25 Reasons Why Boutique Firms Are the Best Choice for Many Attorneys and Can Be Much Safer Than Larger Law Firms

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

At times, boutique law firms have been frowned upon by many attorneys. Boutique law firms are small and usually have small practice areas. However, for some lawyers, boutique law firms can be a smart legal career choice.

Summary: Is a boutique law firm right for you? Find out why it is often a much better choice for your legal career than a large law firm.

There are different points on view on this topic. See 20 Reasons Why There Are No Such Thing as "Lifestyle" Boutique Law Firms and Why Boutique Law Firms Can Be Much More Dangerous Than Larger Law Firms for a different view.

One thing that amazes me is how people continually want more and more money, beauty, success, popularity, and benefits of "big city life," even when it is so often the case that those very things make people unfulfilled and unhappy. The more people want, and the more they compare themselves to others, the unhappier they often become. There are, of course, people who are immune to these influences, but many attorneys seem to be driven by them, to their disillusionment and detriment.

Years ago, I began finding local Los Angeles "society" magazines in my mailbox. I could not believe how many parties, events, happenings, and so forth were occurring all over the place. There were club openings, store openings, and various parties for this and that, where stars and celebrities were always invited. My wife grew up in Los Angeles and knew many of the people in the magazines.

"What are those people like?" I asked her.

"I don't know many of them very well," she said. "But I know that they all have a reputation for doing a lot of cocaine. So, if you want to get invited to those sorts of parties, I guess all you need to do is try cocaine, start hanging out with people who use cocaine, and you probably would find yourself at these parties sooner or later."

That struck me as sad--but the more I thought about it, the more the message became clear: In pursuit of popularity and the appearance of success, many of us become people who we are not. In the process, many people destroy themselves financially, socially, professionally, and in every imaginable way.

Nowhere is this as clear to me as with attorneys who work in large law firms. Many attorneys who work in large law firms are living lives they simply do not want. They are pursuing something that they think is very important to them (professional and financial success), but in many respects, they are no different from people who turn to cocaine (or something else) so they can be well-liked by others. They prostitute themselves and work extremely long hours, they try to please attorneys above them, they compete to be better than their peers, they suffer health (and other) problems, and they generally sacrifice themselves in pursuit of what the large law firm wants. Many get divorced early in their careers. Some never have relationships because they are working all the time.

I am often mystified when I speak with these attorneys. Frequently, when I tell them about other opportunities
and other kinds of firms, these unhappy large firm lawyers are dismissive--even though these other opportunities and firms could very well be the keys to their happiness. Most of their dismissiveness has nothing to do with whether or not they would be happier somewhere else. Instead, they are dismissive because they place the perceived reputation, prestige, and similar factors they associate with large firms above their very own happiness.

If you made a list of 25 large law firms in a city like Los Angeles or New York and asked a big firm attorney to rank them from "1 to 25" in the order of most to least prestigious, the majority of these attorneys would quickly and happily do so without the aid of any outside research. They would literally be able to articulate the differences between 12 and 16. This is how hung up and preoccupied large firm lawyers are with prestige.

With the most "affected" of these attorneys, sometimes I will simply read off a list of 100 law firms and ask them to respond with impressions, negative comments, and an indication of whether or not they are interested. It is incredible how acutely aware these attorneys are about pecking orders, prestige levels, and where they stand on the hierarchy of firms. They will dismiss certain law firms based on rumor, innuendo, and so forth. Their identities are so intimately tied up with their employers that the two are inseparable.

How important is the prestige level of the law firm you're working in? Why?
See How Attorneys Choose Law Firms for more information.

On a weekly basis, I come into contact with attorneys from New York City who may be losing their jobs, have left their jobs voluntarily, or have moved to new states with spouses and are unemployed.

If the attorneys are working but losing their jobs, they often "shoot themselves in the foot" and only consider firms that are close to, or near, the prestige levels of the firms they are at. Many times they sabotage their searches because it appears they are only interested in working if it is in a circumstance that makes them look good to others. Many then leave their positions and never practice law again.

If the attorneys have left the state (or area), they will often delay their searches, not approve law firms unless they are the most prestigious in the area, and even turn down offers when they get them for inconsequential reasons. Often they will move to medium-sized cities and turn down offers because the salaries are only half of what they were making in New York City--despite being top of the market wherever they are (with far fewer hours). Many of these attorneys also never practice law again.

These attorneys then spend the rest of their lives stating that they are "recovering attorneys" and tell this to anyone who asks. It is ridiculously common for attorneys from New York and other major cities to sabotage their careers (and job searches) and drop out of the practice of law. Sadly, it is also often the attorneys who are the most motivated and have the most potential who drop out of the practice of law.

As my first job out of law school, I clerked for a federal judge in a relatively small town in Northern Michigan that was known for beet farming. I got to know several of the associates from many of the smaller law firms that surrounded the court because they often sat beside more senior attorneys in court and I would see them out and about occasionally. That was over 20 years ago. Recently, I looked up some of them. Do you know what I found? Almost all of these attorneys were still at the law firms they were with back then. There may be a pecking order among firms in this part of the country, but no one cares all that much. Instead, what is important to these attorneys? Things like family, church, and stability.

For my career now, I review resumes of attorneys each day and I tend to see the most stability from attorneys at smaller law firms. These attorneys either joined their firms as their first jobs out of law school or joined them later in their careers. These attorneys almost uniformly seem better adjusted, more stable, and happier than their counterparts in many major law firms. A small, stable law firm is not easy to find--but if you want to practice law and be happy doing so, it is often the best choice. The attorneys I meet from these firms often look healthier, are not as nervous, and are more likely to have interests besides their careers.
This article discusses the benefits of working for a smaller law firm. I have written elsewhere about the benefits of working for a major law firm and also why boutiques can be dangerous place to work. But there are some very good reasons why attorneys should consider working in small law firms if they are not currently doing so, or consider staying with their smaller law firms if they currently are working there.

Do you prefer boutique law firms or large law firms? Why do you feel that way?

See the following article for more information:
How Important Is It to Work at a Major Law Firm?

25 Reasons Why Boutique Firms Are the Best Choice for Many Attorneys and Can Be Much Safer Than Larger Law Firms

- Attorneys in Very Niche Legal Specialties Are Often Better Off at Smaller Law Firms
- Attorneys in Specialties That Are Not Profitable for Large Law Firms Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Want to Represent Smaller Businesses Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Are Too Senior for a Large Law Firm and Want to Continue Working in a Law Firm Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys with Books of Business Who Are Not Getting the Compensation They Want at Large Law Firms Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Want a Guarantee of a Title (such as Partner) Now or in the Future Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Have No Other Options in the Market Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Are Not Interested in Doing Much Work but Want a Title like "Counsel" to Make It Appear as If They Are Working and to Keep Their Options Open in the Legal Profession Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Find Boutiques with Stunning Business Propositions That Make Growth and Success Appear Very Likely Are Often Better Off in Those Boutiques
- You Are Often Better Off at Boutiques If They Were Recently Started by Refugees from Your Law Firm, If You Know and Trust Them, and If Their Reasons for Leaving Match Your Reasons for Considering Leaving
- Attorneys Who Need More Client Contact Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Need More Responsibility Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Believe Another Type of Firm Will Make Them Happy and Are Trying "One Last Thing" Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Are More Comfortable in Personal and Intimate Environments Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Have Work Habits or Other Problems That Large Law Firms Would Easily Expose and Not Tolerate Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Want to Be Big Fishes in Small Ponds Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Know They Will Not Continue Practicing Law Long Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Want to Avoid the Politics of Larger Law Firms and the Constantly Changing Policies and Directions of Larger Law Firms Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Are Coming from Accounting Firms, In-House Positions, the Government, or Public Interest Jobs and Who Will Not Get Looked at by Larger Law Firms Are Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Are Looking to Work Closely With Well-Known Successful Attorneys in Their Practice Areas Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Cannot Get a Job with a Major Law Firm Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Want Better Hours Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Do Not Care about Money or Prestige Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms
- Attorneys Who Have Good Books of Business and Want to Maintain Control Over Those Books and Their
Compensation Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

Attorneys in Very Niche Legal Specialties Are Often Better Off at Smaller Law Firms

There are several smaller law firms that are known for expertise in certain very niche specialties. There are some very good firms that have expertise with (1) ERISA, (2) tax, (3) healthcare, (4) white collar criminal work, (5) plaintiff's work, (6) patent prosecution, (7) entertainment, (8) bankruptcy, (9) family law, (10) trust and estates, (11) employment, (12) fashion law, (13) sports law, and (14) appellate law. In many cases, these small firms were started because groups of attorneys who specialized in certain niche types of law got together to practice that type of law. Over time, the best of these firms developed good reputations in their niche areas and they continue to attract a continuous stream of business as a result.

If you have a certain specialty, the best place for you to practice is often going to be a boutique law firm due to the boutique’s strength in that practice area. In fact, some boutiques have such good reputations, pricing power, and access to important work that the best choice for your practice often is a boutique.

See the following articles for more information:
- Develop a Niche
- The Right Time to Specialize

Attorneys in Specialties That Are Not Profitable for Large Law Firms Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

There are a variety of specialties that are not profitable for major law firms. If you practice in one of these specialties, the best option for your career is often going to be working for a boutique. These practice areas include (1) insurance defense, (2) criminal law, (3) most types of plaintiff's work, (4) trust and estates, (5) family law, (6) most types of entertainment law, and (7) public interest work. Almost all "consumer facing" types of work (where you are representing individuals in contrast to large businesses) are better done in a smaller law firm than a larger one. Very few large law firms represent individuals. This work is almost always done in smaller law firms.

Why do you think work representing individuals is most often done by smaller law firms?

See the following articles for more information:
- Family Law Attorney
- Trusts and Estates Attorney
- Insurance Defense Attorney
- Practicing Entertainment Law: Exposing the Truth Behind the Glamour Myth
- The Reality of Entertainment Law

Attorneys Who Want to Represent Smaller Businesses Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

Smaller businesses can rarely afford to use larger law firms for their work. The rates are too high. Many attorneys like working with and helping smaller businesses. Attorneys who enjoy working with smaller businesses and representing them can often do very well working in smaller law firms. I know one attorney who specializes in representing the franchise owners of a certain fast food chain. These clients could never afford the expense of a major law firm, and this attorney has a very successful career representing these clients at a smaller law firm. Many attorneys have an interest in a certain type of business because they were raised around the business. These attorneys are often better off working for a smaller law firm than a larger one.

Do you prefer representing large or small businesses? Why?

See Treating Your Legal Career Like a Small Business for more information.
Attorneys Who Are Too Senior for a Large Law Firm and Want to Continue Working in a Law Firm Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

Once an attorney has more than seven or eight years of experience—unless the attorney has portable business, is in a well-defined and profitable practice area, or is just "lucky"—the attorney will have a very difficult time getting a position with a major law firm. This is just the way it works. At the same time, smaller law firms have a very difficult time attracting talented attorneys when they are younger because they cannot pay them the high salaries young attorneys want.

See 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) for more information.

But a smaller law firm is often happy to hire an attorney who has been trained by a larger law firm, even if the attorney has seven or more years of experience. The smaller law firm may have clients that need attorneys with sophisticated, big firm experience. For example, a smaller law firm may not have anyone who can assist with mergers and acquisitions and may welcome the opportunity to hire a seasoned large firm attorney to do this work instead of having to refer the M&A work out elsewhere. Bringing in large law firm attorneys can be very profitable for smaller law firms and often works out.

Have you ever seen a big law firm attorney with specialized skills move to a small firm? What happened to them?

Attorneys with Books of Business Who Are Not Getting the Compensation They Want at Large Law Firms Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

Attorneys with stable books of business that they service on their own will often move to small law firms to keep a larger share of the revenue they generate. This is often a very smart choice, provided their clients do not require the name recognition of a major law firm. I have known attorneys in a variety of practice areas who have done this successfully and benefitted greatly from moving to smaller law firms.

If you have enough business, the smaller law firm is often happy to give you a larger percentage of profits than a larger law firm would. Smaller law firms typically have less overhead (salaries, office space, legacy costs, support staff, libraries, summer associate programs--etc.) and having less overhead means they do not need as great a share of the business you bring in.

Have you ever considered taking your book of business to another firm? What would entice you most to move?

See Law Firm Economics and Your Career for more information.

Attorneys Who Want a Guarantee of a Title (such as Partner) Now or in the Future Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

I have worked with several attorneys who are senior associates, or counsel, at major American law firms who want to move into roles where they are called "partners" by their law firms. The concept of partner and ownership of the law firm is extremely important to them and something that they aspire to and need. It is very frequent for attorneys at many major law firms to "hit a glass ceiling" and move to boutique law firms that will either make them partners right away, or give them some sort of guarantee that they will be partners at some point in the future if certain conditions are met (i.e., staying on for a certain period, bringing in a certain amount of business, or hitting certain goals for billable hours).

It is much easier to become a partner in the majority of smaller law firms than in major law firms. Because the advancement is more certain in smaller law firms, attorneys often move to smaller law firms to guarantee their advancement.
How important is your title in a law to you?
See What Law Firm Titles Mean: Of Counsel, Non-Equity Partner, Equity Partner Explained for more information.

Attorneys Who Have No Other Options in the Market Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

The most important thing an attorney can do is stay employed. If an attorney wants a career inside of a law firm, the attorney often needs to “take whatever the attorney can get.” Once you are unemployed and not working in a law firm for an extended period, it becomes extremely difficult to get a new position. If the best position you can get is in a smaller law firm, you are best off taking that position. It does you no good to be unemployed. You can try and move to a larger law firm later if that is important to you. If you have no other options, the best thing you can often do is to take a position in a smaller law firm. You may not have other options because:

You are losing your job (or have lost your job). The most important thing that any attorney can do is stay employed—not just for the sake of earning a living, but for the sake of the appearance of commitment on the attorney’s resume. If an attorney is unemployed, the attorney looks weak to the market and will have a very difficult time getting a new position.

You are in a small market without large law firms. If you are in a small market without any (or few) large law firms, you obviously have no other option than to work in a small law firm. There is nothing wrong with this, and you are better off staying employed than unemployed.

The market is in a recession (or there is a major slowdown in your practice area), and there are no jobs available. During recessions, work typically slows down most dramatically in the largest law firms (they have the highest billing rates) and often moves to smaller law firms (with the lowest billing rates). Smart attorneys move to smaller law firms. At BCG Attorney Search, our revenues often actually increase during recessions because we move so many attorneys to smaller firms—it is dumb giving up in a recession. Similarly, during very good economies, some practice areas do poorly. When interest rates are rising, many practice areas like real estate slow down and there are few jobs in major law firms. At these points in time, attorneys are best off going to smaller law firms.

There are plenty of good reasons for working in a smaller firm, and you should remember that the most important thing you can do is stay employed in a law firm if you do not want to foreclose your options of working in a law firm ever again.

Under what circumstances would you move to a smaller firm?

See the following articles for more information:
Four Fatal Mistakes Highly Qualified Attorneys Make When Choosing Law Firms
The Benefits to Living and Working in a Smaller Market
Attorneys Who Are Not Interested in Doing Much Work but Want a Title like "Counsel" to Make It Appear as If They Are Working and to Keep Their Options Open in the Legal Profession Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

Many small law firms hand out titles like "counsel" to attorneys like candy. They will call you "counsel" (or allow you to call yourself "counsel") if you are working at home or working part-time for them. This is a good option for many attorneys who may not want to work full-time (women having/raising young children), attorneys who are exploring other careers in addition to practicing law (writing a book, starting a business--just few of the examples I have seen recently), and others who may be undecided about whether they want to continue practicing law. Attorneys who want to leave their options open can often get positions with small law firms that will allow them to call themselves "counsel" without too much difficulty. This gives the attorney the option of having a resume that communicates continuous dedication and commitment to the practice of law and not the opposite.
Is having a flexible schedule important to you? How is your current firm doing at helping with this need?

See the following articles for more information:
Be Committed to What You Do
The Only Thing That Matters Is Commitment

One of the smartest things any attorney can do is to take a position in a smaller law firm where the attorney has close friends, relatives, and others who will defend and protect the attorney. If you have a group of strong allies, you are always going to be much better off than if you do not.

I frequently see attorneys join firms owned by friends or family and then come to me seeking new positions. In almost every case, I tell these attorneys to stay right where they are if they are getting good work, experience, and training. If you have a relative in the firm, for example, your relative will show you things you normally would not learn because of that bond. Relatives will show you how they get business, watch out for you politically, and help you minimize your weaknesses. Moreover, if they own the firm, relatives will be far less likely to fire you for mistakes or let you go when work slows down. It is important to have people who have your back. In a larger law firm, even if you have relatives or friends there, their opinions are far less likely to carry any weight.

A goal of most attorneys should be to have powerful mentors and powerful allies. If the people who are developing and protecting you are your friends or relatives, that is perfectly fine and not something that should disturb you. Many people who have achieved great success—in virtually every calling—have been helped along the way by friends, relatives, and others.

Have you ever received a job interview or offer due to connections with friends or family? What happened?

There can be risks to getting jobs through friends. See the following article for more information:
The Danger of Getting Legal Jobs Through Friends
Attorneys Who Find Boutiques with Stunning Business Propositions That Make Growth and Success Appear Very Likely Are Often Better Off in Those Boutiques

When I finished my clerkship, I had the option of going to work in a large law firm where I was a summer associate, a few major law firms in Los Angeles, and a firm that at the time had about 45 attorneys in Los Angeles—Quinn Emanuel. Quinn is now one of the largest and most successful law firms in the world. I joined the law firm because I saw that is was going to be successful, attracted exciting people, and had a spirit about it that made it different from all of the other firms I spoke with.

I was not alone. Many attorneys with more experience than I had just knew good things were going to happen with that firm. They felt something positive was going to happen and wanted to be part of it. If you get in on the ground floor of a small law firm that looks like it is headed for success, very good things can happen to you. Many of the attorneys who took the risk and joined Quinn when it was a young firm became far, far more successful than they ever would have at a major law firm. They got a better experience, made more money, and had access to partnership opportunities that would not normally have been possible.

Have you seen this happen to any attorneys that you know? Share your experience.

See Seize Every Opportunity That Comes Your Way for more information.
You Are Often Better Off at Boutiques If They Were Recently Started by Refugees from Your Law Firm, If You Know and Trust Them, and If Their Reasons for Leaving Match Your Reasons for Considering Leaving
On a weekly basis, attorneys break off from major law firms and start their own small law firms—generally taking a few clients with them at the same time. If a group of attorneys you know has done this, and you know and trust these attorneys, taking a position with them might be a good career decision, provided their reasons for leaving match your own. While most attorneys leave for financial reasons, many leave because they disagree with management, believe there are no opportunities at their current firms, or are under constraints that make their careers difficult (billable hour targets or billable hour rates, for example).

In some cases, major law firms simply lose commitment to and interest in certain practice areas and gradually get rid of people in those practice areas, or make it difficult for them to hold onto clients in those practice areas. In other cases, law firms make it clear that they have lost their commitment to (and interest in) certain branch offices. This may make leaving the best option for attorneys in these offices.

Have you ever thought of leaving your firm? Why?

See the following articles for more information:
There Are Only Three Reasons an Attorney Should Ever Switch Law Firms
15 Reasons You Should Leave Your Law Firm and Look for a New Job
The Right and Wrong Reasons to Switch Law Firms
Attorneys Who Need More Client Contact Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

To be happy, many attorneys may feel that they need to have more client contact. In many larger law firms, I have seen attorneys practice five or more years without ever seeing a client. Attorneys may need more client contact because it is important for them to feel more connected to their work and the people they are doing work for. An attorney in a smaller law firm is more likely to get more client contact than he or she would in a larger law firm. If you are driven by having more connection to people, a smaller law firm is often your best bet.

Do you like contact with clients, or do you prefer working behind a desk on paperwork?

See the following articles for more information:
You Need Connections to Make the Most of Your Career
Take Small Actions and Meet Others
Relationships, Commodities, and Making Connections
You Need to Be Connected with Others at Work
Attorneys Who Need More Responsibility Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

Smaller law firms typically have far fewer layers of people attorneys need to go through to do work. In a larger firm, you are more likely to be working on portions of matters and not the entire matter. In contrast, smaller law firms typically offer their attorneys the ability to assume much more responsibility for matters than they would receive at larger law firms. Many attorneys thrive on having a great deal of responsibility, and this is important to them. They would prefer to have close-to-complete ownership of a matter instead of just a portion of it. Doing every part of the matter gives them pride and purpose, where doing only a small part of the matter does not.

If you know what you are doing, are profitable, and the firm's clients give you repeat work, you are far more likely to be left alone, and allowed to work on files in the way you want, in a small law firm than in a larger law firm.

How much responsibility has your current law firm given you?
See the following articles for more information:
You Need to Be Self-Managing and Responsible
Take Responsibility
Attorneys Who Believe Another Type of Firm Will Make Them Happy and Are Trying "One Last Thing"
Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

Many attorneys are unhappy in large law firms and believe the solution to how they feel is to either (1) work in a boutique law firm or (2) go in-house. This thought pattern is as old as the hills and something that I hear several times a day most days.

If an attorney is unhappy in a large law firm, the attorney may very well be happier with a smaller law firm. If the attorney gets more responsibility, has more client contact, and is around people the attorney feels comfortable with, then the attorney may do much better in a smaller law firm. Before quitting the practice of law, or going in-house, it is often a very smart move for attorneys to try and get positions with boutiques because they are often much happier doing this in the long run.

Are you happy being an attorney in your current firm? Why or why not?

See the following articles for more information:
Why Most Attorneys Are Unhappy
The 'Dark Side' of Going In-house
Why Going In-house is Often the Worst Decision a Good Attorney Can Ever Make
Attorneys Who Are More Comfortable in Personal and Intimate Environments Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

A large law firm can be extremely impersonal for many attorneys. There is often nothing that feels "family-like" about a large law firm. There can be layers of bureaucracy, attorneys rarely know how they are doing, there is constant insecurity, the work is demanding, and no one is ever really looking out for anyone else. Smaller law firms tend to be more personal and intimate. The attorneys tend to know each other quite well and may even be friendly outside of work. Because of necessity, attorneys at smaller firms often make a concerted effort to get along as well as they can and treat each other well. There tend to be fewer surprises (layoffs and firings, for example) because everyone is much more likely to know what is going on. In many cases, there tends to be less competition and paranoia among attorneys because there is less tolerance for backstabbing and other similar activities in such close quarters.

Do you prefer a smaller, family-like environment or larger, bureaucratic environment?

See the following articles for more information:
You Need to Be in the Right Environment
The Importance of Environment
Seek Out Environments, Conditions, and People That Create Positive Beliefs in Yourself
Attorneys Who Have Work Habits or Other Problems That Large Law Firms Would EasilyExpose and Not Tolerate Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

I have known attorneys who were drug addicts, alcoholics, had been convicted of crimes, had mental breakdowns, ongoing psychological problems, were disbarred in one state, and had other issues who still managed to find positions in boutique law firms. There are small law firms that can tolerate this and where an attorney with such problems can find a home. I am not condoning any of this one way or another. What I do know is that some attorneys have problems that are so severe they could not possibly survive in a large law firm.
One attorney I know drank himself out of a position with a major law firm and became a full-blown alcoholic. He had formerly been a partner with a major American law firm in Los Angeles and had a large book of business that he lost because he could no longer function. He moved to a desert town in California where he has continued drinking and now helps the elderly with social security disability cases for what I estimate is a salary of no more than $60,000 a year. He formerly made $700,000 a year--and that was several years ago. I called him on the phone recently, and despite having known him for several years, his mind was so gone that it took him several seconds to even remember me. There are boutique law firm jobs for people who have crashed and burned.

Do you have any problems you hope your law firm won't find out about? How do they affect your career?

See the following articles for more information:
How You Deal with Problems Will Determine the Quality of Your Life
Confront Problems and Do Not Be a Dabbler
Attorneys Who Want to Be Big Fishes in Small Ponds Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

If an attorney desires to be a big fish in a small pond, working in a boutique law firm can often be a good choice. If you want to be a standout because of your intellect, education, work ethic, business, or experience, a boutique might be a good fit for you. Some people are naturally inclined to want to be in positions where they feel like they have authority and where others respect them for what they have achieved in the past. They may also feel that they will try harder if people look up to them. In other cases, if an attorney has enough business and wants to “run the show,” he or she can do this at a smaller law firm.

I know many attorneys who have smallish books of business by large law firm standards who are considered “superstars” in the smaller law firms they are now a part of. A “mistmaker” attorney at a large firm can be a “rainmaker” at a small firm. Your success in any firm will be dependent on the quality of your peers. If you are with a large law firm, you will almost always be less successful than other attorneys, and it will be more difficult for you to stand out. If you want to feel successful, all you have to do is surround yourself with less successful peers.

How successful do you feel you are in your law firm?
See The People You Work and Associate with Can Either Make or Break You for more information.
Attorneys Who Know They Will Not Continue Practicing Law Long Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

If you know you are not likely to be practicing law for very long--and have other plans for your career--then a boutique may be the right choice. You will typically have fewer hour requirements, the firm may be more flexible, and the firm may even allow you to work part-time, when you want, to earn money. I have seen small law firms make all sorts of concessions that large law firms would never make. I have seen attorneys who joined these smaller law firms do things like:
- Take classes in computer programming to learn to become programmers (a new career idea)
- Start businesses in their spare time
- Work on books, start blogs, and do other similar pursuits
- Travel while they are working

If you have other plans for your life and career, working in a small law firm can provide a good transition point, provided you have something strong enough to offer the firm so it is willing to be your stepping stone.

Do you have other plans for your career besides being an attorney? What are they?

See the following articles for more information:
60 Nontraditional Jobs You Can Do with a Law Degree (and Should Strongly Consider Doing)
Practicing Law Not the Only Option for Attorneys

Attorneys Who Want to Avoid the Politics of Larger Law Firms and the Constantly Changing Policies and Directions of Larger Law Firms Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

Many smaller law firms are relatively stable places—they do not grow or shrink too much each year. These smaller law firms often have a well-defined balance regarding how they operate that makes them comfortable places for attorneys who need predictability in their careers and lives. Large law firms can be frightening places because they are always adjusting their compensation systems, expansion plans, hiring, firing and so forth. Because of the unpredictability of the large law firm, many attorneys are much happier working in smaller law firms, where there is predictability. They are often willing to accept lower salaries and work on less important matters in exchange for the peace of mind offered by many smaller law firms.

How do you deal with the office politics at your firm?

See the following articles for more information:

Problems

In Defense of Long-Term Employment with a Single Employer

Attorneys Who Are Coming from Accounting Firms, In-House Positions, the Government, or Public Interest Jobs and Who Will Not Get Looked at by Larger Law Firms Are Better Off in Smaller Firms

Larger law firms have close to zero (and at best very little) interest in attorneys coming from positions that are not inside of law firms. If you are not part of a law firm environment, other law firms either assume you (1) were not good enough to get a position with a law firm when you got your last position or (2) did not want to get a position with a law firm. Regardless of the reasons, large law firms treat people not coming directly from law firms as virtual pariahs. They do not have to get into the reasons with you about why you may have left (nor do they care) because they have so many other qualified candidates for their positions that there is zero justification for them to take a risk on you. Moreover, the quality of attorneys coming from law firms (who do work for paying clients) is almost uniformly much higher than it is for attorneys coming from other practice settings—that at best have inconsistent standards in their legal departments.

If you cannot get a position with a large law firm from a practice setting outside of a law firm, your best option is often to get a position with a small law firm. Starting out with a small law firm will give you the ability to later get into a larger law firm.

Have you seen an attorney move from a smaller firm to a large one? How did they do it? See Top 10 Ways Attorneys Can Move to a Better Law Firm and Get a Better Attorney Job for more information.

Attorneys Who Are Looking to Work Closely With Well-Known Successful Attorneys in Their Practice Areas Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

The nice thing about many boutique law firms is that you are often hired by the person you are going to work for and you often will work directly with that person. This means that the person who hires you is often going to be your mentor and you can closely observe this attorney and pick up his or her work habits, mannerisms, skills, and also observe his or her weaknesses.

Many very successful and well-known attorneys are working in smaller law firms around the country. If you can get a position with a famous or well-known attorney, this can often benefit you greatly and will give you "street credibility" in your practice area. Moving from a larger law firm to a smaller one with an extremely accomplished attorney you will work directly for is often a very smart decision for attorneys. I have seen attorneys launch their entire careers from this one decision.
Is there a famous attorney you would like to work with and be mentored by? Who is it?

See the following articles for more information:
11 Steps for Attorneys to Find Mentors (and Why Attorneys Need Mentors)
Taking Charge of Your Mentoring Experience
Attorneys Who Cannot Get a Job with a Major Law Firm Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

If you cannot get a job with a major law firm and the only job you can get is with a smaller law firm, then you should take it. You should take the best job you can get, try as hard as you can, and always do the best you can. The important thing is to keep your career on track.

What advice would you give to an attorney who thinks accepting a job with a small firm is settling?

See the following articles for more information:
Legal Career Suicide: Quitting a Job without Having another One Lined Up
No, You Should Not Quit Your Job before Securing a New One
Attorneys Who Want Better Hours Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

While by no means always the case, the hours tend to be much better in smaller law firms than in larger law firms. There are many reasons for this; however, the largest reason is that smaller law firms typically represent smaller clients. Smaller clients do not have unlimited budgets that allow attorneys to constantly bill them for work. In other cases, attorneys in small law firms are not interested in billing a ton of hours.

The benefits of working in a law firm with better hours should not merit much explanation. People are happier when they are not working all the time--when they are not tired, when they have time for their families, when they have time to see their spouses and children, when they have time for exercise, when they can take vacations, when they have time for hobbies and other interests, and when they have time to live better. Recently, I ran into a few attorneys I used to practice law with and noticed that two of them looked like sailors--their teeth were chipped, broken, and practically falling out. They had not been to the dentist (by all appearances) in a few decades at least. They had not been to the dentist, I am sure, because they did not want to take time off work. The firms they were at put too much pressure on their partners to constantly be billing. Maybe there was a different reason that both these guys looked like sailors, but I keep seeing very successful attorneys looking all run-down and unhealthy. I know that if they took the time to take care of themselves, they would no longer look like this.

How are your hours at your current firm? Do you have time for outside activities and family?

See the following articles for more information:
Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law
Another Big Law Attorney I Know Just Died Young
What Can I Do to Deal with the Stress of Practicing Law?
Attorneys Who Do Not Care about Money or Prestige Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

If you do not care about money or prestige, then a smaller law firm might be for you. You can make decisions about where you want to work based on factors that have nothing to do with any of the things that most "Type-A" prestige-conscious and money-conscious attorneys do.

I run across these sorts of attorneys now and then and am always amazed by them. They simply want to be happy practicing law and are perfectly content where they are despite the fact that they could be in a much larger, much more prestigious law firm if they wanted to be. Their concern is on their happiness. I have seen Harvard Law graduates spend their first and second summers at ten-person law firms in small towns, or in
large cities, and decide that they liked the people so they went there after graduation and spent their entire
careers there. This sort of thing is rare, of course, but these attorneys are typically very "highly evolved" on
the social scale. They tend to be people who have come out of well-adjusted families; they often have a
strong support system (friends, religious groups) and outside interests that keep them very grounded.

How much does money and prestige matter to you as an attorney?

See the following articles for more information:

The Top Reasons Why Money Is the Dumbest Thing Any Attorney Should Focus on When Joining a Law
Firm
Why You Should Find Your “Tribe” and Not Just Focus on Money in Making Law Firm Job Decisions
Never Focus on the Money: Focus on Your Higher Purpose and Contribution
Attorneys Who Have Good Books of Business and Want to Maintain Control Over Those Books and
Their Compensation Are Often Better Off in Smaller Firms

In larger law firms, partners with good books of business often find that their books are under assault by the
firm at all points in time. Here are some of the things I hear on an ongoing basis:
The firm keeps increasing the partner's billing rate, and the partner keeps losing clients.
Other partners (and associates) overbill their clients, and the firm will not write-off the time. The partner loses clients.
The firm continually lowers the partner's compensation (or plays games with it), despite the partner bringing
in the same amount (or more) business.
The firm will not provide enough support to the partner.
There are too many conflicts that prevent the partner from bringing in new work.
The firm does not like certain types of work the partner is doing and does not want the partner doing it
anymore.

These sorts of complaints are common and are the reasons that many partners move to smaller law firms.
Smaller law firms allow them more control over their destinies.

Do you have any issues maintaining control over your book of business with your law firm?
See The Importance of Portable Business for more information.

Conclusions

I live in a pretty small community, Malibu, California, where there are about 7,000 full-time residents in my
estimation. Many of these people are high achievers who have been in the entertainment business or in
other public-facing businesses, where they were once caught up in the popularity and success game. A very
high proportion of these people (compared to anywhere else I have ever lived) like to talk about how they are
in recovery from drugs, sex, alcohol, dishonest business, hurting people, and similar destructive pursuits.
They talk about how they will never fall victim to OxyContin, alcohol, cocaine, scamming people, cheating,
and so forth ever again. These recovering addicts remind me of the former large firm attorneys I speak with
each day who are avoiding the practice of law: They are trying to avoid something that has destroyed their
lives and are happy to tell strangers and others how difficult it was for them. For them, practicing law was
something like a bad drug that brought them to their knees.

In contrast, most attorneys from smaller law firms often have careers inside of law firms that last longer. They
have lives that tend to be less fractured by divorce and other problems. They are not unhappy and they do
not seek to escape from the practice of law. The average attorney who joins a smaller firm in a major market,
or joins a smaller firm in a smaller market, ends up staying with the practice of law for much longer--often the
attorney’s entire career. Attorneys who work in smaller firms often are unaware of (nor are they interested in)
the pecking order of larger law firms and have isolated themselves from this and are just happy doing their jobs. They are likely working fewer hours, are surrounded by more supportive people, are more balanced, and have happier lives outside of work.

If you are constantly comparing yourself to others and playing the pecking order game (money, prestige, what others think) you will get the following results in your life:
You are going to constantly be upset and agitated when you think of other attorneys who are better than you. This will make you resentful and you will always try to be part of the crowd you are not part of or to prove something.
You will be so focused on how you compare to others that you will act superior to (and feel superior to) other attorneys you believe are better than you. This will isolate you from others and make you afraid to work with people you believe are better than you.

This is not a prescription for a happy life or career.

See the following articles for more information:
To Boutique or Not to Boutique
Does (Firm) Size Really Matter?
Will I Be Happier at Another Firm, or Are They All Just Basically the Same?
What Factors Should I Consider When Thinking of Moving from a Big Downtown Firm to a Smaller One?
Is Work-life Balance a Realistic Goal at "Biglaw" Firms?
Breaking Into a Smaller Market
How Do I Know If a Small Law Firm Is Reputable?
Choosing the Small versus the Large Firm
Top 10 Reasons Most Law Students and Lawyers Prefer Large, Famous Firms
Do Small Firms Like Attorneys That Start Out at Big Law Firms?
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?
How Should an Attorney Choose Law Firms

Share Your Thoughts
Which type of law firm do you prefer: a large firm or a small boutique?
Can an attorney be happy in a large firm? If so, how?
Where do you see your legal career in the next 5 years? 10 years?
Share your answers to the above questions in the comments below.