

How an Attorney Can Get a Reduced-Hour Position Inside of a Law Firm

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Summary: Have you ever dreamed about working fewer hours in a law firm while still practicing law and making a difference? Read this article to learn how you can.

Working in a law firm requires dedicated attorneys that serve their clients day and night.

Some attorneys aren't able to (or don't want to) dedicate 80 hours a week to practicing law.

Major law firms (and some small ones) often make it very hard to avoid working nights and weekends.

If an attorney wants to work fewer hours but still practice law in a law firm, he or she should follow one of these five suggestions.

There is a culture of fear inside of most law firms where attorneys are often quite hesitant to ask for reduced-hour positions. [Law firms make money by charging clients by the hour and paying attorneys less money than they collect from the work that attorneys do.](#) Law firms are profitable and make money to the extent that attorneys bill as many hours as they are capable of billing for as little money as possible. In an ideal world, attorneys would work for free and law firms would bill them out at high hourly rates.

Because law firms cannot exploit people this way, they rely on paying them fixed salaries and creating a culture that makes them feel that they need to bill as many hours as they possibly can. In order to create this culture, law firms will fire people for not working enough hours, advance people primarily based on hours, and often make their offices as attractive as possible in order to keep attorneys there for as many hours as they can. Some law firms have baristas, snack bars, and other perks. Some give associates personal messengers to take care of errands like picking up prescriptions, which enables the attorneys to remain in the office and bill as many hours as possible. I even recently heard of the founding partner of one of the largest firms in the United States handing out a stimulant to other partners and associates during trials so they could work longer hours. "You cannot expect to succeed at this level unless you're using something to help you get there," he told an associate he was giving a pill to when the associate said he was tired.

Working in a law firm is like working as a surgeon. If someone has an emergency in the middle of the night, a surgeon cannot declare that he or she is sleeping, or working on a reduced schedule, and not come into the hospital when required. A lawyer needs to be available for client emergencies, to get deals done, and to throw him or herself into the work when things get very busy. Large law firms do not have the luxury of responding to client needs when they feel like it. Instead, to succeed, firms must cultivate an "all hands on deck" atmosphere, with attorneys putting out one fire after another and billing a lot of hours in the process. A law firm is a service business that requires services be rendered when the need arises. It is because of this that it is often difficult for attorneys to get reduced-hours arrangements. Regardless of their sizes or locations in the country, law firms are extremely demanding places with high expectations and work demands for their attorneys.

See the following articles for more information:

[Top 14 Ways Attorneys Can Avoid Burnout from the Stress of Practicing Law](#)

[Ways to Cope with Stress in a Legal Career](#)

[Ways to Effectively Manage Stress](#)

The most prestigious law firms also have attorneys with great qualifications lining up to work there. Attorneys want to work at these kinds of law firms because they pay the highest salaries and get the best and most sophisticated work. In addition to the practical problems with reduced hours discussed above, the best law

firms also have very little incentive to allow their attorneys to work reduced hours because they have plenty of people who are willing to dedicate their bodies and souls to working as hard as they possibly can. Any of these ambitious attorneys can easily replace an attorney who is only giving part of him or herself to the firm in the form of a reduced-hour schedule.

Over the past few years, I have had at least three or four conversations per week with attorneys who are asking me to help them move law firms in order to get reduced schedules and work fewer hours. The most typical example is a woman with children who already has a reduced-hour arrangement with her existing firm. In almost all instances, regardless of her qualifications, law firms will not be interested in her because they prefer to hire people who are going to be in the office at all times--and they can hire these people because they will get tons of applications from people like this. Law firms want to hire people they can rely on to work late at night, be there on the weekends, and be "on call" at all times.

In this regard, firms often make a distinction between attorneys who are already employed with them and attorneys who are trying to lateral over to them. If an attorney is already inside the law firm, the firm is often likely to accept the reduced schedule because to say no would be discriminatory against the mother, for example. But hiring a mother who wants to work reduced hours as a lateral is another matter completely. Most firms are resistant to doing this.

Even mothers who are already on reduced schedules inside of law firms have problems. Just last week, I spoke with a woman who was fired from a midsize law firm because the firm did not like the fact that she could not work long hours consistently when required to close transactions and at other times when the work demanded she be available. The partners felt that they and other associates were working long hours and that she was not part of the team. They did not like this and resented that she was going home at certain hours and unavailable when they needed her. Risking getting sued, they simply told her that the reduced-hour schedule was not working out and they let her go.

See the following articles for more information:

[**Why You Should Work Weekends and Holidays**](#)

[**Working on Sundays and Concentrating on Your Work**](#)

Another scenario I frequently see is attorneys going on reduced-hour schedules and then leaving their firms after doing so. Once an attorney goes on a reduced-hour schedule, the attorney is often given less challenging work and is no longer part of the active social scene in the office. The attorney misses out on the opportunity to bond with attorneys outside of work and get put on assignments that the attorney might get if he or she was in the office all the time. Because they end up feeling marginalized, reduced-hour attorneys are often unhappy and start looking for new positions. Alternatively, the law firm decides that an attorney in this situation is not "working out" and lets the attorney go. Firms also do not like the implication raised by part-time work schedules that attorneys on these schedules have outside obligations that take precedence for the attorney over working inside of the law firm. In the experience of many law firms, once an attorney goes on a reduced-hour schedule, it is often only a matter of time before the attorney decides that he or she would rather not practice in a law firm at all.

Another thing that I see quite often--at least once every few weeks--is men who are working in smaller markets where the salaries are lower and who desire to commute a few hours or more to work in larger markets where the salaries are higher. These attorneys are not necessarily seeking reduced hours, but they want to work in markets that pay more but where they can either (1) catch a train every day by 6 PM--or something similar to this, or (2) go home every weekend and work in the office of the major city only during the week. In principle, these attorneys are stating that they are willing to still work the long hours but that they cannot be in the office on the weekends, or after 6 PM each day. I have seen numerous attorneys try this with Ivy League law school credentials and experience in major American law firms. Law firms generally have zero interest in this. Law firms simply do not like the idea of someone not being in the office to work with other

attorneys who may be working long hours. The idea of telecommuting and not being in the office when other attorneys are present and in the office and working on firm matters for paying clients is considered a form of reduced hours, and firms do not look kindly upon this circumstance because of the reasons already discussed.

Law firms also sometimes get burned with these sorts of arrangements. I recently saw a male attorney working in the branch office of a major New York law firm who did something that completely astonished me. This attorney told the law firm that he needed to take his wife to the doctor twice a week on Mondays and Fridays and could only work in the office three days a week. The law firm believed that it was important to accommodate this and allowed the attorney to do this. I was working with the attorney. At some point, he started making me a little suspicious--I was not sure why. I investigated and found that the attorney's LinkedIn profile stated that he was still an engineer with a major company in Silicon Valley. I investigated further and discovered that he was still an engineer with this company in Silicon Valley and he admitted it to me when I asked him about it. Incredibly, this attorney was making over \$300,000 a year working in a major New York law firm's Silicon Valley office while at the same time working as an engineer for the company in Silicon Valley. My guess is that he was padding his hours on the days he was not in the office--likely because he was working in the offices of the company--and telling the law firm that he was working at home on the days he was "taking his wife to the doctor." Law firms can easily get burned like this. When someone is not in the office, they have no control over what is actually occurring outside of the office.

When an attorney is considering any type of reduced-hour arrangement, or an arrangement where the attorney cannot be in the office when other attorneys are, the attorney needs to ask him or herself why the law firm would allow this, given that:

There are plenty of people the law firm could hire who do not want reduced hours.

The law firm is risking being cheated if the attorney is not in the office.

The lawyer will not be around to work long hours when the attorney is needed.

The attorney who is not in the office will not be considered part of the team.

The law firm will not make as much money off of the attorney as it would if the attorney worked full time.

Attorneys who are not working reduced hours will resent the attorney who is.

The law firm will believe that the attorney has one foot out the door and is likely to leave in the future.

Because there is so much pressure to not work reduced hours, many attorneys make the decision that working reduced hours is not the best option for them. As a consequence, many attorneys often desire to do things like [go in-house](#), start their own businesses, work for the government, or do [other positions where they can escape working long hours and the stress of practicing law](#). However, when attorneys begin investigating these sorts of options, they quickly realize that all of this is easier said than done.

For example, in-house positions can be extremely difficult to get and there is often a lot of competition for them. Moreover, many in-house positions pay far less money than an attorney is accustomed to making inside of a law firm. [In-house employers often do not need to pay high salaries because there are so many attorneys who want these jobs](#). Therefore, many attorneys who thought working in-house was the solution end up circling back to explore ways that they can go back to law firms and still work fewer hours. On the one hand, attorneys realize that trying to work reduced hours inside of a law firm is a difficult proposition, and on the other hand, they realize that doing this may be their only option.

See the following articles for more information:

[Why Going In-house Is Often the Worst Decision a Good Attorney Can Ever Make](#)

[The 'Dark Side' of Going In-house](#)

[A View from the Other Side: My Life as an In-House Attorney](#)

There are many reasons that someone might want to work reduced hours inside of a law firm--or need to:

They may legitimately enjoy the practice of law, challenging work, and working around smart people but do not have an interest in working 80-hour weeks. Working inside of a law firm often offers the best

experience for practicing law for many attorneys. The work is often the most challenging, interesting, and fulfilling. An attorney working in a law firm represents clients facing real challenges. Attorneys working inside of law firms often can make a real difference.

They may have experience that is not necessarily translatable into an in-house position, or other legal environments. Many attorneys have the sort of experience that may not readily translate into an in-house position--litigators, for example, have a very difficult time getting in-house positions. These sorts of attorneys may want to continue working in a law firm without being expected to work the most hours.

They may work in a market where their only option is to work in a law firm. There are many small markets around the country in which there are not a lot of legal jobs and the only option is to work a reduced-hour position. In this situation, if someone is interested in a reduced-hour position, these sorts of positions may be perfect fits.

Here are some suggestions for how people can work reduced hours inside of a law firm if this is something that they really need or want to do. Though ways exist to work reduced hours in law firms, attorneys who do this need to realize that there are costs associated with going on a different track. These costs include the possible perception that the attorney is not as committed as other attorneys in the firm, that the attorney is potentially going to leave in the future, and more.

See [The #1 Attorney Career Killer That Attorneys Are Never Taught](#) for more information.

Major Law Firms Are Often the Best Places to Ask for Reduced-Hour Arrangements--As Long as You Are Currently Working There

If you desire to work reduced hours, the best place to do it is often going to be in a major law firm. Both men and women will need good reasons for asking their current firms to put them on reduced-hour arrangements. These reasons could be related to childcare, illness, or something else. Regardless of the reason, it will need to be a good reason. These reasons often involve the need for an attorney to be at home that are unavoidable.

The reason that large law firms are the best places to ask for reduced schedules is because of the nature of the work that they do and who they work for. Large law firms often represent giant institutional clients that can feed the law firms an almost endless supply of work. [This work is often very specialized and could be allocated to many different attorneys in different sorts of specialties within each practice area.](#) Accordingly, if the client is large enough, the law firm may be able to give blocks of hours to a part-time attorney without necessarily harming the quality of representation the client receives. If a large team of attorneys is working for the institutional client, there may be room for a few of the attorneys to do discrete tasks that are not time sensitive.

Another reason that large law firms are more open to having attorneys work part-time is because in representing large companies, large law firms tend to mirror many of the policies that large companies have. Most large companies will allow flex-time and allow people to go part-time in many cases. The largest law firms tend to try to offer the same benefits to their attorneys as their large company clients do. If a law firm is not flexible like its clients are, then this does not look good for the law firm.

See the following articles for more information:

[Why Alternative Work Arrangements Make Sense for Law Firms](#)

[The Delicate Matter of Reducing Your Hours](#)

[Any Law Firm, If You Have a Rare Skill That Is in Demand in the Market](#)

Some attorneys may have rare skills that few people have in the market. I frequently speak with attorneys who went to [Yale Law School](#), or have other exemplary law school backgrounds, who believe that these backgrounds may entitle them to special treatment and the right to work reduced hours. The law school you went to and your performance there will have zero to do with whether or not a law firm will put you on a reduced-hour arrangement. The only reason a law firm will hire someone on a reduced-hour arrangement is if the attorney has special skills or connections that the law firm cannot find in the market and the only way the law firm can hire someone with these skills is to hire the attorney on a reduced-hour arrangement. I have

only seen law firms do this a few times in my career.

I once saw a woman get hired who was the daughter of the founding partner of a major law firm in Los Angeles. She asked for a reduced hourly schedule and I mentioned this right up front when I sent her out to firms. Desiring to be on the good side of this powerful attorney, many firms interviewed her and jumped at the chance to hire her, despite what I felt was a lack of outstanding qualifications. In this case, the woman was able to get a reduced-hour schedule and interest from several firms. This was the opposite of what I have seen occur in most cases.

I have also seen people get hired on reduced hourly schedules that had exceptional and rare skills. These skills are most often found in the patent prosecution market, where an attorney may have a PhD in some sort of obscure discipline--optics, a subspecialty of genetics, pharmacology dealing with a certain class of drugs--or something along those lines. Patent prosecution is a good field for attorneys to ask for reduced hourly schedules because they typically do not work extreme hours because the level of concentration needed to do well is so high.

[If an attorney is expecting to go on a reduced-hour schedule as a litigator](#), corporate attorney, or real estate attorney, for example, the odds of being able to do this would be very slim indeed. Litigation in particular is one where this often does not work. Litigation is a time-sensitive sort of practice area and papers need to be filed with the court based on various deadlines. These deadlines are not open to an attorney's personal scheduling needs. Corporate and real estate work also often have various deadlines associated with them that are not open to an attorney's scheduling needs.

See the following articles for more information:

[BCG Attorney Search Comprehensive Attorney Practice Area Guide](#)

[Think Differently, Specialize and Prosper](#)

[Any Law Firm, If You Are Willing to Be a Staff Attorney or Contract Attorney](#)

Many law firms are willing to hire attorneys as staff attorneys or contract attorneys. A staff attorney may make as little as half (or even less) as a full-time attorney inside of a major law firm. I have seen many staff attorneys get paid approximately one-fourth of what a similarly-situated associate would be paid at the firm. The only difference is that the staff attorney is able to leave at 5 PM each day, does not come in on weekends, and is expected to be at his or her desk at a certain time each morning. In addition, contract attorneys may also be hired by major law firms. The contract attorney is typically paid an hourly rate. Unlike staff attorneys, the contract attorney may often work a lot of hours but the arrangement the law firm makes with the contract attorney is often quite flexible. For example, the contract attorney may have the ability to work from home and choose his or her hours.

The problem with being either a staff attorney or contract attorney is that these positions tend not to be permanent in nature or have futures. Law firms all inevitably go through ups and downs in terms of their workloads--even the largest law firms with massive institutional clients. When things get slow, the first people these law firms let go are generally their contract attorneys and staff attorneys. There is not a lot of employment security in these positions.

Staff attorneys and contract attorneys also in most instances are given the least interesting work and the "grunt work" that other attorneys do not want to do. This means that the work they are given tends to be the sort of work that people do not want to do for the long term.

Another problem with being a staff attorney or contract attorney is that there tends not to be much future in these positions at all. Not only is there no future, but inside of most law firms, staff attorneys and contract attorneys are treated like and feel like second-class citizens. They may be considered people who do not have what it takes to operate at the same level as associates, counsel, partners, and others who have more

prestigious titles within the firm.

See the following articles for more information:

[**Why Law Firms Are Hiring More and More Staff Attorneys: Should You Work as a Staff Attorney?**](#)

[**Should I Accept a Contract Attorney Position?**](#)

[**What Is a Contract Lawyer and Why Do Law Firms Use Them?**](#)

Law Firms in Smaller Markets

Law firms in many smaller markets often do not expect their attorneys to work anywhere near as many hours as they would in larger markets. One thing that I have noticed consistently throughout my career is that attorneys who start their careers in major markets like New York City; Palo Alto; Los Angeles; and Washington, DC often stop practicing law after several years when their peers in smaller markets continue practicing long after those in the larger markets have stopped. One reason for this I believe is that attorneys in smaller markets do not work anywhere near as many hours--nor are they expected to--and they have a different experience being attorneys. While they may not earn as much money early in their careers, they are able to have a sufficient work-life balance that they do not believe they need to quit the practice of law in order to find sanity.

There is a lot to be said for an attorney who wants to go on a reduced hourly schedule to simply go work in a smaller market. When an attorney relocates to a smaller market, the attorney often is much happier than the attorney was in the larger market because the attorney is not expected to work as many hours, nor is the attorney around people who want to work as many hours.

See the following articles for more information:

[**Breaking Into a Smaller Market**](#)

[**Why Relocating to a Different Market Is the Greatest \(But Little Known\) Way for a Law Firm Attorney to Get Ahead in the Legal Profession**](#)

[**Why Every Attorney Should Look at Multiple Legal Markets When Doing a Job Search**](#)

[**A Comprehensive Guide to Bar Reciprocity: What States Have Reciprocity for Lawyers and Allow You to Waive into the Bar**](#)

[**Geography and the Job Search**](#)

[**Job-Search Tips for Out-of-Town Candidates**](#)

Smaller Law Firms in Major Markets

Some smaller law firms in larger markets do not expect their attorneys to work as many hours as they might be forced to work in major law firms in these markets. Nevertheless, this is something that is not always the case. The problem with an attorney trying to work in a smaller firm in a major market to get fewer hours is that the same pressures that are present in the larger law firms often exist even in smaller firms. For example, the attorneys in the smaller law firm also want to make a lot of money and the firms want their attorneys to work as hard as possible in order to generate the money. The attorneys in the smaller law firm will often also have time-sensitive matters that will require attorneys to work long hours. The smaller law firm also has the disadvantage of not having as many people to help when things get busy. This means that there may be even more pressure for the part-time attorney to work when things get busy.

Despite these apparent drawbacks, there are still opportunities for attorneys to work in many smaller law firms that have different cultures than the largest law firms. The issue is that it is very difficult to find these firms and the cultures of these firms-- and their demands--can often change very quickly. In addition, the smaller law firm will often pay a much smaller salary than the largest law firms and the amount of work is not always that much less. Larger markets also have the drawback of having to pay higher costs for everything from office space to secretarial help to the amount partners need to earn and more. These costs need to be paid somehow and the law firm will need lots of hours out of the people working there to be profitable.

Therefore, just moving to a smaller law firm in a major market may not be the best choice if an attorney is

looking for reduced hours.

See the following articles for more information:

[Do Small Firms Like Attorneys That Start Out at Big Law Firms?](#)

[How Important Is It to Work at a Major Law Firm?](#)

[How Do I Know If a Small Law Firm Is Reputable?](#)

[Choosing the Small versus the Large Firm](#)

Conclusions

There is always a cost-benefit analysis to be undertaken in connection with an attorney moving to a reduced-hour schedule in a law firm. But some of the ways that you can do this is by making the arrangement with your existing firm for good reasons, if you have a rare skill or connection that is in demand, if you work as a staff or contract attorney, if you move to a smaller market that has a less-demanding culture, and sometimes if you move to a smaller firm within a major market.

See the following articles for more information:

[Relocation! Relocation! Relocation!](#)

[How to Interview in a Different City without Risking Your Current Job](#)

[What Do You Need to Know If You Are Planning a Move to the West Coast?](#)

[How Can I Make Moving to the West Coast from a New York Law Firm Easier?](#)

[I'm Tired of Working Long Hours as a Second Year Litigator - What Can I Do?](#)