

The Boutique Alternative

Most of my conversations with candidates involve whether or not they will be able to find a job in 2010. Undoubtedly, most of my conversations with candidates involve whether or not they will be able to find a job in 2010 -- and how today's market compares to 2009/2008. The going commentary is that the first 8 weeks of 2010 have been markedly more active than 2009 (which was essentially a flat-line on the associate hiring side of the coin). While this bit of information should lift some eyebrows and produce chants of joy, I find more and more candidates have become disillusioned with the job market and disgruntled with New York Big Law in general -- leading to feelings of "leaving the practice," "moving away," or "taking time off until Big Law starts hiring again."

All of this confuses me and here is why: Big Law is not the only game in town. That's a fact! It's a fact that bears repeating: BIG LAW IS NOT THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN.

Big Law occupies only a small percentage of the overall law firm populace. In fact, outside of that small percentage, you can find [boutique firms](#), middle market firms, small firms, [solo practitioners](#), [virtual law practices](#), and any number of other "opportunities." However, people forget this fact, and we all need to be reminded of what truly exists out there. Granted, it may not be where you saw yourself upon graduating from law school. However, these often overlooked places offer real jobs, real opportunities, and real experience.

For anyone who grew up in small town America (that would be me) in the late 70s/early 80s when the steel mills were closing, we saw our parents and our friends' parents lose their pensions and their livelihood when the steel mills shut down. What else did we see? We saw those same parents finding other jobs...anywhere they could. Some left their professional jobs with corporations for solo practices as consultants. Some left their career-inspired jobs to do free-lance writing or dedicate their 9 to 5 to other income-producing pursuits. Others stayed in the professional world but in entirely different professional roles. The bottom line here is that people did whatever they could to keep moving forward, and a little while later when the economy evened out and jobs were hopping again, some of them moved back into the roles they had originally but with different employers. Some of them enjoyed their new work too much to make a change backward. All of the above-referenced parents retired with professional accolades and a pension at the end of the day. A friend of mine described this single-mindedness as follows (and as told to him by his father): When you don't know what to do, DO SOMETHING.

What does this mean for lawyers right now? It means that Big Law isn't the only game in town, and if Big Law is hiring selectively and slowly right now, that's okay. Other opportunities exist so be mindful of them, look for them, interview for them, stay connected, involved, committed to your career. Be flexible, open-minded, and see yourself in the larger picture. Hopefully, the legal job market will continue to make careful steps toward improvement and hiring, but, until then, you cannot put your life or career on hold. As they say, the character of a man or woman is not measured by success, but by adversity. I believe that to be true, and it also bears repeating.