

Top 9 Reasons Attorneys Lose Law Firm Jobs

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

Summary: Find out the nine most common reasons attorneys end up losing their law firm jobs in this article.

A lawyer can lose their job for a variety of reasons.

Some of those reasons can be of their own doing.

In other cases, the reason they lost their job is beyond their control.

Find out the nine most common reasons [attorneys lose their law firm jobs](#).

There are a variety of reasons why attorneys end up losing their law firm jobs. Some reasons are completely out of their control, such as not enough work in their practice area, getting sick and then being laid off after you return to the firm, the firm going out of business, and so on. On the other hand, many other reasons are due to mistakes on the part of the attorney, whether it is due to performance issues, issues with the culture, your inability to pass the bar, not being able to develop a good book of business, and so on. Here are the nine most common reasons attorneys lose [law firm jobs](#):

Partners left your firm and left you without work, so the firm let you go. The natural question that law firms will have for you if you are in this situation is: "Why didn't they take you with them? Were you not committed enough?" Law firms want to hire the best people they can and if you did not lateral with others from your firm, this suggests that you were not the most valuable member of the pack. When partners leave firms, they take with them the people who work the hardest and are the most committed. They leave behind those they do not want. If the partners did not take you, why didn't the former law firm keep you around? You need to be prepared for this question and have references and reasons. For example, perhaps the law firm to which the partners went did not allow any new associates to come along.

The firm laid you off because there was not enough work. When [law firms do layoffs](#), they do not layoff everyone--no matter how bad things get. They layoff only the people they do not want, or who are the least productive (and therefore the least committed). You better be prepared for this as well. You need to let the new firm know that everyone was laid off and you were not alone, for example.

You were fired for performance reasons. This, of course, also suggests a lack of commitment. If you were committed enough to your job, you would not have made the mistakes you did and would not have been fired. You need to let the firm know that you made a mistake, learned from it, and will not make the same mistake again. If there is a way to get around not saying this, you are better off doing so. [Attorneys who are fired](#) for performance reasons typically are fired not for just making one mistake, but for a consistent pattern of doing so. This is a huge warning sign to future law firms.

You left because you were uncomfortable with the culture. If you did not like the culture of one place, the odds are good that you will not like the culture of another place either. You should have found another job first--law firms will believe that if you were serious about your career (and not your needs), you would have gotten a new job before you left your last one. You are expected to fit in with different cultures: You are a lawyer and need to work with different sorts of clients. If you cannot fit in with a law firm culture, this raises questions that you will not fit in with the next law firm culture either. Lawyers who do not like the culture of their firms may have good reasons for this. Nevertheless, in the experience of most law firms, attorneys who use this excuse tend to have difficulty getting along with others in any environment. No law firm culture is perfect. Instead of telling your interviewer that you were uncomfortable with the culture of your last firm, you should say something vaguer, such as "it was not a good fit for me." It is best not to attack another firm's culture.

You left because you were sick. While getting sick is something that happens to most people, an extended absence due to illness (or losing your job due to this) and leaving a law firm due to this is not common. Law firms are composed of human beings who are "somewhat" compassionate, and the presumption is that a law firm will take you back if you got sick. This is a sign that something else is going on.

The law firm did not have work for you after you took a maternity/paternity leave and so the firm let you

go. At the outset, I want to make something very clear: Men who take extended paternity leave (more than a week) and then come back to their law firms often are not given work. I hate to be the one to bear this news, but I have seen this again and again. Women are almost always welcomed back. My role here is not to judge the differences in the roles of each sex; I am just an observer of what happens in large law firms. Men are not expected to take paternity leaves and with women it is fine. Nevertheless, if a woman takes an extended maternity leave, then the firm may be upset and not give her work. How much is too much? Generally, at the largest firms, more than three months or so is not advisable. If a firm does not have work for someone when he or she gets back, this is generally the result of the attorney not having sufficiently ingratiated him or herself with other attorneys to get back in the cycle, or the attorney not having done good enough work to begin with.

You were fired because you did not pass the bar after a few attempts. This is common and difficult to overcome. If someone does not pass the bar after the first attempt (often simply because the person did not study enough), the person may fail the second time he or she takes the bar because he or she is working and not studying. This is a valid excuse but not one that law firms care about. Law firms believe that the bar exam is a sign of commitment and if you do not put forward your full effort it shows you are not committed. The bar exam is the lowest hanging fruit to show commitment, and not passing the bar never looks good.

Nevertheless, lots of famous people have failed the bar, and it is not something that should consume you.

Here are some examples:

- a. Michelle Obama
- b. Franklin D. Roosevelt
- c. Hillary Clinton
- d. Kathleen Sullivan
- e. Gov. Jerry Brown
- f. Pat Robertson
- g. Congressman Harold Ford Jr.
- h. New York Mayor Ed Koch
- i. Pete Wilson

You were fired for low hours. If you were fired for low hours, this raises the question of why your hours were low to begin with. As an attorney, you are expected to seek out work and create work if necessary. Law firms do not like it if you did not have work in your last job because the best attorneys typically always find ways to stay busy and find work one way or another. If you have low hours, it is best explained by the fact that there was no work at all, or that you spent your time at the firm getting work from only one person and so forth.

Not enough business. Partners are fired all the time in law firms for not having enough business. If this is the case, the partner needs to find a firm that has sufficient work to support the partner. Alternatively, the partner needs to have a convincing story that he or she will generate significant business for the next firm.