

Weighing Options for a Legal Career: Moving from Boutique Law Firm to Large Firm or In-House Department in New York

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office

Question: *I am a second-year associate at a New York-based boutique law firm. I am considering moving either to a large New York law firm, a large, regionally known Connecticut firm or the in-house legal department of a New York-based, Fortune 500 company.*

What do you perceive to be the relative advantages or disadvantages of each of these types of opportunities for a junior attorney?

Answer: Those of you who have read this column in the past probably already know what my answer will be!

But first, let's answer the question regarding my perception of the relative advantages or disadvantages of the three different opportunities.

I can't think of any great advantages for you to go in-house at this stage in your career. More than likely you would be hired at a very junior level. If a company is talking about bringing you in at a senior or managerial level then you need to think twice about the company. After all, you have only been in practice for about a year and four months.

Although I am sure that you work very hard, you still could not have had the exposure and experience that can only come with time. If you do go in-house at this point in your career, you can be fairly confident that you will not be a viable candidate for a law firm job in the foreseeable future. You will have effectively blocked yourself from being in the competition for law firm opportunities. And at a very junior level in corporate America, you will be taking a major step back in salary and status. Do you really want to face all of this?

Let me just add that if you do go in-house and over the years continue to be promoted or move to new employers at higher levels and eventually end up as General Counsel of one of the major corporations, you might very well find yourself being recruited to come in as a partner at a law firm. This is assuming that you would be able to bring your corporation into the law firm as a client. However, this is no reason to take an in-house job this early in your career. Quite frankly, if your goal is to eventually be a law firm partner, I see no advantage in taking an in-house job at this time.

On the other hand, there are some advantages to going over to a regionally well-known Connecticut firm.

More than likely you will have a much more favorable work schedule than you would have at a New York firm. The partner to associate ratio will be more favorable and you will have a much better shot at making partner. However, you will definitely make considerably less money and there is always the chance that you will not be working on the same types of cutting-edge, high profile matters as you might find in a large New York firm. And, unless you are working on some of those cutting-edge, high profile matters or are in a particularly desirable practice area, you will not be able to compete with people from the large New York practices who will be applying for those same big firm jobs.

So, unless you want to tone down your lifestyle and have a smaller, more controllable practice, the disadvantages of going to the regional firm outweigh the advantages.

Here's the problem. It is difficult to know what you will want in three or four years. You may be ready for a

career on the in-house side or for a calmer lifestyle in a regional New England firm. But what if you don't want either of those types of practice? What if you want to be earning the big bucks in a major New York law firm? Maybe you will and maybe you won't, but it is far easier to leave that type of practice than try to get back into it.

I recommend that in these earlier years of your career, and given the choice, you will end up far better off by being a part of the large, well-known New York law firm. You are young and much more energetic than you will be in 5, 10 or 15 years from now. This is the time to take on the grueling hours and the larger than life matters while at the same time earning top dollars. Should you decide down the road that you do not have the stamina for this type of practice or simply that this is not the life for you, you will be an extremely viable candidate for both in-house jobs and regional law firm opportunities.

If you have the opportunity and inclination to work in a large New York law firm, I would urge you to go in that direction at this point in your career. Give your practice a few years to develop before you decide what you want it to be. Please let us know what you decide to do.

Summary: *What do you perceive to be the relative advantages or disadvantages of moving to different types of opportunities for a junior attorney?*

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