

# Four Fatal Mistakes Highly Qualified Attorneys Make When Choosing Law Firms

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

As lawyers embark on their careers, their worst mistake can be selecting a law firm in which they don't fit.

The firm's lifecycle is worn out.

The firm's location may be bad.

The clients may not be likeable or easy to work with.

The culture might not feel comfortable.

Avoid these mishaps by selecting the correct law firm.

**Summary:** Learn the most important factors you should look at when selecting which law firm to join so you avoid making these four fatal mistakes.

A substantial percentage of attorneys who are qualified to work in major law firms ultimately choose the wrong law firm. Because these attorneys choose the wrong firms, they end up not succeeding as attorneys. They leave the practice of law, become perpetually unhappy, underperform in their careers, and achieve far less than they otherwise might.

Most of my life's work has involved finding attorneys who are likely to succeed in large law firms. This is a very competitive game. There are very few attorneys who have the right mix of skills to be marketable to large law firms. For example, if you were to take 100 random attorneys and law students you would be lucky to find even five that would be "potentially" marketable to a major law firm.

Moreover, it is not enough for an attorney to appear "potentially" marketable to a large law firm. Even with the five percent of attorneys who show "potential" to succeed in large law firms, the firms will still go to great lengths to see if the attorney is a fit. In interviews and discussions among themselves, the law firm will investigate such issues as whether the attorney is likely to be (1) hard working, (2) motivated, (3) qualified, (4) committed, (5) a social fit, and (6) will contribute as expected for an attorney of their level.

Most attorneys do not have these qualities--and if you do you have a "leg up" on probably 90% of all attorneys "potentially" qualified to work in a major law firm. Most attorneys ultimately fail simply because they do not have these qualities. These qualities are so important that even entering the race towards being a successful large law firm attorney demands you have them.

Some law firms investigate these qualities better than others. If a law firm lets you in the door even when you do not have these qualities, the law firm is generally making a mistake. It may be "dazzled" by your experience or qualifications, but if your resume shows signs that you are not likely to commit for the long term and the firm hires you anyway, then the firm makes the mistake of hiring someone likely to leave.

While major law firms have all sorts of methods for evaluating who is likely to be a good fit for them, most attorneys do not have methods for evaluating law firms and for understanding which sort of law firm is likely to be the best fit for them. Most attorneys do not set goals about the sort of major law firm they want to work for, or in some cases, they set goals but without having much of an understanding about the gravity of the choices they are making. While law firms tend to make discriminatory decisions about attorneys they are hiring, most attorneys simply take offers from the most prestigious law firm that offers them a job. This

constitutes irresponsible decision-making and is one reason so many attorneys are unhappy and ultimately fail in the practice of law.

***The reason the choice of law firm is so important is because your odds of succeeding at a high level as an attorney will be either boosted or severely limited by the choices you make about the sort of firm you join.***

Just having the "right sauce" is generally not enough to succeed as an attorney--by any measure. Ultimately, your level of success will be determined by the choices you make about what kind of firm you join. You can, in fact, be made unsuccessful by the joining the wrong firm--even if it is a very good firm. ***Your "choices" about what sort of firm to join play much more of a role in what happens to you than any other single factor.***

The factors that "qualified" attorneys should consider when joining a law firm are (1) the stage in its lifecycle the firm is in, (2) where the firm is located, (3) the types of clients the law firm serves, and (4) the culture of the firm.

### **What Stage in Its Lifecycle Is the Firm in?**

All businesses (and law firms are businesses) go through various stages in their lifecycles. They typically start with a lot of enthusiasm and then grow into something viable, stay stable, or die off slowly. Each law firm will behave differently and have different expectations for you depending on where it is in its lifecycle. Your success in a law firm also will be determined by where the firm is in its lifecycle.

#### **a. The Prestigious Newer Firm**

The newer firm will typically be excited about people with a lot of enthusiasm and ideas. These types of firms will attract nonconformists to some extent. As a newer law firm without a lot of brand recognition, it will often hire social misfits and others who would normally not make it into a more established law firm. Such firms may find a candidate's unique outside interests interesting and enjoy varied personalities. Law firms that are newer and younger will often have more tolerance for unique individuals and even be attracted to them to some extent.

When a law firm is newer and trying to grow, it will hire people who would normally not get jobs in major law firms. Newer law firms will hire people who are less polished and accomplished than a more established law firm normally would. These people will want to hire and attract people like themselves.

People who go to work in these smaller, less stable, newer law firms will always justify their decision to work in these law firms by saying things like "they wanted a smaller law firm" and "they wanted to be part of a growing enterprise" or "they wanted to be around a group of collegial people." All of these things may be true, but very few people will give up huge salaries and other perks for these things.

Additionally, all law firms are businesses, their primary goal is to make money, and most money making enterprises will grow to make as much money as they can - values like "collegiality" and so forth be damned.

- **Please see [Why There Are No Lifestyle Law Firms](#) for more information.**

When interviewing with a newer law firm, your objective needs to be to fit in and act like this is what you want to be part of. Showing up and acting extremely serious, like you are the sort of person who would be interested in a major law firm and so forth is a huge mistake. You need to act the part and be liked by the people there.

In most instances, the young [growing law firm](#) will have an eclectic mix of people working there, and many will have no chance of surviving there if the firm becomes larger and more institutional. They may be

attracted to the "family" atmosphere of a small law firm, or the variety of people, but they will rapidly leave when it starts to change.

In addition, the young growing law firm will often be devoid of well-defined procedures and so forth. It may be absolute chaos. There may be no formal HR policies. It might be busy and disorganized, but productive. Therefore, in order to succeed at a firm like this, it is important that you not seem too rigid. You need to act like you feel comfortable in an unorganized environment and convey the impression that you like what the firm is. This is the only way to get hired by a firm like this. If you do not look like you can deal with the unpredictable nature of the firm, it will not work out.

Smaller growing firms often care less about your grades or pedigrees than larger, more established firms. Attorneys can often get into these firms without the same qualifications they would need to get into major, more established firms.

But remember that despite the unconventional nature of these newer firms, they still exist to make money. Firm management is concerned about you working hard and making the firm money. The more you give the impression that you will work hard and contribute to the profits of the firm, the better off you will be.

#### INTERVIEW TIP:

When interviewing with a newer law firm, it is important that you quickly size up the culture as soon as you walk in the door. If it looks like a freak show (and it may), do whatever you can to connect with the people--make the people you are speaking with feel comfortable, encourage them to like you, show them that you are not judging them, and convey in every way that you accept them. When it comes to management--and this is very important--you need to impress upon them that you are someone who is likely to be a good fit for where they see the firm going. You can do this by giving them the impression that you will work extremely hard and help the new venture become a great success.

The prestigious, newer firm will generally be composed of a group of attorneys who splintered off from a major law firm. These attorneys will generally have good qualifications and will be excited about their potential.

There are different kinds of "newer" law firms, of course, but in general newer, growing law firms will have a difficult time attracting the most polished attorneys because these attorneys will go to law firms with better perceived brands. The newer law firm will still want people from top law schools (or firms) if they are lateralling and therefore will be left (to a great extent) with people without the social skills or the ability to get positions in the [best law firms](#).

Attorneys who can get positions in major, established law firms are generally not attracted to newer law firms because they are brand conscious and also risk averse. Like most businesses, newer law firms will often go out of business and are not all that stable. I see these firms start all the time and they often go out of business after a big case settles. Sometimes partners begin to have fights about money, people leave, and then the firm dissolves.

Running a business requires all sorts of skills that large law firms have typically developed over decades. Anytime a new business starts up, there are going to be growing pains. If you join a [new firm](#) early on, this can be potentially rewarding, or have serious negative consequences. In general, the people who are part of a law firm when it is new are not the same people who are there later on. As businesses mature, they generally bring in people who have different and more advanced skills than those who were hired in the beginning. Nevertheless, there are those who survive in a newer firm and find that being part of a new

business can be quite rewarding. In fact, your odds of being a partner in a newer prestigious law firm are much better than they might be in a more mature law firm. Because there is so much perceived opportunity, the newer law firm can be an extremely exciting place to work.

**Lateral partners** coming from major law firms also are often attracted to the prestigious newer firms. They are attracted to the lack of rules, the ability to earn more money, and the newer brand of the law firm. They may also feel limited by the politics of their present firms. The reality is, though, that as all businesses grow, firms become much more the same.

**PROS:** The newer firm can be a good choice for an attorney who would normally not do well in a major established law firm. It is good for an attorney who likes a lack of organization and a certain amount of unpredictability. Newer law firms also provide a platform for someone who may be developing late to acquire the social and other skills needed to do well in a large law firm later on. Attorneys can often get a lot of very good early experience and responsibility in newer firms that they would not get in a larger law firm. Additionally, if you are in the law firm early, you stand a good chance of being made a partner if the law firm survives.

**CONS:** Newer law firms will typically have lower hiring standards when they are young as opposed to when they mature. It is common for the firm to get rid of earlier hires after the firm matures. Also, these law firms may go out of business or experience other problems as they grow. They can be hectic places to work. Because they are not "institutional" and **there often is not a lot of hierarchy**, there may not be as much oversight and attorneys may pick up bad habits and ways of **practicing law** that may be difficult to break later on. If the law firm breaks up, lawyers will have a difficult time getting new positions. The law firm may not grow and this can create issues as well.

#### o. **The More "Established" Prestigious Firm**

Once a firm has been going at least five to ten years, it starts to become more established and begins to value things like professionalism in its attorneys. The firm culls its workforce to make it appear more uniform and professional. Personalities that are too unique often are cast out as part of this culling process. Firm management starts to realize that varied personalities are not necessarily conducive to the creation of a reputable law firm brand. The firm starts to value uniformity and predictability over creativity and uniqueness.

The evolution that occurs as firms become more established generally happens because serious firm managers realize the importance of predictability and systems. To become reputable brands, firms need predictable business, predictable employees, predictable income, and more. The law firm as it grows will start mirroring its corporate clients and how they operate. It will become more of a business, less fun, more serious, and a place where the serious and motivated are the ones who do best.

Larger, more established law firms start instituting various procedures and becoming much more standardized. When they do this, the candidates for hire who make it in the door tend to be more serious and the sorts of people who follow rules and are more comfortable with organized and predictable environments. They do things like institute grade cutoffs and crave more uniformity in the people they hire. They want people who are smart, can be controlled, and will be more "group oriented" and be concerned with what others think of them.

#### **INTERVIEW TIP:**

Growing and established law firms expect you to be more serious, act professional, and be more "uniform" than they would expect if you were working in a newer firm. The majority of law firms out there would be considered "established" and the sorts of places that are likely to be relatively conservative, rules-oriented institutions. As bureaucracies, they become more "top down" and appreciate people who can be managed.

In the most prestigious major law firms, the opportunities for upward advancement become extremely difficult due to the fact that there will be fewer opportunities for new partners, for example. Becoming a partner in these law firms may require massive amounts of business or bringing in an important major client (often a public company). Lateralling into one of these firms as a partner will also require a good deal of business.

More established law firms start watching everything very closely because they are now run like "real" businesses. As a consequence, billable hours become very important and are watched. Because there are so few opportunities for advancement without major billable hours, people start killing themselves billing as many hours as possible to get ahead. Despite all of this, it is rarely enough. Because these atmospheres are so political and personally taxing on many attorneys, it is not uncommon for attorneys to get such a bad taste of [practicing law](#) that they end up leaving due to their experience. Attorneys who could have done well in other sorts of law firms often prematurely transition into government or to in-house positions. In fact, the career goal of many attorneys in major law firms is to [go in-house](#).

**PROS:** The more established law firm can be a good fit for people who are comfortable with predictable environments. These law firms have good brands and people can have long careers inside of them if they do good work, are connected, and are able to bring in business. They also provide excellent training.

**CONS:** Many attorneys have very negative experiences inside of major law firms. The amount of work, politics, and more leave a very bad taste in their mouths and many attorneys leave. Advancement is also extremely difficult--often impossible--in major law firms. Incredibly, even the most loyal, hardworking, and intelligent attorneys will eventually be asked to leave major law firms prior to becoming partners.

- See [Top 10 Ways Attorneys Can Move to a Better Law Firm and Get a Better Attorney Job](#) for more information.

### c. The Older, Dying Law Firm

Law firms die for a variety of reasons and it is often difficult for attorneys to spot and understand why or how a law firm is dying. Law firms are notoriously "secret" institutions and they do not share their finances readily. If you do not know what to look for (and I tell you below), it is difficult for the untrained eye to discern if a firm is healthy or dying.

If you join a dying law firm, it is rarely a good career move--regardless of the stage of your career. Attorneys who join dying law firms experience all sorts of problems and often never recover. The reason is that when they join a dying law firm there is often not enough work, there are no mentors, and there is no opportunity. In addition, the levels of stress are very high. The energy is negative. Attorneys inside of these law firms are often made to feel like bad people just because they are there to do work. Attorneys in this situation often have such a bad (and natural) reaction to this sort of environment that they never want to practice law again--why would they? The environment feels unwelcoming in all respects.

Law firms can be dying for years and they are generally to be avoided. Here are some ways to identify a dying law firm:

- It is constantly seeking a merger partner.

- Partners are constantly leaving.

- Work is hoarded by different "factions" within the law firm.

- There is not enough work.

- Reviews are unnecessarily harsh (the law firm is trying to get people to leave).

- Partners do not seem that busy.

- Lots of people are being asked to leave.

- Summer associate classes keep getting smaller, fewer summer associates get offers, or the firm cancels the



summer associate program altogether.

You hear about [lateral partners](#) being hired with huge "guarantees" for their salaries.

There are other warning signs, of course, but these are the main ones. If you are in a dying law firm, the best thing you can do is leave. If you sense you are interviewing with a law firm that may be dying--you should not accept an offer there. Incredibly, law firms that are dying will keep interviewing people laterally and hiring people while they are dying. It makes little sense.

- Please see [The Law Firm Lifecycle: Why Some Firms Fail](#) for more information.

## Where Is the Law Firm Located?

Geographic choices have a lot to do with how happy and successful an attorney will be. In fact, depending on where you choose to work, you may find your career options limited, expanded, or even crushed.

When a young attorney is deciding where to work, the attorney often does not understand how profound the choice about where the attorney will work is going to be to his or her career. Attorneys can choose to work in major markets, smaller markets, or midsized markets. They can choose to work in the international office of a major law firm, or the main office of the law firm.

Many attorneys choose to go to smaller markets. A small market might be something like Greenville, South Carolina, for example. If you go to a smaller market there are positives and there are negatives. You may join a prestigious firm in a local market or you may join the branch office of a large national law firm.

### a. The Smaller Market

The positives of a smaller market are that you may find yourself in a law firm where you like the people, where the people protect you, and where you are happy. In smaller markets there tend to be few opportunities for attorneys to lateral to other law firms, so people do their best to get along and work together. Attorneys tend to protect one another more so than in major markets.

If an attorney is working in a smaller market, it is more likely than not that the attorney will continue practicing law throughout his or her career than if the attorney is working in a larger market. The stresses are different and attorneys in smaller markets generally have a better experience practicing law than they do in major markets. Smaller markets tend to be more of a "community" and because of this attorneys are just generally much nicer to one another.

The qualifications of attorneys in smaller markets also tend not to be as good as those of attorneys in major markets. In a market like Los Angeles, for example, going to a law school like [Harvard](#) is a good thing--but law firms get numerous applicants from schools like Harvard for every position they have. In contrast, this is likely to be much more meaningful to a law firm in a smaller market. In a smaller market, going to a law school like Harvard could practically make you a celebrity. Your past accomplishments can carry more weight in a smaller market than they do in a larger market. For example, graduates of [Yale Law School](#) might be virtually unemployable in a market like New York if they do not have the right experience, but they would be gobbled up in a smaller market.

### INTERVIEW TIP:

When interviewing with a firm in a smaller market, it is best to play up your cultural and personal ties to the region and to make the people in the office feel like you want to join that office for legitimate reasons and will commit to that firm. Never act like you are "above" the smaller market firm or convey the idea that you are making a compromise to be there. People who work in smaller market firms tend to be very happy and they will want to feel like you are genuinely excited to come and be part of their team.

The problems with smaller markets, however, are numerous. If you upset the wrong people or make a mistake in a smaller market, you can end up getting "blackballed" and having a very difficult (or next to impossible) time finding a position with another prestigious law firm in the market. In a larger market, your past mistakes are less likely to follow you. All it generally takes is for you to upset one wrong person in a smaller market and your career can be severely limited, if not over.

Another major drawback of working in a smaller market is that the work is often going to be far less sophisticated than it is in major markets. Large companies generally do not send their most sophisticated work to law firms in smaller markets. Instead, they send that work to law firms in major markets. Because there is less availability of sophisticated work in smaller markets, the attorneys working in these markets generally do not get the same skills as attorneys in major markets and cannot transition to major firms if they want to later. It is quite common for attorneys in smaller markets to want to transition back to a major market but experience a very poor reception from larger law firms, regardless of their educational qualifications. In contrast, attorneys from major law firms in larger markets can almost always transition back to a smaller market if they so choose.

**PROS:** The smaller markets offer attorneys a more collegial environment where they can be protected and advanced. Many attorneys who work in smaller markets enjoy the practice of law for years to come. They do not get used up, expelled, and disheartened. They do not leave the practice of law in droves like many attorneys in major markets.

**CONS:** Attorneys who work in smaller markets generally will not get the benefit of working for the most sophisticated clients and may not get the best training available. If an attorney makes a big mistake in a smaller market, the attorney can be "blackballed" and it will be far more difficult to get past that mistake in an insular smaller market than it would be in a major market.

#### o. **The Prestigious Firm in a Major Market**

Major markets have the most sophisticated work and the largest law firms. They are also very competitive markets to practice in. Because the billing rates charged are so high, the salaries are so high, office expenses and support are so high--and so forth--the demands on attorneys for high quality work become extreme. Clients of major law firms have a lot of choices and they will demand the highest quality possible--or they will leave. The major market is the "big leagues" in terms of what is required of the attorneys working there. Due to this, the most is expected out of the attorneys there.

The good thing about major markets is everything is at its most extreme.

- Attorneys are paid the most money.
- Attorneys have the opportunity to be very wealthy.
- Attorneys are competing with the most competitive attorneys.
- Attorneys are working on the most sophisticated matters.
- Attorneys are getting the best experience.
- Attorneys are working the hardest.
- Attorneys are becoming the most specialized.

All of these are positive things to some extent--but there are also numerous drawbacks to all of this. Because of the demands on attorneys in major markets, they are more likely to lose their jobs, be alienated from the

practice of law, and experience all sorts of issues (depression, substance abuse, psychological problems, divorce, premature death due to cancer, heart problems, and other job-induced issues). Working in large law firms can be grueling.

Another issue of large law firms that is quite serious is that there is very little loyalty to attorneys in them. Large law firms typically view attorneys as "disposable" and they get rid of them if (1) they get too senior, (2) the firm does not have enough work, (3) the attorney is not billing enough hours, or (4) the attorney does not have enough business. In contrast, in smaller markets you see much less of this sort of thing. Attorneys typically take care of each other more in smaller markets.

#### INTERVIEW TIP:

When interviewing with a prestigious firm in a major market, you need to come off as the "cream of the crop." You must bring your "A" game in terms of professionalism, polish, and commitment to the firm and to the legal profession. You must be an ambassador of excellence and productivity. You need to portray yourself (and be) the type of person who will bill incredible hours, always be on call, and be happy to do what is asked of you when it is asked of you. Moreover, you must be personable and impressive such that the firm will want to introduce you to, and entrust you with important clients.

A final issue of the larger market is that there are often very few opportunities for meaningful upward advancement. With few opportunities for upward advancement, attorneys are more likely to leave the practice of law or go in-house than continue in a law firm. All of these sorts of decisions effectively mean that the attorneys often stop practicing meaningful law--whereas, they still would be practicing law (probably happily) if they were in a smaller market.

**PROS:** Prestigious major market firms offer high salaries, the chance to get rich, sophisticated work, important matters and clients, the opportunity to be constantly challenged by the smartest and most competitive attorneys, and the ability to develop unparalleled specialization.

**CONS:** On the downside, prestigious major market firms offer attorneys less job security and fewer advancement opportunities than smaller market firms. They also are extremely stressful and grueling environments in which to work and take their toll on gifted attorneys--leaving such attorneys with exhaustion, unhappiness, disillusionment, feelings of failure, depression, substance abuse issues, psychological problems, divorce and personal problems, premature death, and more.

Please see the following articles for more information:

- [Another Big Law Attorney I Know Just Died Young](#)
- [Seven Reasons Why Practicing Law Might Be More Stressful than Spending 18 Months in a POW Camp](#)
- [Top 30 Factors Large Law Firms Consider When Hiring Lateral Attorneys](#)

#### What Type of Client Does the Law Firm Serve?

In most cases, the most [prestigious law firms](#) will be "business facing" and not "consumer facing." This is an important distinction.

If a law firm is business facing, it will have clients that can turn a spigot and cash will simply pour out and the client will not pay a ton of attention to this. These are the sorts of clients that create major law firms. When a law firm has clients like this it can grow and grow. The quality of work that the law firm does will be expected to be very good and the law firm will demand high quality work from its attorneys. Attorneys will be expected



to "tap into" the spigot and bill as many hours as possible.

In contrast, the closer a law firm gets to being "consumer facing," the less there is going to be any sort of "spigot" involved. The clients of the law firm will be smaller cash-sensitive businesses or even individuals. The closer a law firm gets to actual individuals, the less money there is going to be to spread around and the more the emphasis is on saving money and just getting the work done as opposed to doing the best work possible.

In addition, law firms that are consumer facing cannot pay people a lot of money and the attorneys in them never learn the sorts of habits that create good attorneys. If you join a law firm that is close to consumers, then you are typically not going to learn good skills and become a good attorney. Practice areas that are considered "consumer facing" include (1) family law, (2) most types of cases where a single plaintiff is suing people, (3) [insurance defense](#), (4) consumer bankruptcy work, and (5) criminal law.

In general, if you start your career in a consumer facing practice area, you are going to be limited in your prospects and will not be able to get into a larger law firm later on. The skills you develop cutting corners to save your clients money and you time will not benefit you in the long term because you will not develop the skills of a [large firm attorney](#). While this is not a horrible thing in itself, what it means is that unless the attorney becomes entrepreneurial and starts his or her own firm, the attorney will never make a lot of money practicing law. There is simply not enough money being generated to pay attorneys a lot of money in these consumer facing practice areas.

#### INTERVIEW TIP:

When you go to the interview, make sure to assess whether the firm is business facing (one you want to be involved with) or consumer facing (one you probably do not want to be involved with). Ask what kinds of clients and work the firm does. Ask for specific examples: What cases have you litigated this year? What are the last five deals you worked on? These questions should enable you to ascertain if the firm is business facing or consumer facing.

The problem with any law firm that is consumer facing, or works for smaller companies, is that the attorneys trained in that environment will not be as detail oriented, learn to spot arguments as well, or know how to work on matters at a high level. In most instances, when they confront attorneys from larger law firms, they end up losing because the large law firm attorneys have a better command of the law.

Most attorneys with strong backgrounds, however, end up joining major law firms. If a law firm is servicing growing companies and midsized to larger companies, the attorney will generally be trained in a way where the attorney is able to do in-depth research to understand various matters and become proficient. If an attorney is trained this way, the attorney will likely have a much better and successful career than an attorney trained in a different way and with different expectations.

There are some limitations for attorneys trained in major firms and working for major clients. If a law firm is doing work for major institutional clients, it often has no interest in attorneys bringing in business. In fact, the firm is happy just to have people working on its institutional clients because this "spigot" is extremely profitable for them and they see no reason for more business. The law firm may have no interest in attorneys bringing in smaller, growing clients because it is a distraction from the "cash spigot" that the firm is already tapped into. This means that there will be fewer opportunities for an attorney to become a partner unless the attorney brings in similar major clients.

At the point where a law firm gets enough major clients, the attorneys inside of the firm become expendable. The law firm has no need to make people partners other than to give the impression of upward mobility to its

legions of soldiers working on matters. The law firm wants to keep costs down and profits up. Therefore, it is in the firm's best interest to hire people, work them hard, and then have them leave. The cash spigot remains and all it needs to do is continually plug in bodies into the spigot to bill hours. The law firm does not care how hard you work, where you went to school, or how smart you are (within limits)--it just needs to keep grabbing money from the spigot. The less it costs the firm to do this, the better.

Most young attorneys do not understand the concept of the law firm cash spigot--how helpful it is to them making a lot of money, but also how limiting it is as well. Law firms with good cash spigots will train attorneys to do very good work (and expect it), but they have very little reason for keeping attorneys around or advancing them because the cash the firm has coming in gives them power.

• **See [The Similarities between Human Trafficking and Practicing Law: Why Control and Energy Are So Important to Your Life and Career](#) for more information.**

### What Is the Culture of the Firm?

Different law firms value different things. There is no way to know unless you get a good sense of the firm and the people who seem to be in power there. You need to understand the values of the firm before you join it. If you are not a good cultural fit for the firm, you may be expelled like a virus. Conversely, if you are a good fit for the firm you will be welcomed with open arms, advanced, and find yourself having a great time.

If someone is extremely intelligent, that person may join a very well respected firm and discover that succeeding at this particular firm is more about how social and connected they are. There are firms where how social you are is more important than how smart you are. The attorney may not be given work, and when the attorney is given work the attorney may be unfairly criticized for the quality of his or her work. I know of one attorney from an Ivy League law school in this position right now who is so discouraged that he is thinking of [leaving the practice of law](#).

Conversely, if someone is extremely outgoing, he or she may join a well-respected firm where the people are very cerebral and serious. Certain firms have a reputation of being very "buttoned up" and serious. The person who is social and outgoing may get the opposite sort of reception from the people he or she works with. He or she may start getting poor reviews and feel alienated. One woman I know of working at a top firm told her female boss (whom she thought was her friend) about a wild weekend she had with a man she met while on a trip. The boss did not react well, stopped giving her work, and the attorney ended up leaving the practice of law. In contrast, in some firms this sort of behavior would be condoned. You just do not know. Different people operate in different ways.

It is extremely important that you join a law firm where the culture matches your values. You want to be around people who are like you and who value the qualities in others that you do. If you make a poor decision here you can literally find yourself ostracized and having a very bad experience that would be the opposite if you were in a different culture.

The social fit calculus is not always something you will pick up in your interviews, but you need to try your best. Attorneys who are interviewing you may not always share with you everything about the way the firm is. In addition, some law firms will almost automatically make you an offer if they have enough of a need and your qualifications are good enough.

- If you are a top student from a top law school, you will get offers at firms that are bad cultural fits for you.
- If you are a partner with a ton of business, you will get offers at firms that are bad cultural fits for you.
- If you are in a "hot" practice area where good attorneys are scarce, you will get offers at firms that are bad cultural fits for you.

You need to understand the culture of the firms you are interested in joining. If you do not understand the culture of the firms you are interested in joining, you will more likely than not be in trouble.

#### INTERVIEW TIP:

When you get to the firm, use all your senses and powers of perception to ascertain if it is a good cultural fit. Talk to everyone you can--from the receptionist to the paralegals to the associates and partners. You can even talk to the parking attendant. What are they wearing? What are they acting like? What are they talking about? Are they talking at all or is everyone "hush hush" and aloof? How do they have their firm set up? Are there common areas where people congregate or is everything closed off? What types of decorations do they have in their offices? Is there anything to indicate a tendency for the attorneys to be of a particular social set or religion? Do they all seem to come from the same schools? What is the vibe? Do people look like they are stressed out and about to go off the deep end, or do they seem calm, collected, and satisfied with their situations? Take everything in and see if it is in accordance with your values and the kinds of things that make you comfortable in a workplace and with colleagues. Check in with your gut and decide if it is telling you to get out of there as soon as possible or if it is telling you that you have found your law firm "home."

Please see the following articles for more information:

- [Firm Culture Matters Most](#)
- [Find an Employer with Similar Values](#)

#### Conclusions

The sorts of decisions you make about what type of firm to join can have positive or devastating consequences on your career. In fact, the biggest mistake attorneys make is joining the wrong firm. After years of getting good qualifications and making the right decisions with their lives, attorneys end up joining the wrong firms and experience career failures or unhappiness.

When you make the wrong decision, the firm will expose your dark side and highlight everything you are lacking or not good at. The wrong firm will make you feel inadequate and bring you down. The right firm will bring out your positive side and help you excel. [The right firm will protect and advance you and enable you to have a happy and productive legal career.](#)

The wrong firm is not healthy for you and the right firm is. If you care about your future, make the right choice when it comes to picking a law firm to join.

See the following articles for more information:

- [Which Type of Law Firm Is Best for You and Your Career: Main Offices of Large National Firms, Branch Offices of Large National Firms, Midsized Firms, Boutiques, or Newer Fast-Growing Firms?](#)
- [Why You Should Find Your "Tribe" and Not Just Focus on Money in Making Law Firm Job Decisions](#)
- [There Are Only Three Reasons an Attorney Should Ever Switch Law Firms](#)
- [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](#)