

Are all law firms really “the same”?

Law firms, it seems, breed a culture of negativity. You

Now that I've become a recruiter at BCG, all of my lawyer friends who I thought were happy (or at least not miserable) at their current jobs have suddenly confessed to their discontentedness at their present law firms. My question is "why"? If you ask them, they will confess that nothing has really changed at their respective firms over the past 4 or 5 years. Same job, same people (at least mostly), same gawdawful hours. So why am I just now hearing about all of this misery?

Law firms, it seems, breed a culture of negativity. You're unhappy, but then so are the poor guys in the offices on either side of you. You perhaps rage against it during your first few months at your firm, but then you assume that you have to accept your lot in life. Heck, you worked hard to get where you're at, and the money is nothing to sneer at, so might as well just plod along. Besides, no one really wants to hear about it (unless the unhappiness stems from something fairly salacious). Looking back at the happy hours with my friends during my years at various law firms, no one really discussed how they felt about their jobs, what they were doing at work, or how their [jobs fell short of their expectations](#). It was too depressing to relive over drinks, and that's why we were drinking anyway, right?

On the other hand, ALL the associates at your current firm no doubt complains ALL the time to each other about how miserable they are. Here, though, no one is really listening. No point, really, everyone is working for the same people and have to attend all the same annoying dinners/events, so it's really just a waste of breath.

Why the culture of negativity exists is perhaps a bigger issue than I want to address right now. I'll save that for my first novel. But I guess I am more interested in knowing why attorneys accept misery as a fact and don't really try to change the situation. So many of my now-I-realize unhappy friends have been at the same firm their entire career. I have asked many of them why they stay if it makes them that unhappy, and the constant reply is this: all big firms are the same. Why go to the trouble of starting over again, trying to establish good will with a new group of partners, if the effort is just going to get you exactly where you currently are?

The thing is, having been at three firms over the past five years (that's right--3 in 5), they really are not the same. Yes, you do have the same lack of control over your schedule, and you will no doubt encounter annoying or even evil people in any law firm environment. At least that was my experience. But, the culture, the work, and the amount of mentorship you receive can vary greatly among firms. Each firm I worked at was distinct. Hated the people at one, loved the people at another. Received great mentoring at one, realized the concept of mentoring was a new one at another. Sure, I never found a perfect fit, but my problem was that I never really wanted to be a lawyer. Perhaps that is your problem. But, if it is not, why on earth accept misery? Maybe it's too much to ask that work be fun (although my job luckily is), but there are many emotional states that exist between misery and happiness. Do some soul searching and try to find out exactly what is making you unhappy, do some research into other firms, and then put your misery behind you (after some exit therapy). Strike out and find something new.