. Attorneys should have self-confidence that comes from within and that is not dependent wholly or substantially upon their connection to something outside

themselves. In my opinion, the best attorneys are the ones who have self-confidence and are strong-willed. As a result, they can provide the best legal representation to their clients and convince them that, as an attorney, they have the power and the ability to help their clients recover from their injuries or harm done to them. Mentally tough attorneys will not be intimidated by attorneys from larger law firms and will not be pushed around by virtue of the fact opposing counsel works for a prestigious firm. Mentally tough attorneys will not only stick up for what is right but will also do what is right. In all, it does not matter who you are associated with. What matters is who you are inside and what decisions you make in your life.