

21 Reasons You Will Never Get a Job with a Major Law Firm Now (or Ever Again)

By A. Harrison Barnes

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ATTORNEY SEARCH



21 Reasons You Will Never Get a Job with a Major Law Firm Now (or Ever Again)

By A. Harrison Barnes

Summary

If you ever want to work at a major law firm, you must avoid making any of these major career mistakes.

In the course of my work, I encounter attorneys who have fatal flaws on their resumes that will almost always prevent them from ever getting a job in a large law firm—whether at the start of their careers or later on in their careers. Attorneys are generally completely unaware of these flaws and many mistakenly believe that “the right experience” is enough.

It is not.

Each day I review the resumes of scores of potential candidates and the majority of these poor souls (or lucky souls, depending on how you look at it) will never be able to secure a position inside of a large law firm. There are so many roadblocks to getting a position inside of a large law firm that it is a wonder anyone gets these jobs at all.

At the outset, it is important to understand that there are legitimate and strong reasons for attorneys to want to get positions at the largest and most prestigious law firms. While much is said that is negative about large

law firms, there is in actuality a lot that is extremely positive about them and there are good reasons for wanting to work in them. While by no means an exhaustive list, some of the reasons include: (1) more prestige, (2) more sophisticated work for larger clients, (3) clients who pay their bills, (3) higher salaries and better benefits, (4) more stability, (5) better training, (6) better lateral career opportunities, (7) the ability to attract better clients, (8) better credentialed attorneys to work with, (9) nicer offices, and (10) better support (secretaries, paralegals, word processing departments and more).

In fact, one could argue that the pluses of working in large firms are so strong that your career trajectory is likely to be far, far different if you are in a large law firm than a small one. Let’s face it: People want to work in these firms and try very hard to do so. It is for this reason that if you truly want to work in a major law firm and stay in a major law firm (with its corresponding advantages), you better know what mistakes you better not make, because they will disqualify you from working in them.

1. Going to a Poorly Ranked Law School and Not Doing Extraordinarily Well There.

This is almost always a near insurmountable roadblock for those seeking positions in large law firms. While there are some firms that may hire you if you have a rare skill (such as an electrical engineering degree, preferably a PhD in electrical engineering), not doing very well at a poorly ranked law school will most often be the end of it. If you go to one of the lower ranked law schools, you generally need to be first in your class, or very close to it. If it is a midlevel school, or a strong regional school, you may be able to get a job in large law firm in the city where the school is located by being in the top 5 or 10% of your class, but this is rare. *A law student in this position is unlikely to get a summer associate position in a large law firm and due to this will likely never work in a large law firm.*

Even if an attorney manages to get a position in a large law firm from a poorly ranked school, the attorney will still have a difficult time lateraling to a major law firm—but it is not impossible. The bottom line is that going to a poorly ranked school is likely to haunt an attorney for his or her entire career and make it very difficult for that attorney to get a position in the largest and most prestigious law firms.

2. Going to a Law School Not in the Top 10 and Doing Average to Poorly There.

It is generally very difficult for a law student to get a job in a large law firm if that student performed poorly in law school. Large law firms have few ways to distinguish the potential of attorneys except by the quality of their law schools and their grades earned at those law schools. As such, if a candidate is at the bottom of his or her class, law firms will assume that he

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or she does not have the drive or the smarts of other people and the firms will hire other candidates. *A law student in this position is unlikely to get a summer associate position in a large law firm and due to this will likely never work in a large law firm.*

3. Not Getting a Summer Associate Job in a Large Law Firm.

The failure of a law student to get a summer associate position at a large law firm is generally the “kiss of death” when it comes to ever working in a large law firm. If a law student does not get one of these coveted summer associate positions, firms will assume that the candidate is either not interested in working in a large firm or has some “fatal” flaw that disqualifies them from the ranks of those firms. It generally does not matter where the student went to law school, if the student did not get a position as a summer associate it

is very likely that he or she will never get a position in a large law firm, although there are sometimes exceptions.

While this sounds harsh, the fact is that this pattern is something I see all the time. When a candidate with otherwise strong qualifications fails to get a position in a large law firm as a law student, it sends the wrong message, because virtually every attorney in a large law firm was a summer associate at a large law firm somewhere.

They expect the same from you. If you do not meet this basic requirement, you generally will not be able to get a position with a large law firm.

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4. Not Getting an Offer as a Summer Associate.

If a candidate did not get an offer as a summer associate, this will generally severely limit the attorney's chances of getting an offer from a large law firm when the attorney graduates. While not as fatal as not working as a summer associate at all, large law firms almost always ask and "check" if the attorney received an offer as a summer associate.

Law firms use summer associate jobs for a variety of purposes. One of the main uses is to assess whether a law student is suitable for law firm life. This means that law students are observed for their work ethic, social skills, behavior around others, and to determine if

they will fit in at the firm. In order to fail this test, the summer associate needs to really mess up. Failing this test is a huge warning sign to future employers to simply stay away from the candidate. The law firm believes the law student will likely be a liability wherever he or she goes.

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5. Coming Out of School at the Wrong Time.

Timing is truly everything for attorneys seeking to get jobs in large law firms. Legal recessions occur periodically and wreak havoc on the careers of attorneys—regardless of where they went to school. While excellent performance at a top law school and a pleasing personality will generally virtually guarantee a position at a top firm—even in a recession—it does not always. If attorneys come out of school at the wrong time, they may find offers received as summer associates revoked, they may be hired and quickly laid off only months into their first year, or they may not get a job with a large law firm at all.

If an attorney does not start his or her career with a large law firm, it is difficult, if not impossible, for that attorney to ever get a position in a large law firm. In most instances, the first firm a student joins out of law school will be the largest one he or she ever works with. If it is not a significant firm, it will raise questions about the attorney's abilities to get a position with a large law firm, suggest red

flags somewhere, and serve as an indicator for future firms to almost always avoid the attorney.

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6. Not Having Your First Job Out of Law School Be with a Major Law Firm or Federal Clerkship and Not Having Been a Summer Associate in a Major Law Firm

Provided you were a summer associate in a major law firm, doing a federal district court clerkship (or above) will generally be enough to get you a position with a large law firm once you complete your clerkship. But if you were not a summer associate in a major law firm, you will have a difficult time getting a position with a major law firm once your clerkship is complete.

If your first job out of law school was as anything but as a clerk for a federal district or appellate court or as an associate for a major law firm, you will have a very difficult time ever getting a position with a major law firm. This includes working in-house, for public interest organizations, or for the government. Major law firms expect their attorneys to be trained in the mindset and way of thinking of large law firms accountable to major clients. Unless

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you start your career with a major law firm (or a federal judge), law firms believe that you will have picked up habits, ways of thinking and working that they will never be able to correct. Moreover, major law firms have no interest in seeing if they can correct the sorts of bad habits you might have picked up working in another sort of setting because there are plenty of people interested in working for them that do not need "retraining."

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7. Being a General Practitioner as Opposed to a Specialist.

If you become a "jack of all trades" inside virtually any law firm, it will be extremely difficult for you to transition into a large law firm. For example, if you are doing litigation, real estate and corporate, you will almost never be able to get a position as an attorney in a large law firm in one of these practice groups.

Large law firms generally only hire "specialists" who have experience doing simply one thing. The largest law firms even break up corporate into numerous sub-specialties such as M&A, capital markets,

asset finance and so forth. Once an attorney becomes a generalist the attorney becomes less marketable to large law firms that are made up almost exclusively of specialists.

Large law firms are made up of specialists. They do not hire generalists. If you are working as a generalist you do not fit the “mold” that large law firms require you to fit.

8. Having More Than 10 Years of Experience and No Substantial Portable Business.

If an attorney has more than 10 years of experience and no portable business, the attorney’s odds of getting a position in a large law firm are severely diminished—but not impossible.

For an attorney who does not have business to get a position in a large law firm, the attorney will generally need to be in a very specialized practice area (tax, ERISA, patent prosecution, bankruptcy, real estate) and in a market where the supply of attorneys and work far exceeds the demand. Litigators, for example, have an extremely difficult time lateralling without business when they get senior. There are tons of litigators everywhere. Most attorneys doing anything other than transactional work (environmental, labor and employment, insurance litigation) have severely limited options unless they have portable business.

While it is a sad thing to say, unless an attorney gets business, the attorney’s options inside of large law firms become few and far between. Most attorneys who become senior realize they have hit a wall and (1) do their best to “stick it out” at their current firms, or (2) try to find a smaller firm, in-house job, or other option that will support them. Very few law firms welcome “counsel” or other senior attorneys without business.

9. Having Too Much Diversity.

There is nothing wrong with being diverse, of course. Diversity is highly valued by law firms. What law firms do not want, though, is too much diversity. Too much diversity means that the attorney makes an issue out of their diversity. You need to “fit in” to the extent you can with the relatively “straight laced” atmosphere of a law firm. You need to dress the part, talk in language suitable to the part, and do your best to fit in and be friendly with those you are working with.

Large law firms are middle class institutions primarily serving very wealthy companies, institutions and individuals. These institutions (and clients) expect you to look, act and behave a certain way. None of this means you cannot practice your religion, or that you need to hide your race, or sexual orientation, or disability. What this means is that you cannot make an issue out of any of these things. People want to work around people who do not make them feel threatened, threaten them, or make them uncomfortable. You need to make those with whom you are working feel comfortable if you are going to get hired.

10. Going In-House.

Unless you are in a highly transactional practice area and have not been in-house longer than a year or so, **going in-house** is almost always something that will destroy your future career prospects in a large law firm. Attorneys make this mistake all the time and believe that they can go back to a law firm after going in-house. This is far from true. If you go in-house you have demonstrated to

large law firms that you are not interested in “playing their game” and are likely to leave again. They have no incentive to introduce you to their clients, train you, bond with you, and make you part of their ecosystem. They know you will leave the law firm world again (and you most likely will). Attorneys who join law firms after going in-house very rarely last more than a year. There are exceptions, of course, but it does not happen often.

Law firms expect attorneys to be 100% committed to working and learning the law firm game. They expect attorneys to want to work with large clients and be accountable to paying clients for results. Law firms do not want to hire attorneys who show any indication they are not interested in any of this.

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11. Quitting Your Job Without Having Another Lined Up.

If you have quit a job because of something you did not like with that firm, other firms know that it is just a matter of time until you find something you do not like with them and quit. As soon as you quit a job without having another lined up, you have sent future employers all sorts of messages about your lack of perseverance, tolerance for adversity, and ability to “stick it out” regardless of the issue.

Furthermore, why would firms hire you? They have plenty of people they can hire who do

not come with the same “baggage” and whom they know will likely never quit a job without having another lined up. Your odds of getting hired with a large law firm if you have quit a job and are currently unemployed are not very good at all. In some markets, such as New York City, it is nearly impossible.

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12. Getting Fired or Laid Off from a Job.

Large law firms almost never hire attorneys who are unemployed, or who have quit jobs. Does it happen? Of course it does. But it is very rare. In large legal markets it is incredibly difficult.

Getting a job in a large law firm is extremely competitive as it is. Large law firms have their pick of scores of highly qualified attorneys interested in working for them. Being unemployed sends the message to firms that there is a reason you are unemployed that is related to your performance, attitude, reliability, entitlement, lack of needing a paycheck, or other issues that will likely be a problem for them in the future. Law firms believe they can do better by hiring someone else—and they do.

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13. Working as a Contract or Staff Attorney.

Once an attorney takes a job as a contract attorney, the attorney sends a message to the legal market that the attorney is not as valuable as attorneys currently working inside of major law firms. Contract attorneys also send a message that they do not want the level of accountability that full-time attorneys have, or that they want flexibility or a working arrangement that large law firms simply do not provide. Regardless of the reasons, I cannot recall once ever seeing a contract attorney hired by a major law firm as a full-time attorney (unless the contract attorney was already at the firm and had proven indispensable).

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14. Suing a Former Employer.

It does not matter why you felt you needed to sue your former employer—large law firms simply do not care. They are risk averse and only want to hire people who have never caused trouble with past employers. Law firms know that there are plenty of people they can hire who will not be associated with such past issues and they will hire these people instead.

If you want to be hired by a large law firm, you need to avoid any appearance that you might be a problem for your next employer or be some kind of troublemaker. In my experience, law firms avoid hiring attorneys who have waged litigation against past employers.

15. Going from a Large Law Firm to a Smaller Law Firm.

One fantasy that many attorneys have is that they can move from a large law firm to a smaller law firm and then go back to a large law firm again. This is another “pipe dream” that rarely, if ever, works out. Large law firms simply assume that attorneys who move from large law firms to smaller ones were simply not “cut out” for working in large law firms and sought to escape to smaller law firms, or (for whatever reason) could not get a position in another large law firm.

Moreover, large law firms understand that different levels of training, ways of practice and other qualifications typically apply to large versus small firms. The quality of smaller law firms tends to be inconsistent and all over the map. Most attorneys move from large law firms to smaller ones because they want less pressure, or cannot get a job in a large law firm when they are interested in moving.

Regardless of the reasons, a large law firm has little incentive to take a risk on someone who has moved from a large law firm to a smaller one. There are plenty of people in the market who are coming from large law firms whose backgrounds do not raise these questions.

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16. Moving Firms Three or More Times in Less Than Five Years (or Having Too Many Firms on Your Resume).

There is nothing wrong with moving firms. But there is something wrong with moving firms too often. Once you have moved firms a number of times in a short period of time, subsequent firms are going to be perfectly justified in assuming that you will leave them in short order as well. Regardless of the reasons for your

multiple moves, too many moves sends the message that you will not be able to be trusted with clients, trusted after being trained, relied upon, or that you will be someone who requires constant coddling and reassurance.

Law firms also are concerned that an attorney who moves around too much might have issues with reliability, substance abuse, dependability, cooperation, work product—you name it. There is no need for law firms to participate in all of this when they can just as easily find someone more stable and upon whom they can rely at all points in time.

17. Saying Bad Things about Your Former (or Current) Employer in Interviews.

If an attorney says bad things about his or her current (or former) employer in interviews, the odds are that he or she will do the same thing

to his or her new firm. In addition, most large law firms have been around for decades and will be around decades after the negative-speaking attorney is gone. The odds are quite good that the attorney was the source of the problems, or that the attorney's inability to tolerate the issues was a legitimate cause for concern.

Attorneys who have negative things to say about former employers show poor taste. If

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the employer was good enough to hire the attorney and give the attorney a job, then the attorney is expected to be thankful in the future and not say negative things. It is also expected that the attorney will be discrete enough to keep any issues their

employer may have had quiet in their next position. Keeping client confidences is an important part of being an attorney.

Finally, there is no reason for a large law firm to take a chance on someone who is likely to say bad things about them in the future. They have no incentive to do so.

18. Working in Insurance Defense.

If an attorney is working in insurance defense—it generally does not matter how large the law firm is (and there are some very large law firms practicing insurance defense)—very few other large law firms will have any

interest in the attorney. Insurance defense is not considered the same sort of high-rate work that large, general practice law firms are involved in.

Insurance defense is typically a practice where the fees are lower and where there are very tight budgets for the work. As a consequence, the quality of work is not as high. It is not uncommon to see papers filed by insurance defense firms that are filled with typos, factual errors and incomprehensible legal reasoning. While this is not necessarily the “norm” for insurance defense attorneys, this is the reputation of most insurance defense law firms among mainstream, high-billing law firms. Due to this, large, prestigious law firms will simply not hire attorneys from these law firms.

In addition, insurance defense firms almost always pay dramatically lower salaries than large law firms.

Because their salaries are so much lower, they are unable to attract the same quality of attorneys as large law firms and the overall quality of the attorneys practicing in them is most often far lower.

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19. Doing Any Type of Consumer-Facing Legal Work Such as Criminal Law (Not White

Collar), Family Law, Consumer Bankruptcy, Consumer Tax Resolution, Personal Injury, Immigration Law, Residential Real Estate, Foreclosure Litigation, and Trust and Estates (Except for the Very High End), or Any Type of (Predominately) Small Company Representation.

Large law firms make money by working for companies with a ton of money and which can open their wallets and write checks from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands of dollars per month. These sorts of law firms cannot pay the sorts of salaries they do, support the sorts of office spaces they are in, or maintain anywhere near their level of staffing without working for these sorts of companies.

For the average individual or small company, twenty-five thousand dollars or more each month is a ton of money. This is a lot of

money for all but the wealthiest person or most successful company. People who are not multimillionaires cannot afford to hire large law firms and

pay them the sort of money they require. Companies that can afford to hire large law firms and expensive attorneys typically are large companies with lots of disposable income.

In order for large law firms to function effectively, they need people trained in how large law firms operate and think about and attack problems. Large law firms carefully work over issues and transactions and do

things without cutting corners—because they do not have to. For example, in many cases, a large law firm will require multiple memos about issues, charge thousands of dollars for travel time, charge outrageous fees for sending faxes and making photocopies, request reimbursement for late night meals, charge as much per hour for paralegals as many small law firms charge for attorneys and more. The average consumer hiring any of the above attorneys simply cannot afford to pay them what a large law firm charges for its legal services. The sort of attorneys who do work for consumers simply cannot afford to develop the level of insight and analysis of issues that large law firms require from their attorneys.

Trained to cut corners, do things the “easy rather than the hard way” and attack issues in a different sort of manner, attorneys in consumer-facing practices are almost always not marketable to larger law firms.

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20. Having any Sort of Black Mark on Your State Bar Record, or Easily Findable Negative/Salacious Information about Your Past Online

Lawyers are expected to uphold the law and, as such, they should not have negative information about them that can be found online. Negative information undermines their credibility, undermines the credibility of their clients, and is generally “shunned” by the legal profession. Lawyers who want to work

for large law firms need to maintain pretty spotless records—especially early in their legal careers—and that means not getting arrested for being in a fight and convicted of a misdemeanor, or getting in any other kind of serious trouble (that the State Bar or their law firm finds out about). If they do get into such trouble, they will generally lose their positions with large law firms.

In addition, I have seen attorneys lose their jobs with major law firms for having written negatively about their law firms online—and you know what happens to attorneys who lose their positions with major law firms.

A major law firm has no need for attorneys who have black marks on their records. The people inside of a law firm are the law firm’s brand and law firms will avoid and not hire people due to negative information about the attorney that seriously calls into question the attorney’s judgment, character and honesty.

21. Working as a Solo Practitioner, for a Solo Practitioner, or for a Very Small Law Firm.

You cannot open an office as a solo practitioner, or go to work in a very small law firm, and expect that you are going to be able to work in a large law firm. From the perspective of a large law firm, the only reason people go to work in small law firms is because they cannot get jobs in large law firms, or they do not like working with large groups of people. Attorneys with solo practices typically are not doing work that is as serious as that done by large law firms, and the quality of the work they do is not overseen by large groups of others attorneys. There are exceptions to this general rule, of course—

but they are rare. In general, the only way attorneys from this sort of background will ever get positions in large law firms is if:

- They have one very large, significant client (or a few) that is paying “full freight” and large law firm rates (that they may have more than one).
- They have extremely rare and specialized skills in a transactional area (ERISA or corporate, for example) and are doing work for large clients.
- They are working for a nationally famous attorney (or attorneys) with sterling pedigrees doing important work for significant clients.

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CONCLUSIONS

These are the top reasons that disqualify people from working in major law firms. You need to avoid making any of these mistakes if you want to have the option of working inside a large law firm.

Share Your Thoughts

- What are the top 3 worst mistakes that will prevent you from getting a job with a major law firm?
- What are some reasons that major law firms will make exceptions in their hiring?

...at bcgattorneysearch.com

- What are the top 3 things you can do to increase your chances of getting hired by a major law firm?

Additional Article & Book Resources

Please see the following articles for more information:

10 Factors That Matter to Big Firms More Than Where You Went to Law School: Why the Law School You Went to Ultimately Does Not Matter as Much as You Think It Does to Major Law Firms

Why Attorneys with 5+ Years of Law Firm Experience Are in Serious Trouble (and Seven Steps They Need to Take to Save Their Legal Careers)

Law Firm Diversity: They All Talk the Talk, But It's Harder to Walk the Walk

The "Systematic Reason" Why Most Attorneys Fail in Large, Prestigious Law Firms

Why Upper and Lower Class Attorneys Rarely Succeed in Law Firms: How Race and Class Often Hinder Law Firm Success

The 'Dark Side' of Going In-house

Why Going In-house Is Often the Worst Decision a Good Attorney Can Ever Make

Top 20 Mistakes Attorneys Make When Choosing to Look for and Accept New Jobs

Why You Can Never Stop Practicing Law for More Than a Few Weeks Once You Start

How to Explain "Job Hopping"

10 Biggest Career Mistakes Big Law Firm Attorneys Make (and 10 Ways to Survive in a Big Firm)

Take This GIFT for Granted and Your Legal Career Will Be Dead