

What Is a Contract Lawyer and Why Do Law Firms Use Them?

By Amanda Griffin

Summary: Contract lawyers are becoming more common in the legal industry. Do you really understand what they do?

Contract workers are becoming an ever increasingly popular option for companies so it is no surprise that lawyers are being contracted as well. You will come across contract attorneys in just about every aspect of the law. They are becoming more popular as an option for law firms when the stability of the legal industry wavers. Law firms are able to fill the work as it comes in without placing a high-cost commitment into associates.

The idea and demand for contract lawyers started with need in litigation support and due diligence. As the legal industry adjusts to changing laws and environments, the need for contract lawyers also adapts. Now law firms and corporations are turning to contract lawyers for larger roles as a way of keeping their costs down. Law firms are constantly looking for ways they can save money without sacrificing the quality of service to their clients.

See [Why Law Firms Are Hiring More and More Staff Attorneys: Should You Work as a Staff Attorney?](#) for more information.

In today's market, contract lawyers perform the same functions as [associates](#) or [in-house counsel](#). They help with [real estate transactions](#), regulatory & compliance, [labor & employment](#), M&A deals, [intellectual property](#), and [litigation support](#) by conducting document review, drafting legal documents like contracts and settlements, preparing annual reports, conducting depositions, carrying out legal research, supporting a team headed to litigation, reviewing and suggesting modifications to employee manuals, assisting in Discovery and eDiscovery stages of a case, and preparing case strategy.

The background for becoming contract lawyers can be anything. Some are working parents, solo practitioners supplementing work flow, lawyers enjoying a flexible schedule, lawyers in transition, tenured lawyers wanting to stay busy, attorneys recently relocated, and more. Contract lawyers may go directly to the law firm or in-house legal department for work while others are staffed by an agency. They may also go by a different name, including [staff attorney](#), contract attorney, consultant, litigation support attorney, document review attorney, eDiscovery attorney, of counsel, or non-partner track attorney.

The roles and business models for the use of contract lawyers vary widely. [Law firms hire contract lawyers when they need quick help or specialized expertise](#). When a law firm suddenly finds themselves with an increased workload or a variety of other reasons, contract lawyers come in to help alleviate problems or weaknesses that a firm is experiencing. There are some law firms that use contract work as a way of trying out a lawyer before offering them a full-time position.

The cost of contract lawyers is very appealing for law firms, especially when considering that they do much of the same work for considerably less than their high-priced associates. They can be assigned projects where they review tens of thousands of pages of documents according to a particular request or condition but at a more efficient cost to the firm. Unfortunately for contract lawyers, this means they aren't exactly rolling in the money themselves.

Contract lawyers must tread lightly. While there is great freedom in being able to pick up work when wanted or needed, there is a sacrifice in the quality and compensation. Many contract attorneys describe horrible working conditions and lousy pay. There are stories of dungeon-like offices with no working bathrooms. They complain of growing debt, low wages and humiliating treatment by the law firms they temporarily work for.

Most importantly, many say they are stuck and can't seem to find more permanent work. Washington D.C. lawyer Fiona Edwards explained, "We are treated like day laborers. We are the migrant farm workers of the industry. We are treated like an inconvenience when, in reality, law firms are making lots of money off of us. The morale among contract lawyers? Disenchanted."

The actual number of attorneys working as contract workers is hard to determine. The Posse List, which acts as an online clearinghouse for contract attorney employment opportunities, reportedly had around 14,000 U.S. lawyers registered on their site at one point. Several listings for contract attorneys offer rates of \$20 to \$30 per hour, significantly lower than what most attorneys in any size law firm make. This was not always the case for contract attorneys. Many years ago, these temporary attorneys used to receive gourmet meals and snacks brought right to their desks, clean work stations, and respectable wages. When the recession hit, things changed for most contract lawyers.

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