

Practicing Law in California

BCG works with a number of candidates seeking to relocate from another region (typically the East Coast) to California. Part of my job is to explain what to expect during the job search and the realities of living and practicing in California. This article surveys the process of finding a position in California and life as a California attorney.

What California Firms Look for in Attorney Candidates

1. Compelling reasons for the move

Many firms tell us they have had great success with relocation candidates who moved to be with their significant other or are originally from the area or lived there before. I often hear this about candidates who are coming from the East Coast (New York in particular). A firm wants to be assured that a candidate who moves to California to join that firm will stay.

While having some ties to California is great, not everyone does; and that's okay. Other reasons people move here are purely for professional development (perhaps a particular practice area is hotter in a particular city and will offer more opportunities for a candidate to shape his/her practice) or the candidate had visited the area and fell in love with it. Larger markets like Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Silicon Valley certainly like to see ties to the area; but as long as you have the right experience, you will likely get an interview. Relocation candidates who come from the East Coast thrive in these cities. California firms know East Coasters (particularly New Yorkers) generally have strong work ethics and have had exposure to high-level work. In fact, some firms have practices that are more "East Coast" and specifically want a candidate from New York (I hear this often from corporate practices).

San Diego and Orange County are smaller markets and less receptive to relocation candidates unless there is a very good reason for the move. That being said, I have seen candidates with no ties to the area get hired quickly because they had the exact experience a law firm was seeking.

Sacramento, Fresno, Bakersfield, and Santa Barbara are even smaller markets; but they are fairly receptive to relocation candidates as long as the candidate is already admitted to the California Bar.

If you are moving to California because of the laid-back lifestyle, think again. There is a misconception that attorneys in California do not work as hard, and that is just not true. While it's a fair generalization to say California lawyers do not work as hard as New York lawyers, we do work as hard (and in some cases harder) than associates in D.C. or Boston. Few firms expect attorneys to bill 1,800 or lower, and the majority expect their associates to bill at least 2,000. I have heard some attorneys billing as many as 4,000 hours!!! Many die from it! [See Another Big Law Attorney I Know Just Died Young](#)

Further, you cannot make any generalizations about practicing in a specific city. For instance, many outsiders think San Diego or Orange County would offer a better "lifestyle" (i.e., "a less demanding practice"). That simply is not true and should not be your motivation for moving. Many large firms have branch offices in these areas, and these offices need to compete with offices in larger cities; sometimes these branch offices expect more of their attorneys. It is not unheard of to be billing 2,400 hours in San Diego, Sacramento, Orange County, or Santa Barbara.

Firms in Fresno; Bakersfield; and other small, less "sexy" markets generally do have lower billable hour expectations and do offer attorneys a very good lifestyle. [If you are seeking to relocate to California for its laid-back culture, I would suggest moving to one of these areas.](#)

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

2. Membership in the California Bar

California firms are more likely to hire someone who is already a member of the Bar, has recently passed it, or is awaiting results. That being said, some of the larger firms place more emphasis on the quality of a candidate's experience rather than membership to the Bar. In other words, there are some large firms where the lack of California Bar membership is not an issue. And there are some firms (including large ones) that have a strict policy of never [hiring attorneys](#) who aren't already members of the California Bar. Generally, smaller and mid-sized firms require membership to the California Bar.

Large firms in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Silicon Valley are more receptive to relocation candidates who are not already admitted to the California Bar. Orange County and San Diego are less receptive; and Sacramento, Santa Barbara, Fresno, and Bakersfield are even less receptive. In fact, several large firms in Sacramento will flat out not consider a candidate-no matter how strong the resume-until that person is admitted to the Bar.

The reason firms place such an emphasis on the California Bar is because should the candidate join the firm, that person needs to be "up and running" as soon as possible. It is essential for a litigator to be able to go to court and sign off on motions and various documents. Further, it is difficult for a firm to hire someone and then have him/her leave for a few weeks to prepare for and take the exam. Lastly, the firm has to wait six months before getting the results. If a relocation candidate does not pass the exam the first time, many firms may ask that candidate to leave the firm. Firms would rather not deal with this; that is why they tend to hire those who are already members. It's another way to weed out candidates.

If you have lack compelling reasons for moving to California, sign up to take the next Bar exam (offered in late February and July). Firms will assume you are committed to moving if you take the time to prepare for and take the exam.

3. Stability in a resume

California firms look for candidates who are not "firm hoppers" or who move from city to city. If there are moves on a resume, firms will want to know a valid explanation for each one; otherwise, it will be very difficult to move there.

Unlike those in New York, firms in California are more receptive to candidates who are not "cookie cutter" (i.e., have graduated law school in the last five years and have been practicing at the same firm). If a candidate has experience in a specialized practice-trusts and estates, corporate, structured or corporate finance, labor and employment, real estate, tax, investment management ('40 Act), or intellectual property, to name a few-but has taken a few years off from [practicing law](#) or transitioned into another practice area, firms will consider these candidates assuming the candidate is flexible regarding class year.

However, these candidates must be ready to take a potentially significant hit in class year. For instance, let's say you graduated law school six years ago and worked for four years as an associate in a strong real estate practice before deciding to become a mortgage broker. After two years of working as a broker, you realize how much you miss the intellectual challenge and stability that comes with practicing law. You miss working with lawyers and are eager to return to a law firm environment. You cannot expect to come into a firm right where you left off.

While you may believe your brokerage experience has made you more well-rounded and even a better attorney, I guarantee you the firm won't. In fact, you may not realize it, but there will be a significant learning

curve; and it will likely take you close to a year to get to the level you were when you left the firm. You will most likely come in as a second- or third-year associate. And if you are truly dedicated to returning to the practice, you would jump at this opportunity.

In general, East Coast firms are more skeptical of lawyers who have done anything but the "standard law firm line." So, people who have taken substantial time off, moved around a bit, or started their own businesses are not welcomed by East Coast firms.

How to Explain Job Hopping

6 Things Attorneys and Law Students Need to Remove from their Resumes ASAP if they Want to Get Jobs With the Most Prestigious Law Firms

Interviewing in California

If you are relocating, chances are you don't know the California market well. I would highly recommend speaking with a BCG recruiter, who is not only an expert in his/her market, but also has established relationships with many law firms.

Having a strong resume and deal or case sheet where necessary is essential. Your recruiter can help you with this, as well. From the time the recruiter sends out your resume, you should not expect to hear anything for at least two weeks. First, firms usually request a "screening" interview with a candidate. Depending on the firm, this may be done over the phone, but there is a strong preference for meeting candidates in person. A [screening interview](#) typically lasts about an hour, and it involves a candidate speaking with one or two attorneys (typically partners). The purpose of the screening interview is to get a feel for the candidate's background, reasons for moving, level of experience, and personality-to make sure the candidate is a potential "fit." Firms in California for the most part do not pay to fly a candidate out for a screening interview-no matter how large or prestigious the firm. If you are serious about moving to California, you are better off scheduling a short trip (perhaps a long weekend) to California and designating these days for screening interviews.

If the screening interview goes well, you will be asked to come back for a full round of interviews, which typically last two to four hours and may include lunch. Do not be too anxious to hear back from a firm about a callback. Typically, it takes at least one to three weeks for law firms to fully evaluate your candidacy and determine whether they would like to have you return. Normally, law firms have weekly or bi-monthly hiring committee meetings, where they discuss which candidates to make offers to.

Many law firms will pay for your travel expenses (such as airfare and hotel). Some firms have travel agents who will take care of these expenses; other firms will reimburse the candidate. And some firms believe if you are serious about moving here, then you should be willing to pay for your travel expenses, as well. This certainly weeds out candidates who are just looking.

In attempting to relocate to California, the entire process can generally take anywhere from two to six months and sometimes even longer depending on the nature of a candidate's practice and seniority. You will hear stories about candidates who obtained a position with a top firm in San Francisco or Los Angeles in less than two weeks, but I warn you that is rare. Candidates who have between one and five years of experience with a top East Coast firm and top academic credentials will quickly get interviews and offers, sometimes in less than a week.

21 Major Job Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs

Offers and Salaries

There is no general procedure for California firms to make offers. Generally, the law firm makes a verbal offer

(either through a partner or recruiter) and follows up with an offer letter sent via mail and sometimes email. Some firms only make verbal offers, and some firms just send out a letter in the mail. Again, even if the callback went well, it can take several weeks before knowing whether you will be made an offer.

Salaries in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Silicon Valley are all roughly the same. They are on par with D.C. salaries and a little bit lower than New York salaries (first-year associates at large firms make \$160,000). Salaries in Orange County and San Diego tend to be a bit lower depending on the firm, although many large firms have branch offices here and pay the same salary across all offices. Salaries in Sacramento, Santa Barbara, Fresno, and Bakersfield tend to be much lower (for instance, a starting salary for a first-year can be much less).

Generally, firms do not offer signing bonuses, particularly where the candidate is relocating. In fact, some firms will be put off if you ask for one, and I have seen cases where an offer was even revoked.

If the firm sends a written offer letter, it will include some or all of the following: (1) class year, (2) base compensation, (3) relocation expenses, (4) benefits, (5) bar fees, (6) bonus system, (7) partnership track, (8) vacation, (9) parking, and (10) anything else the firms offers (such as attorney retreats or in-house lunches). Almost all law firms will have you fill out a conflicts form, and many firms will carry out a criminal background check and a credit check.

Everything is Negotiable

Choose Your Negotiations Wisely

The Dangers of Negotiating Offers in a Down Market

Relocation Expenses

Not every firm pays to relocate candidates, although many large firms do. Typically, law firms have caps on relocation expenses (anywhere from \$2,000-\$10,000), and others will either pay for or reimburse a candidate for his/her "reasonable moving expenses." Some firms do not consider shipping a car or a piano to be "reasonable." Each firm is different, and this is normally not something that can be negotiated.

California Bar

If a candidate is not already admitted to the California Bar, most firms will give time off (two to four weeks) to study for and take the exam. Some, but not all, firms will pay for your time off. Some firms will pay for a bar review course, as well as expenses and fees associated with the exam. Most firms will pay yearly bar membership dues and for Continuing Legal Education courses.

Reciprocity Law Among the States

Parking

The standard in California is for firms not to pay for parking. If a firm offers to pay for parking, that is a perk others do not offer, even large firms.

Parking Benefits and Falling in Love With Your Job

Practicing Law in California

Typically, attorneys begin their days between 8-9 a.m. and leave between 6-9 p.m. You will also find many firms have an "open door" policy, meaning most attorneys work with their doors open. Having an open door shows your supervisors you are working and that you are approachable.

Some practice areas are not as sophisticated as those on the East Coast, particularly in New York. For

instance, generally speaking, corporate law practices are not as sophisticated in California. However, there are many tech companies in California with sophisticated intellectual property needs or thriving start-up/emerging company practices. Of course, this is a generalization; and some California firms pride themselves on having a "New York" practice.

Cost of Living in California

Renting and buying a home in California is expensive too. Gas is very expensive (more than the rest of the country). Before beginning your search, you should investigate real estate websites such as www.ziprealty.com and salary/cost-of-living calculators such as www.homefair.com.

California is a wonderful place to work and live. It has great weather and offers a variety of outdoor and cultural activities. It is better to investigate the realities of living and practicing in California before beginning your search. Because once you receive an offer, you will not have much time to make a decision (typically one to two weeks). If after reading this article, you are still interested in making the move, I would recommend speaking with a BCG recruiter as soon as possible.

Moving your career to another city