The Top 17 Reasons Law Firms Do Not Hire and Make Offers to Attorneys and Law Students: It's Not What You Think

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

You apply and apply and apply. But as that elusive law firm job goes, it's no dice. No one's asked that you interview with them, or if you have interviewed with a firm, you haven't been given an offer. You're not alone.

Summary: Why is it so hard to get a job in a law firm? If you have been applying for positions and have not even gotten an interview—or if you have gotten interviews but no offers—then this article is for you. It explains why law firms reject so many applicants, often even before those applicants have gotten their feet in the door. It also explains what you need to do to eventually succeed where so many others fail.

Rejection is something that comes with being an attorney—especially in the higher paid positions. There are just more attorneys out there looking for positions than there are positions to fill. Things become even more difficult, of course, when the market is in bad shape.

The legal profession is about the least welcoming profession there is. It is so unwelcoming it can be downright bizarre—and unfair. It does not matter if an applicant is a law student, an associate, or even a partner, the legal market often will give that applicant the impression that he or she is not wanted or appreciated. The reality is that there are economic and other forces operating at all times that can destroy an attorney's legal career and/or make it nearly impossible for that attorney to find a position.

One of the most discouraging things about being an attorney and practicing law is the amount of rejection that you face when looking for positions. I regularly talk to talented attorneys who are three and four years out of law school, have been applying for positions on their own or through a variety of recruiting firms, and have not even gotten a single interview. When an associate has spent months looking for jobs and has not even gotten an interview (let alone an offer), that associate often concludes that things are hopeless. Similarly, when it comes to looking for jobs, even partners with decent books of business often feel trapped and as if no one is interested in them.

Sometimes law firms reject attorneys before they even get in the door. Other times law firms reject attorneys after they have already gotten in the door. This article discusses the law firm hiring process to help attorneys better understand how things work, why it is so difficult to get law firm jobs, and why rejection is often based on factors that have nothing to do with the attorney. The only way to be successful in a legal job search is to persevere beyond rejection, to not take anything personally, to make strategic decisions to broaden your search, and to simply not give up until you have an offer in hand.

What did you do to overcome rejection when applying for law firms? Share your experience below.

A. You Are Most Often Rejected Before You Ever Get in the Door

If you are applying for jobs and not even getting interviews, you might be failing for one or more of the following reasons: You Are Not Applying to Enough Places. Frankly, no attorney is perfect or has the perfect background. In order to get a position, you may need to look at in excess of 100+ places depending on your practice area, the city you are in, your experience level and more. Many of the most successful attorneys I have worked with...
applied to a ton of places before they got offers.

For example, lately the market for litigators has been slow in Washington, DC and Silicon Valley. Even your most highly qualified litigators in these markets are having an exceptionally difficult time getting positions. Most of the placements I have made in these markets came after extensive searches. Many of these attorneys had to apply to 50+ places or more over a period of months before they found success. There is just not a lot of work in the very best law firms at the moment. You only experience success in some markets when you are able to reach out and apply to many places.

In addition, law firms are businesses. If you are seeking a position in a law firm you need to be the right fit for the firm's business and you need to be the type of attorney the firm can make money from hiring. Whether or not you are someone a firm can make money from is based on a myriad of factors so complex that you often cannot deduce the answer without simply applying to those firms and seeing how things go. Some of the factors are:

- The amount of work the firm has for attorneys at your level
- Whether or not the firm's clients need someone with your expertise
- Whether or not the firm has other attorneys who can do the sort of work you do
- Whether people in the firm are leaving shortly (or have left) and the firm needs to hire replacements
- Whether you look like someone who will help (or hurt) the existing political make-up of the firm (whatever that may be)
- Whether the firm has an affinity with (or dislike of) people from your firm, law school, ethnic group, sexuality, socio-economic or religious background
- Whether the firm wants people who have done work on the client you have spent most of your time on
- Whether the firm likes or does not like working mothers

I could list these factors indefinitely. The point is you just never know and have no idea if you are a fit or not. The only way to find out is to apply to more and more places. Certain people from various backgrounds do better than others in the market and you cannot control this. The only way to control it is to make sure you are applying to enough places.

What can you do to make sure you apply to more places in your legal job search?

**There Are Better Applicants Than You.** Think about it. The odds are pretty good that there may be better applicants than you for many positions you are applying to. What makes a better applicant? It could be the attorney's experience, the attorney's perceived stability, the quality of the attorney's current law firm, the attorney's amount of business or a host of other factors. Who knows? The point is that regardless of how good of an applicant you may think you are, there is a good chance that there are more qualified applicants than you for just about every position you apply to. If there are more qualified applicants than you, then you cannot control this and you need to keep applying to more places.

For example, many attorneys apply to only the most prestigious law firms and ignore firms that are not as prestigious. But this is not a savvy way to run a job search, as the odds are almost certain that you will be rejected from many firms. The best law firms will generally always have better applicants than you and, therefore, it will be difficult for you to get positions in them.

**You Applied Too Late.** The most effective way to get a position is to apply just as soon as the position becomes open. The reason for this is that law firms typically bring in the first applicants who apply for a position and ignore those who come later. The law firm will bond with the initial applicants and start discussing them internally. It takes "billable" time to interview attorneys and law firms do not particularly enjoy interviewing lots of people. You will generally do the best when you apply right when the position becomes open.

When a new position comes into our system at BCG Attorney Search, we will generally email our candidates,
text them, and get into contact with them immediately to tell them about the new position. We have found this to be extremely important and game changing for our candidates. In fact, the ability to get our candidates into law firms as soon as positions become available results in countless more placements than we might otherwise make each month.

It is important that you continuously monitor the market. One reason people get discouraged when applying for positions is due to the fact that they apply to a bunch of places initially (that may have had openings for weeks) and although these firms might otherwise have been interested in them, they simply applied too late. **You Are Not Applying to the Right Firms.** If you are looking for a position, you need to apply to jobs and firms that potentially could have an interest in you. This means you need to apply to places that do the sort of work you do and have hired people with your sorts of qualifications in the past (from your law school, firm and so forth). There are countless rules that govern the legal profession and how law firms hire. For example: Major law firms do not hire people from small, not prestigious law firms unless those candidates have very well defined experience in difficult-to-train practice areas (ERISA, patent prosecution, certain types of corporate, real estate and so forth). The number one criteria for getting into a major law firm is always going to be the caliber of law firm you are coming from. Major law firms almost never hire people from fourth-tier law schools unless they were at the very top of their class--and even then this is rare.

The law firm you are applying to needs to be busy and have work. You need to find law firms with lots of work. **The Law Firm Does Not Think You Are Serious.** This may seem hard to believe, but law firms receive so many applications for their positions that they often do not think any given applicant is necessarily serious about taking a job with them. It is very common for a major law firm with an opening in a city to receive applications from attorneys from every major law firm in that city.

I have had numerous instances where I worked with attorneys who applied to several big firms in the cities in which they were located before I got involved. While they did not get interviews before I got involved, they did get interviews after I came on board. One attorney I worked with from Harvard Law School was trying to move from Hawaii to Los Angeles. He applied to 15 major law firms in Los Angeles but did not receive a single interview. Then he came to me, and once I was working with him I was able to get him interviews with more than half of the firms he had applied to. What I brought to the table was a level of seriousness—the law firms knew that if I was working with the attorney that he must be genuinely interested in the positions.

When you apply to law firms, it is important that each firm truly believes that you are interested in working for that firm. Many of the most prestigious law firms out there do not even pay attention to applicants unless they are coming through a well-respected recruiter whose credibility is also on the line with respect to the candidates’ interest in the firms. **You Look Unstable.** Many law firms will not interview you if they think you are unstable. If you have not been at your law firm a long time, or have many moves on your resume, you are generally going to have to overcome the appearance of instability. Most law firms are conservative institutions that want the people who work there to provide a sense of stability to their clients. If you look like you are going to get there and move again the law firm will generally decide that you are a “risk” and will opt for another candidate who looks more stable.

Law firms like stability. The more you can do to look stable the better. Each addition to the law firm affects the culture of the firm in an appreciable way. Law firms do not want to undermine the attorneys who already work there by bringing in people who are likely to find fault with the firm and leave. **The Market for Your Practice Area Is Slow.** In 2001 and 2008, the corporate market died in New York City and the Bay Area. Attorneys in these markets lost their jobs in droves. Most could not find law firm positions
and gave up looking. Many junior attorneys moved in with their parents, for example. Others managed to find jobs in-house and still others stopped practicing law completely—or became contract attorneys or solo practitioners. The market died and so did the careers of these attorneys. When the market slows down in your practice area, rejection is the norm and you cannot take it personally. Instead, you need to keep moving forward and apply to far more places than you might normally do.

The legal profession is an equal-opportunity-rejecter that does not care who it makes feel unwelcome and unwanted. Even the most qualified and exceptional attorneys can find themselves treated like pariahs when the market goes "cold" on them—and it is disgusting what happens to the very best attorneys when the market goes cold. Many give up on the practice of law completely or take the sorts of jobs they would not otherwise need to take.

For example, recently both litigation and intellectual property ("IP") litigation have become very slow. Not too long ago, I started receiving numerous inquiries from several highly credentialed IP litigation associates who were let go from Goodwin Procter in Boston after a few big IP litigation cases resolved. Instead of transitioning the attorneys into something else, the law firm simply let them go (something many big firms do when things slow down). These attorneys all went to great law schools like Harvard and had great pedigrees, but when the firm cut the cord they did not know what to do.

There were few IP litigation jobs available in Boston at the time, and after these young attorneys applied without success to these positions they felt out of options. Some became solo practitioners or contract attorneys. Others gave up on the practice of law completely. I recently saw the same thing happen with another major law firm in New York City when that firm settled a few large IP litigation cases. Attorneys with the most stellar qualifications can see the market become extremely cold if they are in the wrong practice areas or the wrong market at the wrong time. It does not matter. Many attorneys experience rejection simply due to the market and this kind of rejection has nothing to do with the quality or caliber of the attorneys.

You Are Not Applying to Enough Markets. When I work with attorneys who are open to more than one market, and are truly committed to looking for new positions, I know that it is generally just a matter of time before they will find success. Things can happen quickly, or they can take time. This is common knowledge in the legal profession and the best attorneys understand this. If you are being rejected a lot, the best thing you can do is find a market that needs you. This works all of the time. You need to apply to positions in every geographic market you possibly can. The more markets you approach, the more possibilities you have to find firms with the work to support you. This should be a very simple proposition and easy to understand, but most attorneys become content in one market and fail to see this "big picture" when they want and need new positions.

I have some important advice for you. Unless you are a partner with a book of business—or you are near 100% confident in the stability of your position—one of the biggest mistakes you can make as an attorney is to settle down in a single legal market. This is especially so if you are in a niche practice area where the positions can be few and far between. You need to look at every market you possibly can to find a position. This is always critical. The more markets you look at the more success (and less rejection) you will face.

Interestingly, during economic recessions, our legal search firm makes more placements than it makes when the market is good. This may sound difficult to believe, but it makes sense when you analyze the situation. First, in an economic recession there typically are more highly qualified attorneys looking for work. Second, in an economic recession the work typically moves from larger (more expensive) firms to less expensive regional firms. Third, in an economic recession attorneys are more open to looking at more firms—instead of just large law firms with openings. All we do in an economic recession is send people to the suburbs and into smaller markets and get people out to more firms. When we can convince attorneys to do this, the results are generally very good. They could also be very good in an average-to-strong economy, but attorneys never listen as much when the economy is doing well.
What are some other reasons you think law firms often reject attorneys besides the above ones?

Please see the following articles for more information:
Why Every Attorney Should Look at Multiple Legal Markets When Doing a Job Search
Taking the Bar in Multiple States
● Guidelines on Reciprocity or "Admission on Motion" among the States as per American Bar Association
A Comprehensive Guide to Bar Reciprocity: What States Have Reciprocity for Lawyers and Allow You to Waive into the Bar

You Are Only Applying to Firms with Openings. This is another huge mistake. If you are very qualified at doing some sort of legal specialty, you should of course apply to firms with openings--but you should also apply to law firms that do the sort of work you are very good at. If you are concentrating on just law firms with openings, you are shortchanging yourself and running a very dangerous job search. Firms with "formal openings" have generally opened the floodgates and have already received lots and lots of applications. If the firm does not have a formal opening, it will receive very few applications and you will be competing with fewer people to get the position.

When a practice area is very slow and there are not many openings, the best thing you can do is apply to firms without openings. Most of the placements I make when the economy is slow in a given practice area are with firms that do not have openings.

Have you had any success applying to firms with no openings? Share your experience below.

There are countless reasons why you might get rejected before even getting in the door--and why you might be wondering why you have not even gotten an interview despite sending out applications. If you are in this situation, the best thing to do is to keep applying to more places and not give up. One of the problems with the legal recruiting profession in general is that most legal recruiters work with an attorney for only a few positions, or for a short period of time. Even the best attorneys can often take months (or over a year) to be placed in the correct positions.

The most important thing you can do when searching for a position is to never give up and constantly be pushing forward. Limited initial success is never a sign of things to come, and even an ongoing lack of success is not a sure sign that you are likely to fail in the legal profession. You need to do what you can to constantly push forward and to not give up. You need to never give up and keep readjusting your approach.

Please see the following articles for more information:
Why Every Attorney Needs to Apply to a Lot of Places (and Not Give Up) When Rejected
Top 30 Factors Large Law Firms Consider When Hiring Lateral Attorneys
8. The Most Common Reasons Law Firms Reject You After You Get in the Door

As discussed above, law firms will reject you for a variety of reasons prior to you even getting in the door for an interview. However, they also will reject you when you get in the door for a variety of incomprehensible reasons as well. I recently sent a partner from a major law firm in Washington DC on an interview in New York City. He took the day off from work and rode the train to the interview. He was excited for the interview because he was in a "niche" corporate practice area where there was not a lot of work. When he got to the
interview, the law firm had him wait in the lobby for over an hour and a half. Then a secretary came out.

"We're sorry, but we cannot interview you today. Something has come up."

None of this would be all that unusual, of course, but the law firm never interviewed him again and provided no explanation for the last minute change of heart. I followed up again and again and the firm kept saying "we're working on it" but the firm never interviewed the candidate again. He was placed in another major firm six months later, but the experience left a bad taste in his mouth and he was quite upset.

Many attorneys who are interviewed by law firms are told they are likely to be hired and then never given an offer, or never interviewed again. They wait for weeks for something to come up and never hear anything. For example, I recently had an attorney who was told by a law firm that he was going to be hired and then paraded by the firm around to four of the firm's different offices in three separate states to meet people. Then the firm "went dark" and the attorney never heard from them again.

Believe it or not, when a law firm interviews you, the firm is hoping that you will be a good fit. Law firms really are interested in hiring you once they bring you in. Firms generally bring you in because you represent the prospect of the firm earning money--and firms are always interested in earning money. Speaking with you takes time and time costs money. They would not bring you in if they did not see a use for you.

Still, things do not always work out, despite everyone's initial high hopes. Here are some common reasons why you might be interviewed by a firm and then not get the job or even hear anything more from the firm:

**The Law Firm Interviewed Better Applicants.** What does this mean? Who knows? It is something you cannot control and so it is best not to worry about it. You interviewed for the job and (presumably) did the best you could and then did not get the job. There is absolutely no reason for you to worry too much about this. Just do your best the next time. You always need to put on your "A game" in every interview and do your absolute best to get the job.

**The Law Firm Lost the Business—or Is Nervous about the Business It Was Interested in Hiring You For.** This is extremely common and happens all the time. Law firms get excited about bringing someone in but then business slows down and they get nervous about hiring you. Law firms will never admit this reason of course (they want to always look strong), but this happens with a lot of regularity. If this occurs, there is not much you can do but move on.

**There Is Some Sort of Conflict in the Firm You Are Unaware of.** Hiring for one practice group or individual within a firm is often something that is fraught with all sorts of politics and internal squabbling. You cannot control this and generally you are better off avoiding these jobs altogether. When this occurs, there is nothing you can do about it.

**The Law Firm (or Someone in It) Does Not Like You for Whatever Reason.** Law firms often have all sorts of problems and issues with the attorneys they interview. They are primarily conformist institutions where you are expected to look manageable, act manageable, and fit in. Even if you do all that, though, the law firm may still have reasons for not liking you. If there are certain personality characteristics that you believe make you unsuitable for a law firm, you need to avoid these in future interviews--or find a firm that accepts you for who you are.

**You Are Not a Good Cultural Fit for the Law Firm.** Not much you can do about this either. If this is the case it is generally best to move on and find a firm where you are a good fit.

What do you recommend attorneys do to keep going after being rejected by law firms?


For attorneys applying to the highest paying and most prestigious firms, rejection and defeat will be
something they experience. In fact, with limited exceptions, most attorneys will get rejected by the substantial majority of firms to which they apply. Some attorneys may be rejected by 80% of the firms and others may be rejected by 99% of the firms. This is how it works and has always worked. Unless an attorney is a hands down "perfect fit" for a given firm and position, the attorney will most likely be rejected from the substantial majority of positions to which he or she applies.

Attorneys who succeed in the practice of law learn that they need to persevere no matter what. You cannot practice law with a shallow ego. If you are giving up after lots of rejection, maybe you should not be practicing law. Whether negotiating a deal, prosecuting a patent, or litigating a case, the most important quality for any attorney is perseverance in the face of resistance. It is very common for attorneys to give up. I see attorneys give up when they are searching for positions all the time. Attorneys conclude that if there is no interest in them at a particular point in time they should give up.

**Attorneys give up after one or more unsuccessful interviews.**
- They give up after applying to five places (or 100 or more).
- They give up when there are no positions in their city.
- They give up when they have only looked at a few markets and not more.
- They give up when they decide that two months is enough time to find a position.
- They give up when law firms lead them on and then do not hire them.
- They give up when they are hired but then do not pass conflicts.

This is what happens when attorneys allow the rejection that comes with the territory beat them down and discourage them to the point where they become solo practitioners, contract attorneys or leave the practice of law altogether. But for each of these attorneys--and for you--success could be right around the corner. You must never give up and you must keep moving forward until you turn that final corner and find what you have been searching for.

You should never give up in your job search. Every attorney is rejected and rejected a lot. The ones who win and succeed are the ones who continually stay in the game, look at more markets, and realize that the nature of being an attorney includes rejection.

How can you avoid giving up even after facing rejection from many law firms?

Please see the following articles for more information:
- Top 20 Mistakes Attorneys Make When Choosing to Look for and Accept New Jobs
- How to Rapidly Get Law Firm Offers (Even When Firms Have No Openings)
- How to Excel at Second Round Law Firm Interviews and Get More Job Offers
- How a Good Legal Recruiter Finds the Best in You and Communicates It to Employers: How to Define Your Unique Selling Proposition
- A Comprehensive Guide to Working with a Legal Recruiter

**Conclusions**

Far too many talented attorneys get "dropped" by their law firms, lose their jobs, and then never work in large law firms (or even practice law) again. Your legal career can literally go away in a second. The Goodwin Proctor IP litigation attorneys did not have to "give up" and they could have found positions if they had applied to more firms or looked outside of Boston and packaged themselves as "general commercial litigators" as well as IP litigators. When a practice is slow and rejection is everywhere, an attorney needs to be open to the entire country--even the world--and work very hard. I recently saw a senior (10+ years of experience), talented international arbitration attorney get a position in Dubai even though he had been unemployed and working as a bartender for a few years. This sort of thing happens when you are open to other markets.
For the past few decades, I have seen attorney after attorney drop out of the practice of law after concluding (wrongly) that there was nothing out there for them. Attorneys get rejected by one too many firms and believe they are unemployable and will never get the sorts of jobs they want--or they have multiple interviews but nothing materializes. This is extremely common and it should not unduly discourage you. If you commit to your legal job search and realize that your lack of success is simply due to market and other forces (that can generally be overcome with persistence and strategy), you will almost always end up in a good position.

Unfortunately, attorneys’ egos get bruised and dented too many times and they give up. One of the motivating forces of my job is to save attorneys who would otherwise fall off the cliff who (1) are trying to stay in major law firms, or (2) have the talent and ability to move to a major law firm. If you have experienced rejection in the past, are experiencing rejection right now and are frustrated, then you should not give up. Instead, you should try to understand the rules of the game, not let your ego get in the way, and develop a plan to move ahead.

You should never give up in your job search. Rejection is part of the game and happens to everyone. But for those who refuse to give up, success also is part of the game, and it might be right around the corner for you.

**Share Your Thoughts**

What can you do to continually apply to many law firms without getting burned out?
What can you do to decrease your chances of getting rejected?
How can you avoid giving up even after multiple rejections from law firms?

Share your answers to the above questions in the comments below.