

10 Biggest Career Mistakes Big Law Firm Attorneys Make (and 10 Ways to Survive in a Big Firm)

By A. Harrison Barnes

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ATTORNEY SEARCH



10 Biggest Career Mistakes Big Law Firm Attorneys Make (and 10 Ways to Survive in a Big Firm)

By A. Harrison Barnes

Summary

Avoid these common mistakes made by many attorneys and you can stay in big law.

Getting and keeping a job with a large law firm is extremely competitive. For the majority of attorneys, entering a large law firm after law school is the culmination of years of study, achievement and sacrifice.

Therefore, it stands to reason that attorneys should try and keep these jobs.

Here are some interesting observations I have:

- **The majority of attorneys who join large law firms out of law school may never make as much money (adjusted for inflation) ever again.** That's right. Even in smaller firms. In a market like New York and Los Angeles, a young associate can make \$200,000+ a year. The average attorney with 15 years of experience does not even make that much. Many **in-house** and **government jobs** pay senior attorneys less than \$100,000 a year.
- **Most attorneys who join large law firms out of law school never work at firms as prestigious ever again.** Attorneys generally move a few times (to large law firms) before finally stepping out of a large law firm into something smaller or different. Once they do this, the odds are greater than 95% that they will never work in a large law firm ever again.
- **Only half of the attorneys who join large law firms out of law school are likely to be practicing law in 10 years, while over 85% of the attorneys who join small law firms are likely to still be practicing in 10 years.** I have no idea why this is. Maybe they are burned out and demoralized. What I do know is that most attorneys I see who join large law firms end up leaving the practice of law.
- **The majority of attorneys who join large law firms out of law school will never work on matters for as large and important clients ever again.** Most attorneys will never have the experience of working on important matters ever again as they had in the large law firm. For the most part, the rest of their careers (if they stay practicing law) will be dedicated to servicing smaller clients.

The fact that the future for most large law firm attorneys holds (1) less money, (2) less prestige, (3) less important work and (4) the strong possibility they may even stop practicing law says something. Big firm life is not for everyone; however, I sincerely believe that many people who should be in large law firms are not because they do not understand how to keep those jobs.

This article is about how to keep a **job in a large law firm**. There are major benefits to staying employed with a large law firm. There is the income, the prestige and other benefits that will result from this commitment. The most important and challenging legal work is done inside of law firms. When a large company has a serious issue to work on, they do not do it in-house. They use an outside law firm.

If you want to keep your position inside of a law firm, you need to understand the rules. Here are the biggest mistakes most attorneys make in large law firms that individually (and cumulatively) end their careers:

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1. Getting Psyched Out.

When I was practicing at the law firm Dewey Ballantine, I was at a cocktail party one evening, and one of the mid-level associates was joking around with a partner in the firm about how no one had made partner in the firm for 12+ years. "That's because you all leave!" he told the mid-level associate.

There is a lot of truth to this. People leave for a variety of reasons; however, it is generally the people who are able to "stick it out" who succeed in the long run. When I look back at the people who are successful partners in the firms I was a part of when I was young, for the most part, they were people who kept their heads down, worked hard, did not gossip and would not think of working in another firm.

Law firms feel a sense of loyalty to people who were **summer associates** and joined them right out of law school. For the morale of the firm, it is important that there is a hierarchy that allows people to rise. The more time you are at a law firm, the more political capital you get.

People leave law firms because they get "psyched out" for a variety of reasons.

- **Reviews psych people out.** Most young attorneys have no idea what they are doing and make various mistakes and blunders on a consistent basis—even the most diligent of them. There are always "ego weak" partners

in every firm who take great pride in putting down young associates and love to prove how little they know. This is perfectly normal and simply part of the process of learning. Many reviews can be quite brutal—and they are done this way to make sure that the person being reviewed improves.

Many young attorneys have been praised in school and by their parents all of their lives. Getting negative feedback is not something they are used to—especially when they may be working 80 hours a week in a law firm for a faceless client.

I've seen many attorneys leave due to negative reviews. An attorney should never leave a firm over reviews. You should simply improve on the things the law firm told you. I also have a little secret...

Junior associates are generally not [that] profitable for a law firm. Once you hit a “sweet spot” inside the law firm and have between 3 and 6 years of experience, you will become quite profitable for the law firm. At that point, you will generally start getting “kick ass reviews” where you are ranked highly on all factors. Reading the reviews of mid-level associates (provided the firm has work) is almost comical. Everyone is told they “are on the right track” and “things are looking good” (implying partnership is coming). By that point, most mid-level associates have purchased homes, are married and may have children. They proudly bring home their reviews to show their wives. Their wives will believe that everything is going well. *It's time to expand our family because our master likes us!*

I cannot tell you how many glowing reviews I have seen strategically placed around homes of mid-level associates—in the television room, on the kitchen table, on the nightstand and so on. Just understand this. There is no need to leave due to a few bad reviews because they will get better once you are more profitable for the firm.

Another secret: The law firm is kissing your ass because they do not want you to leave yet. (Your profitability will start declining at year 7 or so at which point reviews will again turn savage).

A final issue with reviews is this. Many law firms have issues caused by losing clients, recessions, partners leaving, and more. When this happens, the law firm may be under pressure to cut associates or get them to leave. What better tool than the negative review? Thus, just as positive reviews are often a “sham,” so too is the negative review. The point to remember is that you do not need to be the one who leaves when this happens. It may make sense to look for a job, but that may not work if other firms are also hemorrhaging associates.

- **Difficult or undesirable legal matters may psych people out.** I once represented a client from New Jersey who was in the “mafia” and operating a “front business” that had been sued for some matter by a Chinese company. The client at one point called me from his cell phone and gave me a speech about respect and threatened me with physical harm if I did not get him the result he wanted.

Having spent the majority of my career up to that point in the asphalt business in Detroit, and having been robbed and threatened by guys like him before, I proceeded to give him a piece of my mind and tell him that I'd be happy to meet him anywhere for a face-to-face confrontation. In response, he hung up the phone. A few minutes later, the partner assigned to the

case showed up at my office door looking very happy.

“The client just called and said how much he respects you. He says he does not want anyone but you working on his case! I do not know what you did. Good job Barnes!”

While I hate to say it, many of the pencil pushers I was working with would have quit their jobs after being threatened. I was not bothered in the least because I understood the guy and knew it was just a “test” to see if he could push me around. *He knew that if he could push me around, the opposing side would be able to as well.*

Far too many attorneys leave when confronted with a tough legal matter or difficult client.

I’ve seen some associates have to spend 18 months living in a hotel room in a small city in the middle of nowhere reviewing documents and entertaining themselves with rental movies each night. I’ve also seen many of these same attorneys quit a few months in. They quit because, “Living in the suburbs of San Antonio is not New York!” or “I need a life.” I’ve seen many simply walk off the job.

Are you kidding?

You went to law school and worked hard for years to get this job and are leaving because you do not like your current assignment? You do realize how this is going to look to other employers, right?

Perhaps the dumbest move by an

attorney I ever saw was by an attorney who miraculously got a job with one of the largest and most prestigious law firms in the Bay Area after having been unemployed for over a year. During his interviews, he expressed to the partners in the firm that he was most interested in white collar litigation, but that he would also be happy doing **general commercial litigation**. He was **hired to do litigation**.

Unfortunately, the firm did not have any **white collar litigation** work when he started. Nevertheless, they started trying to give him all sorts of commercial litigation assignments, but he refused them all on the grounds that he only wanted to do white collar litigation.

This lasted a few months until he was fired and blackballed from basically every large law firm in the country. He has been working as a contract attorney ever since.

- **The promise of a better lifestyle at another firm psyches people out.** Many attorneys are under the impression that they can join another law firm and suddenly work less hours, have friendlier colleagues, earn just as much money and that the grass really is greener on the other side.

When I first started practicing law, a friend of mine who was working at another law firm called me and told me how cool his firm was. He described attorneys driving around in Porsche convertibles, talking to major Hollywood producers on cell phones and making all sorts of important deals. It sounded good to me!

“These guys are too cool to even work in the office!” my friend told me.

Little did I know the law firm he was working for was having a hard time recruiting people and was offering associates a “bounty” of \$20,000 if they could bring in other attorneys. None of the attorneys at this law firm had anywhere near my qualifications. Nevertheless, I decided to go over there and interview.

When I got there, the law firm was not as described. It was not a “cool” place. They did not have a lot of work, and the attorneys were not cool at all. It was all smoke and mirrors. I realized that I had been “conned” to some extent by believing the grass was greener somewhere else.

Most attorneys do this. They believe that there is something wrong with their current job (hours, stress, types of cases) and that this can be solved by going somewhere else. This is sometimes true—but not always.

The things law firms say when they are recruiting people are often the opposite of what happens when someone is working there.

Law firms are businesses. Because they are businesses, they want to make as much money as possible. In order to make

money, law firms need to bill the maximum number of hours. If they have billable work, law firms will focus on it to increase revenue. If you are there, they will have you doing billable work.

No firm is a “lifestyle” firm if they get a bunch of work. They will make sure their attorneys are working as much as possible when they have a pressing legal matter—or a client willing to pay.

I once had the Sultan of Brunei as a client. At the time, he was one of the richest men in the world. If he wanted something done, he expected it to be done the best way possible with every single angle questioned. When he had something that needed to be done, I was expected to work 16+ hours per day until the work was

complete because he wanted his attorneys to go all out and was paying our bills. Concerns about my lifestyle did not matter. For law firms, it is about money when they have a client willing to pay—pure and simple.

“Most attorneys do this. They believe that there is something wrong with their current job (hours, stress, types of cases) and that this can be solved by going somewhere else. This is sometimes true—but not always.”

- **A poor bonus psyches people out.** Many attorneys have “quit” after receiving a small bonus. Who knows why you received a poor bonus? It could be a variety of factors that have absolutely nothing to do with you. Many people receive meager bonuses simply because the law firms have made promises to other partners, and there is not enough money left for you.

A small bonus is disappointing, but it is certainly not a sign that the law firm dislikes you. Working in a large law firm (and as an attorney) is a long race, and your long-term career satisfaction cannot be determined simply by one bonus.

Part of the “test” of being in the large law firm is the ability to deal with the good times as well as the bad. Many law firms consciously do not give attorneys bonuses because they want to see how committed they are.

A friend of mine was an eighth-year associate in a firm I was in and considered one of the best associates in the entire law firm. Incredibly, though, he had not received a bonus in a few years even though first and second year associates had been receiving bonuses of as much as \$25,000.

“Why don’t you leave if they are not paying you a bonus?” I asked him.

“I am not supposed to know, but another partner (a friend of mine) told me that they do this as a sort of test. There is not a large buy into the firm anyway. They want to see who will stay and who will go with no bonus.”

Sure enough, this guy made partner a few months later.

You should never make a decision to leave a firm based on money and bonuses.

- **A bad mistake psyches people out.** Most young attorneys (even more experienced

ones) make a variety of mistakes. These errors may include things like missing filing deadlines, misapplying the law, upsetting a higher up by saying something inappropriate, turning in an assignment late, or losing a case. When these situations occur, the attorneys at fault may feel like they made a career-ending mistake, and the only way for them to redeem themselves is by leaving.

All attorneys make mistakes. Some of these mistakes are more serious than others. However, the worst thing you can do is take these errors too seriously. If you make a very serious mistake, you need to learn your lesson, never make the error again and then move on as quickly as possible. If you dwell on it, others will too.

You will gain respect by overcoming the situation, persevering and improving. If at all possible, you should not be a “loser” and give up if you make a bad mistake. Just move on.

- **Poor treatment by a superior psyches people out.** One time I was sitting in my office working on a brief with a treatise in front of me that I had checked out of the library when a very important partner in the firm stormed into my office: “GIVE ME THE F***** BOOK!” he screamed and then stormed out.

I was shocked. I had never even worked with this partner. What could I have possibly done to merit such poor treatment? I was very confused, and it was not one of my favorite moments.

For the next several nights, I tossed and turned in my bed. I did not understand how someone in my firm could think so little of me to treat me this way. Should I leave the job? I was too good to be treated this way! Was there something I had done that I was unaware of?

Little did I know, this partner was in the middle of losing his job. He was also being sued for sexual harassment by a former secretary and sued for malpractice by a former client. I learned all this later, of course, but his attitude at the time made me feel like there was something wrong with me and not him.

- **Feeling disfavored psyches people out.**

Law firms have all sorts of sycophants in them. I once heard an uptight associate tell a partner she did not mind when he burped obnoxiously in front of her. Since I knew her, I then heard her complain for at least 30 minutes about how disrespectful the partner was.

Attorneys inside law firms generally want to be liked and favored. This is natural. Law firms are sometimes a meritocracy and other times they are not. What is important, though, is to worry first and foremost about your work. Most popularity contests inside of law firms do not turn out well for the participants. Here is why:

When you are competing in a firm popularity contest, you will eventually “lose” and find yourself disfavored in the contest. You will do something wrong, piss someone off socially, or something of the sort. If you become too friendly with

people in your law firm, they will also learn the details of your personal life which will always be used against you. Let me repeat:

Details of your personal life will always be used against you.

No matter what, you can trust no one. Zero, nada, zilch. You cannot trust your secretaries, friends or anyone. You have no friends.

Not being part of the “favored” group has its own set of advantages because you will then spare yourself the almost inevitable falling out with the group, which will hurt your career more than not participating in the first place. You should be professional with your peers, but realize that work does not need to be a popularity contest.

- **Not having enough to do psyches people out.** Most law firms get slow at one point or another. If your law firm gets slow, this certainly does not mean you need to look for a new job. I have seen attorneys go a year or more without work in a law firm when a large case settles. If you are not busy, you should write well-written memos on matters partners in your firm are interested in or publish articles on various matters to draw attention to the firm.

If you are slow, I am not going to lie to you and tell you this is a good thing. You need to try to find work and be productive for the firm. At some point, many of your peers will leave, and when the caseload increases (which it usually does), the firm will give the work to you.

- **Being around seemingly more qualified peers psyches people out.** Law firms attract some of the most competitive and smartest people out there. While this is a good thing, many competitive people are very good at psyching other people out. They will brag about getting exceptional reviews when they did not. They may make up rumors about others to hurt them. There are many games that can be played, and you need to understand that when you are in the midst of these games, you are up against incredible competitors.

Some competitors will only be nice to you if you have negative information to share about your experience in the firm. Other competitors will “use you” only to solicit negative information about other attorneys that they can spread around.

Remember: These masters of manipulation will do everything they can to psych you out, and you should not let it affect you. Keep your head down and work as hard as possible. Most people playing these games end up having it all catch up to them eventually. It is fun to watch them go down. Just wait.

2. Not Billing Enough Hours.

Your job inside of a large law firm is to bill as many hours as you possibly can. If it is a large law firm, you are going to need to bill at least 2,000 hours. Employment security (outside of New York) is more and more guaranteed the closer you get to 2,500. If you are interested in **making partner and really standing out**, you want to bill more than 2,500 hours.

If you do this and nothing more, your odds of survival are very good.

If you bill less than 2,000 hours your job is in jeopardy.

Generally, the more hours an attorney bills the better their reviews will be and the less likely they will be to lose their jobs.

Even in the most severe recession, there are associates in law firms who manage to stay busy because everyone is preferentially giving them work. When the law firm goes to lay off people, they see who is busy and who is not. That is why it is so difficult for unemployed attorneys to get jobs. Future employers know they were not “the best” at their former firms and probably were not given work.

There are lots of metrics to measure an attorney by such as: social skills, punctuality, treatment of peers and subordinates, looks, writing ability, competence, drive, and negotiation ability. But when it comes right down to it, there is generally one factor your superiors will look at—how many hours you billed. That is what makes the firm money, and that is the one thing that really matters. Arguably, all other components of your performance are overshadowed by your billable hour totals.

How could any group of people be so shallow? Well, it is a business. How many hours you bill tells the firm you are working. Here is what the firm learns from this number:

- **How hard you are willing to work.** That’s right. Give one attorney a bunch of legal matters and they might bill 1,500 hours.

Give another attorney the same legal matters and they might bill 3,500. Which attorney do you think is more profitable for the law firm? Moreover, if you are working all the time and billing a ton of hours, you are clearly very motivated and willing to work hard. This is good. Law firms like people who work hard.

- **How your work is received by superiors.** Superiors will only give you more work if you do a good job when they give you work. A partner does not have time to give work to people who do not take their assignments seriously.

If you are producing work that is not carefully thought through, riddled with typos, or not taking time to understand your superior's point of view and approach to a matter, then partners are not going to give you more work. You can't just make a half-assed attempt to get the work done.

I want to be very clear about something. Every assignment you get from a partner is a **GIFT** and you should treat it as **THE MOST IMPORTANT ASSIGNMENT IN THE WORLD**. That may sound far-fetched to you, but it is absolutely true. You need to make a major, major effort with every assignment you are given and take it very seriously. It is the attorneys who take the work the most seriously that end up getting ahead in the law firm environment.

I almost hesitate bringing this up, but I do because it is something I have seen happen again and again to young attorneys. Young attorneys are given an assignment, but they do not take it too

seriously and take an informal approach to the matter thinking it is not that important. The memo, brief or whatever it is may not be bad, but it is not very good either and not well thought out or thorough. This upsets the partner because the legal matter is very important to them. In fact, the reason they are a partner in this massive law firm is because every matter is important to them. Every matter you work on is extremely important.

- **Your attitude and eagerness for work.** You should always have an attitude where you are hungry and extremely enthusiastic about working. This will set you apart a great deal from many of your beaten-down peers who act as if they already have too much work. You should always accept work and do so enthusiastically (unless it is physically impossible for you to do so).

Let me tell you a quick story about an attorney I once knew who was extremely successful. He was seated on an airplane next to a large client of the law firm when the client was bit by a spider. The client's leg was hurt, and the client decided to sue the airline, the cleaning company and others tangentially involved.

This was a very, very frivolous case, but the attorney (a young associate) begged the firm to let him take it on a contingency basis and promised to continue billing 2,500+ hours per year (to paying clients) during this time. The attorney took on the spider bite case (which he was doing for free) and worked late nights, every weekend and holidays on the case, and eventually took it to trial.

He lost. However, he put in such a huge effort that the client and the partners who had observed him carrying on this war were incredibly impressed.

Not too long after he lost this case, he was made partner at the urging of the client and partners who had observed him working on the spider bite case. His enthusiasm and eagerness to do anything impressed everyone. He was one of the youngest associates to make partner in the firm's storied history.

- **How you are able to get others to give you work.** Attorneys need to be able to convince others to give them more work. This means you need to ask and find others who have work. Many times you may need to ask more than once; however, you should always keep asking. Expressing your genuine enthusiasm for a case, or a legal matter, often can get partners with a certain type of work to give it to you.

Getting work is no different than campaigning for student council or some other similar exercise. You need to get people to like you. In order to do this, you need to be seen, be agreeable and find commonality between you and the people you are working with. People will generally give work to people who ask for it and make an effort. Many partners will only give you work after they have become comfortable with you, and you have

earned a reputation for doing good work. Being inside a law firm involves **marketing yourself to partners**.

- **How much clients like you.** Clients need to see you as a hard-working soldier behind the scenes. You want clients to like you, and this is very important to your success. If a large client likes an associate a great deal, the client will demand to have that associate work on all of their matters.
- **How you make others feel about themselves.** Most partners have slogged away and suffered through 10+ years of indignities and other problems before making partner in a law firm. They deserve (and want) to feel respected and important.

Just because the guy you are working for is someone you would not consider dating in a million years, or reminds you of someone you might have beaten up in high school, does not mean the partner does not deserve to

feel like he is the biggest deal in the world. You need to make him feel important and respected. This is part of your job and is your position on the totem pole at this point in your career.

If the partner feels good about himself each time he gives you work, he will be more likely to assign extra work to you later on. If you are snide, contradict him, or look at him like he is a tired, drab and depressed person, the odds of him giving you additional work will go down dramatically.

"Getting work is no different than campaigning for student council or some other similar exercise. You need to get people to like you."

You should take care of the people you are working for. Offer to get them a notebook or pen, carry their bags on trips and get them coffee. These are the people supporting you, and you should let them know you appreciate them by giving them the respect their roles entitle them to. They will, in turn, give you extra work.

- **How open you are to learning.** One of the strangest types of associates out there is the “know-it-all” associate. Believe it or not, there are tons of young associates out there who are so terrified of criticism that they respond “I know that!” every time someone makes a suggestion to them. I do not understand this attitude, and it does not work well.

Law firm partners have spent tens of thousands of hours learning the law, and they love lecturing young attorneys about various things. You need to learn and incorporate this into your work product. To reward you, these same partners will give you additional work and feel rewarded watching you grow in response to their teachings.

3. Joining a New Branch Office.

There are good and bad branch offices. Developing branch offices, though, can be particularly dangerous. The reason for this is due to the fact that the main office of the law firm where decision-makers reside will generally “protect its own” (i.e., the attorneys in the main office) and let go or fire people from the branch office first.

Think about this for a second. If you are in a New York law firm, you form relationships with

your co-workers by going to lunch, socializing, and working with the same people every day. The attorneys in an office 1,000 miles away are not that important to you. Leaders in the main office of a law firm are going to be under tremendous pressure to protect their own people and will cut expenses and let people go in branch offices before making cuts at their own location.

There is also generally more work in the main office than in a branch office. Main offices generally have a variety of clients and a branch office may have literally been started to serve just one or a few clients. If the work dries up in the branch office, it may just shut down (this happens often). It is generally harder to bill a lot of hours in a branch office than it is in the main office.

For the same reasons attorneys are more likely to get laid off in branch offices, they are less likely to make partner while working in a branch office. How can firm management make you a partner if they do not even know you? I have seen associates in branch offices who have gone a decade or more without ever making partner.

The young branch office is the most dangerous of them all. If **Skadden Arps** had a client like **General Motors** threaten to jump ship, they might do something insane like open a branch office in Detroit. However, once these Detroit attorneys discovered that things like golf during the workday and weekends off were simply not tolerated, all sorts of turmoil would ensue. Realizing that these local Detroit attorneys expected New York salaries with Detroit hours, Skadden might quickly pull the plug on the entire

operation and throw out all the young associates.

“You were making \$275,000 as an eighth-year associate?” a seventh-year associate might be asked weeks later in an interview with one of the larger Detroit firms.

“Yes, but I do not need that much. I would settle for \$250,000.”

“Most of our partners do not make that much. We do not pay New York salaries in Detroit.”

“Yes, of course. I understand perfectly. But I have a mortgage, two car payments and my children’s elementary school tuition is \$40,000 a year. I’m just asking for what I need.”

Meanwhile, General Motors will be wooed by Skadden: “You can trust those local guys with your multi-billion dollar business if you like (if their cell phones are working on the golf course), but we have over 1,000 attorneys and will be more available for you in New York than those guys ever were in Detroit.”

If this sounds far-fetched it is not. I see this sort of thing play out with regularity, and it has been going on for decades.

What happens to the local attorneys? They end up starting a small law firm and taking a bunch of crappy pictures to put on the law firm website where they look all pissed off. I can show you several of these websites—there are tons of them out there, and they are amusing.

4. Sleeping with Superiors in the Office.

I hate to put this one in here, but I have to. For whatever reason, I’ve seen this more times than I can remember. This is not a good idea for the simple reason that the majority of relationships do not last. If a relationship gets sufficiently serious and then shuts down, both parties may have a very difficult time working together in the future. The more “junior” one usually ends up leaving—or finding a reason to leave so he or she does not have to see their former love interest.

When a woman sleeps with a partner at a firm (sorry, this is usually what happens), word generally gets out about this. This creates a difficult time for the woman because everything that happens with her is immediately suspect—a good assignment must be because she slept with so and so. There are all sorts of problems this can create (too numerous to list here) but the point is that it should not occur. Do whatever you want outside the office, but leave your personal relationships out there.

5. Working as a Contract Attorney.

People need to make a living, and I understand this. Unfortunately, the perception of a large law firm is this:

- **Why should we pay you \$200,000 a year if you are willing to work for \$25.00/hour?** Think about this. If you are selling something for a massive amount of money, why should someone pay this if they know you are willing to sell it more cheaply? A job (unlike a contract) is a commitment where you get benefits and protections. A

contract job could last just a day. If you are an itinerant attorney working for a day's wages, a major law firm is not as likely to be interested in you.

- **Are you working as a contract attorney because no one will hire you?** This is the perception. Do you think there is a single associate in a law firm like **Gibson Dunn & Crutcher** with experience working as a contract attorney? I doubt any of the hundreds of associates there have ever worked as a contract attorney.
- **Why would you humiliate yourself reviewing documents?** We are far too important to hire someone who does this. This is just how law firms think. If you are trained to analyze complex matters and are willing to stoop so low that you are now working on unimportant mind-numbing cases, that is going to say something to a law firm.
- **Your skills may have gone away after all of this contract work.** Most contract attorneys do not have to perform at the same level as they would while working on a major corporate transaction or writing a brief. The perception of many law firms is that the contract attorney's skills may have atrophied by doing this work.

6. Taking Too Much Time Off.

While there is nothing wrong with having a child, getting sick, or any other absences from the office, if you take too much time off, you are going to be seen as lacking drive and commitment and will come back from your absence to find that no one is willing to give you work.

I once saw an attorney get fired for taking a vacation. He had a legitimately bad review (he had not been doing good work) and was told he needed to improve immediately. He took a vacation a few weeks later, and it did not go over well at all.

"We are sorry to inform you we are going to have to let you go for taking a vacation..."

"Are you kidding?"

"No, we do not think you take your job seriously..."

Few attorneys are likely to lose their jobs over a vacation, but if you take too much time off, you will lose your job.

One of my absolute favorite reasons for taking an extended absence is "paternity leave." Most firms have an "on-the-books policy" that allows male associates to take something called paternity leave when their child is born. At the recruiting firm I work for, attorneys regularly contact us after having returned to their law firms after taking a multi-week paternity leave.

"I cannot figure it out. I've never billed less than 2,400 hours. I've been back in the office two months now, and no one has given me anything to do," the associate might tell me in a confused tone.

"Where were you?"

"I took six weeks of paternity leave."

"They are never going to give you anything to do again. My advice—never tell anyone you

took paternity leave for the rest of your life. Your career is over with your current law firm. Let's talk about the future."

If you take paternity leave, the odds are low that work will be waiting for you when you return. There are probably partners in your own firm who were busy doing deals and were not even in the same city, much less the hospital, when some of their children were born. What kind of man do you think they think takes paternity leave?

Moreover, the female partner who lives alone with her cats because she never has had time for kids is not going to be too enthusiastic about your paternity leave.

If you take too much time off, or pull some crap like paternity leave, you are going to be in trouble.

When I was in my 20s and working in a large law firm, I informed the partners that I would be taking a one-week honeymoon. I was getting married on a Saturday in New York and then flying to Hawaii from there. On Thursday afternoon, a partner walked into my office and told me he wanted me to report to Texaco's office in Los Angeles on Monday morning because they needed someone to do a small trial for a case that was coming up. Texaco was eliminating their in-house legal department in Los Angeles.

I said, "Yes!"

"Call me Friday afternoon when you get to New York. We just need to finalize the arrangements."

You always need to be available in a large law firm—even when you are getting married. It does not matter.

7. Leaving without Another Big Firm Job Lined Up.

Leaving a law firm is often an excellent career strategy—and moving to another large law firm is often necessary to remain at the same level in your career. Leaving a large firm to go to a small firm or work in another setting is the problem.

If you are considering leaving a large law firm, you should think this through very carefully. Large law firms are like a "fraternity" of sorts and once you leave, you generally cannot come back. Once you go to a smaller law firm, or take a job in a different environment (in-house, public interest, government) the odds of you being able to return to a large law firm are very slim indeed. While it is not completely impossible, it is next to impossible.

Why? Because the perception of large law firms is that they are so great that the only reason anyone would ever leave for something else is (1) if they do not have the nerves and balls for the large law firm, or (2) if they are fired. Unfortunately, the latter perception is the more common one. More firms are likely to presume you were fired if you are no longer with a large firm than that you simply left of your own volition.

Even if you did leave because of your own choice, law firms and the people in them are also smart enough to realize that if you leave once, you are likely to leave again. That's true. Law firms rarely rehire anyone because

they almost always leave again (with all the requisite issues creating poor morale on the way out).

Understand that once you leave a large law firm environment your odds of ever working in one in the future are highly unlikely.

8. Being Dishonest.

One of the more incredible events in my career came when I saw a tenth-year associate get fired and blackballed in the State of California for telling a minor lie. The associate had been working in a major law firm and was asked to send a simple letter consisting of a few lines. The next day, a partner asked him if he had sent the letter, and he said, "Yes."

The associate had not. Instead of sending the letter, the associate went to his work computer, wrote it, and sent it. He did this within a few minutes of leaving the partner's office.

Unfortunately, the partner had known he had not sent the letter when he asked him about it. The partner came into the associate's office and asked him why he lied. The associate denied lying and produced the backdated letter.

The partner called the law firm's IT people to determine the exact time the letter had been written. Despite having worked at the law firm for years and being weeks away from being made partner, the associate was escorted out of the building by security and never worked

in California again. He was blackballed, and the law firm was more than happy to share with anyone who would listen how disappointed they were with him.

The only thing an attorney has is their ability to be trusted. If they cannot be trusted, they will lose their jobs. Partners lose their jobs for making mistakes on expense accounts. If you are dishonest, you will experience massive problems.

9. Talking Poorly about the People You Work for.

It does not matter whether you like or respect the people you are working for. You need to keep your opinions to yourself. If you talk badly

about the people you are working for, it will get back to them. When it gets back to them, they will want revenge, and they will figure out a way to get back at you and hurt you.

"It does not matter whether you like or respect the people you are working for. You need to keep your opinions to yourself. If you talk badly about the people you are working for, it will get back to them."

You never want to say anything negative whatsoever about the people you are working for. These are the people who support you. You will also need these people later in your career. Even the largest legal communities are really small legal communities. Say only positive things about the people you work with.

10. Not Understanding the Rules of Face Time.

Regardless of how many hours you are billing, you are expected to arrive at the office before the partners and leave after they leave. You

do not have to, but you should. This is the rule that the smartest attorneys follow. It is a rule that works, and it is another way to stay employed. This shows you are hungry and take your job seriously. It shows you are giving your superiors the respect that they deserve. It makes them feel good and gives them the ability to call impromptu meetings at 7:30 a.m. or 8:30 p.m.

While this may sound unreasonable, it is far from it. As an attorney, you are expected to be available and putting in hours. I am not saying you must do this, but this is the absolute best way to keep your position in large law firm and is one of the “smaller” things that the smartest and most savvy associates are doing.

CONCLUSIONS

I realize a lot of this may sound unreasonable, but these are the rules (the most important rules). You need to follow these rules to stay employed and survive. If you’ve come this far, you should not blow it by misunderstanding these rules.

There are tons of other things I could tell you about—how to dress, when to talk and remain silent and more. You should pick these up on your own. The items above are of supreme importance. Follow these rules consistently, and you will do very well over the long run. Years from now, your peers will be plugging away at less important jobs, and you will be continuing to rise.

Here is what is nice about these rules: The people who follow them almost always do well. If someone went to a better school than you, or thinks they are better than you for some reason, you can kick their ass on the law firm battlefield by following these rules.

Here is what happens in most law firms: People show up and some follow these rules and others do not. The ones who do are the survivors. What is so thrilling about watching this game is that the ones who do not follow the rules are often the ones with the most hubris. This is a game, and hubris will not win it. If you want to win, follow these rules.

Share Your Thoughts

- What do you think is the most important piece of advice that will help you survive in a big firm?
- What is the hardest mistake to recover from as a big law firm attorney?

...at bcgattorneysearch.com

- Is being a big law firm attorney worth the long hours and other requirements?

Additional Article Resources

Please see the following articles for more information:

Survival Tips for the First Year Associate

A Step-by-Step Guide to Law Firm Success: Rise Up

Top 7 Tips for Succeeding as a First Year Associate: How to Succeed as a New Associate in a Law Firm

How to Be a Successful Attorney

Two Fatal Deficiencies That Prevent 99% of Attorneys from Achieving Greatness

21 Reasons You Will Never Get a Job with a Major Law Firm Now (or Ever Again)

The One Simple Rule for Succeeding in a Law Firm

Two Things the Most Successful 5% of Attorneys Do That the Rest Do Not

If My Boss Gets Mad at Me or I Get a Poor Review, Does This Mean I Should Look for a New Job?

An Associate's Guide to Law Firm Performance Reviews (Including Getting a Bad Law Firm Performance Review)

Why the Best Attorneys Are So Hard on Themselves and Others

Why There Are No Lifestyle Law Firms

Why You Should Find Your "Tribe" and Not Just Focus on Money in Making Law Firm Job Decisions

How Can I Express My Displeasure at Not Receiving a Bonus This Year from My Law Firm?

The Top Reasons Why Money Is the Dumbest Thing Any Attorney Should Focus on When Joining a Law Firm

Never Focus on the Money: Focus on Your Higher Purpose and Contribution

Top 5 Tips for Attorneys Who Make Mistakes

If My Boss Gets Mad at Me or I Get a Poor Review, Does This Mean I Should Look for a New Job?

Why Most Attorneys Are Angry

Take this GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead

Top 9 Ways for Any Attorney to Generate a Ton of Business

Which Type of Law Firm Is Best for You and Your Career: Main Offices of Large National Firms, Branch Offices of Large National Firms, Midsized Firms, Boutiques, or Newer Fast-Growing Firms?

The #1 Attorney Career Killer That Attorneys Are Never Taught

Five Class-Based Rules That Determine Attorney Success or Failure

Why You Can Never Stop Practicing Law for More Than a Few Weeks Once You Start

Four Union-Like Rules of All Law Firms You Need to Know About

Taking Time Off From Practicing Law: How Will It Impact Your Future Marketability?

Two Things the Most Successful 5% of Attorneys Do That the Rest Do Not

Taking a Hiatus from Practicing Law

The "Systematic Reason" Why Most Attorneys Fail in Large, Prestigious Law Firms