

## *Do Small Firms Like Attorneys That Start Out at Big Law Firms?*

**Question:** *If someone is interested in working at a small- or medium-size firm as a long-term career, does spending the first few years of your career at a big law firm give you an advantage over someone who actually starts at a smaller firm and remains there?*

**Answer:** You have asked a good question, but before I attempt to answer it, I must ask you a very important question: How do you know that you will want to be at a small- or medium-sized firm for the bulk of your career? You are just starting out ... I submit to you that it is nearly impossible to know for certain what you want to be doing five, 10 or 20 years from now. Who knows? You may not even be [practicing law](#) 10 years from now!

Now, on the other hand, I do think it is a good idea to keep all your options open. [I believe that the best way you can position yourself would be to take a job in a major law firm if you have that opportunity.](#)

Of course, there are different types of major law firms. For example, if you go to work for a large, national [insurance defense law](#) firm, more than likely you will not be a viable candidate for the firms that do work for the Fortune 500 companies. Similarly, should you choose a large medical malpractice firm then you should be setting your sights on firms that have that type of focus, rather than the firms which represent Corporate America.

But if you decide to accept an offer with one of the national full-service law firms that cater to corporations, investment banks, etc., you will be a viable candidate for the midsize and boutique firms that work with the same type of client base.

Based on my experience (and please remember that headhunters work with a very specific and finite group of candidates - a group defined by the kind of searches their clients undertake), when a midsize or small law firm is looking for a lateral hire, they prefer to interview someone who has been trained in the large national firms. By the way, that's also the preference of in-house legal departments. The reason for this preference - whether it is valid or not - is that the candidate coming out of a major law firm has been part of a very specific training program. These large firm candidates have been exposed to many different aspects of their practice area as well as many different types of corporate clients.

Of course, those of you who have been trained in the smaller firms know that you have had much more hands-on experience than the bulk of your classmates who have gone directly to the large national firms. Even so, this bias in favor of hiring laterals out of the larger firms predominates.

I am speaking of [lateral hires](#) with three to five years of experience. As a candidate becomes more senior, the training they received in their earlier years of practice becomes less important, and the matters they have handled more recently become the primary hiring factor. So if you've been working for five to six years at a prestigious boutique or a well-respected midsize firm, you will be judged on the body of your experience rather than just where you've gotten your experience.

Having said all of that, I do believe that you will have many more options if you start out at a major firm and spend at least two to three years at that firm. In fact, many attorneys opt to lateral over to yet another [large firm](#) after their first two to three years of practice, simply to have the experience of practicing the same kind of law in a different venue. However, I have found that laterals from the large firms move very successfully to the small and midsize firms around the middle to end of their second year and into their third year. Then after around three to four years at this second job, the corporations become very interested because these types of candidates have gained their experience in two very different practice environments, facing many different types of clients, matters and legal issues.

One last word ... frequently when a big-firm associate receives an [offer from](#) a smaller firm, friends and family advise against it because they have never heard of this smaller firm. Just because people outside of the legal community are not familiar with this potential new employer does not mean that you would be taking a step down. I cannot begin to name all of the midsize and [boutique firms](#) that are every bit as prestigious and profitable as the large firms, and are equally well-known to the people within the legal community. If you are concerned that a move to a smaller firm might diminish the marketability of having worked for a prestigious first employer, simply take a look at the new firm's listing in Martindale-Hubbell or its list of representative clients. Your fears should be eliminated at that point.

Take that job at the major firm and plan to stay there for a minimum of two to three years. At that point you will have enough insight to know if you should stay there for at least the foreseeable future, or if you want to start a search to join a firm where you will be more visible, have much more hands-on responsibility and hopefully have a much better shot at becoming a partner. I hope this advice helps.

**Summary:** *Does spending the first few years of your career at a [big law firm](#) give you an advantage over someone who actually starts at a smaller firm and remains there?*

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