

Why Attorneys and Law Students Often Have a Difficult Time Finding Law Firm Jobs

By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director

Summary: There are many factors that prohibit attorneys from obtaining the ideal roles in their career. This article highlights the types of obstacles attorneys face and how to overcome them.

Many attorneys start a search for a new position and expect doors to open immediately. If a search does not produce quick results, they give up and decide that something is wrong. [They may determine they should be in another profession, use another recruiter, and stop using job sites that they are bad networkers](#) -- you name it. When you are looking for a position, your self-esteem can often take a significant hit when you are not getting the results you believe you should be getting immediately.

I regularly work with attorneys who get incredibly frustrated when they do not get immediate results--they often stay where they are and many attorneys even give up the practice of law entirely. In contrast, the attorneys I work with who stick with the process and remain engaged almost always get results in the long run. In some cases, you can end up getting a dream job--something you may have thought was never attainable--after months, or sometimes years, of searching. Attorneys who do long searches also often end up appreciating their next jobs far more, learning not to take jobs for granted.

It would be best if you never looked at a law firm's decision not to interview or hire you as something personal. Most law firms receive a ton of applicants for each position, and they do not have evil thoughts, or think poorly, of the 100+ people they may be rejecting for each job. They are just picking the attorneys right for them. [Many law firms even reject people they feel will not like them](#)--because they are too qualified. You never know what is going through someone's mind. People make decisions about who they are interested in for a variety of reasons that you should not worry about. You can do the best you can to have the best background possible, but when it comes time to apply to positions, there is not much else you can do.

If you are [searching for a position inside of a law firm](#), there are numerous business-related issues that will determine how successful you are likely to be.

Law firms hire you because they believe (1) you are the best applicant for the position and (2) they can make money off of you and (3) you will cause them the least amount of problems and aggravation.

Law firms do not hire you because they believe (1) you are not the best applicant for the position and (2) they will not be able to make money off of you and (3) you will cause them more problems and aggravation than similarly situated candidates.

This simply means your experience, resume, and other qualifications are the best among the resumes they have received for the position.

Culturally, you are the best fit for the firm, and your background is a match for what the law firm needs. You may have a connection with a partner making a hiring decision or some other "in" with the firm.

This means the law firm has the work to support you, or you have enough work to support yourself and will not

What Does "Best Applicant for the Position" Mean?

What Does "They Can Make Money Off You" Mean?

demand more money than they can reasonably afford. This means that your salary expectations are such that you will be likely to stay at the firm when you go there. This means that they believe you will work hard and make them money. Law firms can only commit to paying you a salary, giving you an office, secretary and making you part of their ecosystem if they have the work to support you and believe they can make money off you. When law firms perceive that they have openings, they often do so under the [sometimes mistaken] belief that they will have work for the attorney(s) they hire. This work often does not materialize and when it does not the law firm does not interview, or make offers to the people it is interviewing. When the economy has gone very sour in the past, for example, many attorneys in practice areas like corporate had a next to impossible time getting positions anywhere in the country.

This means that the law firm can manage and control you. This means that you are a team player and not likely to stir up any form of discontent among your colleagues. You do not have requirements such as reduced hours, visa restrictions, or other interests that will aggravate the firm. This means that you are likely to stay in the firm and commit and not leave unless asked to leave.

What Does "Cause the Least Amount of Aggravation" Mean?

No two searches are alike, and your lack of immediate success will be due to many factors outside your control -almost all of these factors will be business decisions the law firm is making about you. Your ego should not be involved, and you should not feel there is something wrong with you if you are not getting hired and not getting interviews. Your success in every search is nothing more than the result of business decisions being made by law firms--and the decisions you are making in terms of how you are conducting your search in a given market.

It is important that when you are conducting any search, you are aware of these factors so that you understand what you are up against and what you can do to improve yourself from a business perspective. Many of these factors you can control, others you cannot.

You Are Applying Only to Large Law Firms

Major law firms receive a ton of applicants. They receive applicants from all over the world for each opening. If you are searching for a position inside of a major law firm, it is important to understand that you will be

competing with a ton of people who also want to work there. To get a position with that firm, it is often a matter of luck. The best-positioned applicants tend to be those who are (1) local, (2) have the fewest moves on their resume, (3) have the right amount of experience being sought, (4) have the best qualifications and (5) interview and connect with the interviewers the best. Before deciding to interview you, each law firm will evaluate your experience closely to see if you have the right amount of experience and are able to screen and often get exactly what they are searching for. Larger law firms have all sorts of reasons for rejecting candidates, and they reject almost all of the candidates they receive. I know of numerous major law firms that reject graduates of Yale Law School as a matter of course because they believe they are too academic, do not take working in law firms seriously and will always leave. Larger law firms are difficult places to get positions in.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

You should not just be applying to major law firms-you should also apply to smaller ones in the markets you are interested in. Smaller law firms often have opportunities that pay as much and are just as good as those in larger law firms. You always want to ensure that when you are seeking a position, you are also applying to not just major law firms but smaller ones as well. If you want to [work in a large law firm](#), you should be applying to large law firms outside of major legal markets where there are not as many applicants.

There is a myriad of other factors that are contributory to getting a position at a large law firm. Here are some articles that highlight those other factors. Are there any things you think help maximize the odds of getting a position at a large law firm? Please share your thoughts in the comment section below.

[Top 30 Factors Large Law Firms Consider When Hiring Lateral Attorneys](#)

[21 Reasons You Will Never Get a Job with a Major Law Firm Now \(or Ever Again\)](#)

You Are Applying Only in Large Legal Markets

In major legal markets, you will often be competing with a massive number of applicants for each position. Major legal markets draw a ton of highly-qualified candidates to them. There are very good firms and attorneys in Cleveland, Ohio, for example, but compared to New York City there is no comparison. Larger markets have more jobs. However, it is often much more difficult to get jobs in them because they also have more people competing for each job. The highest paying firms in those markets often have a ton of competition for each position--this makes it far more difficult to get positions.

In a market such as New York City, for example, if a law firm wants someone with between three and four years of experience in a given practice area, they are likely to get them. Large markets are very good at publicizing their jobs and have entire human resources departments dedicated to doing so--their jobs will appear all over the web, on their career sites and more. In major markets, the attorneys who fit what the law firm is looking for are bound to learn of each position because they will be contacted through calls and emails from recruiters if they fit what the law firm is seeking. Large law firms will always find what they are looking for because no stone will go unturned in the market to find that attorney.

If you are seeking a position in a major legal market, you will have the best odds of getting a position if you apply immediately if there is a matching position. If you delay your application,

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

it will be much more difficult to get a position because law firms often ignore applicants that come later once they have started bonding with the initial people they interview. It also costs money and wastes time when law firms have to interview people. In large markets, the best way to find positions is often to find jobs that are underpromoted. If you are trying to find a job in a major legal market, your odds of finding a position will also go up if you start applying to smaller law firms as well.

Because you are competing with so many people, you also need to realize that you will do much better if you apply to more places rather than fewer. The most places you apply to the better off you will always be. You need to be able to cover the market when you are applying to firms effectively. Something about your background may pop out and look interesting.

You Are In a Major Practice Area Where There Are a Lot of Other Attorneys

If you are in a practice area such as litigation, it will generally be more difficult to get a position than if you are in a practice area with fewer people. For example, attorneys in many practice areas such as ERISA, [Food and Drug Law](#) and other "niche" areas often do very well because there simply are not a lot of people they are competing with. In niche practice areas law firms often have a difficult time finding people and they are more enthusiastic when they find someone with a certain skill in a given practice area. If you are competing with a lot of applicants for a position, your odds of getting a position will decrease dramatically.

If you are in a major city, you will have a much easier time getting a position if you tailor your resume to look more like a specialist in something. It will also be much easier for you if you apply to more places rather than fewer. You will generally be better off applying to more geographic areas rather than fewer if you are in a practice area that is not that popular. The best thing you can do to get in the door is to make sure that your resume looks tailored to the position the firm has. You should try and find firms with openings for generalists that call for certain unusual skills you may have that everyone does not necessarily have.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

You Are In a Niche Practice Area In an Area of the Country Where There Are Not a Lot of Firms That Do Your Work

Different practice areas are more or less in demand in different parts of the country. For example, corporate is very popular in New York City and much less so in Washington, DC. Intellectual property litigation is very popular in Silicon Valley and much less so in Cincinnati, Ohio. If you are in an area of the country where your practice area is not in as much demand as in other areas, you will need to either move--or wait--for openings to become available in the area of the country you are in. Just because you are an outstanding patent

attorney, does not mean that law firms in Omaha, Nebraska are going to care: They will not have the work. Remember that law firms hire people when they can make money off them. If a law firm does not have the work, regardless of how impressive your background is, they are not going to hire you.

If you are working in an area of the country where there are not a lot of firms that do the sort of work you do, it is likely to be more difficult for you to find a position and take longer. In some cities, there may be only a few firms that do a certain type of work. In these circumstances, it is important that you seriously consider whether or not your career will benefit from remaining in that area.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

It is important to note that when you are looking to transition into a new larger legal market that you perform your due diligence. You should always research the new market, geographic area, and other important concerns. Relocating to a new geographic area or a different market can be very beneficial, but only if you ensure it is the right environment for you.

You Are Applying Only to Firms With Openings

If you are applying only to firms with active openings, you will be competing with lots of people for the same job in many instances. Once many firms make their openings public, they receive a large number of applicants. This is especially so for attorneys in general practice areas such as litigation and corporate. Because these firms receive so many applicants, it becomes very difficult for you to stick out and get positions. Many attorneys spend months applying to positions and never get interviews because they are competing with so many others for the same openings. Remember: Law firms will hire you if they believe they can make money off of you. A law firm that believes they can make money off you has an incentive to hire you if they have a lot of work--it is a no brainer. The law firm can make hundreds of thousands of dollars a year by plugging you into existing work they have or taking a percentage of your business.

[A talented legal recruiter will also often be able to get you into large law firms](#) that do not necessarily have an opening--if they know the market they can often convince firms to do what are called "opportunistic hires" and bring you in because you fit very well in a given practice area. This is a much easier way to get a position because if a law firm brings you in this way, you will not be competing with anyone. As a legal recruiter, these sorts of hires comprise the majority of placements I make--the best legal recruiters do not rely on just openings for guiding their search. They know and understand the market, have a history with firms and know (1) the sorts of attorneys law firms are likely to hire and (2) who is busy and who is not.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

The Economy is Not Favoring Your Practice Group

When the economy is good, many practice areas suffer. There tends to be less litigation when the economy is doing well than when it is not. There is almost always much more corporate work when the economy is good than when it is not. Many practice areas are affected by the economy. Many practice areas are also affected by the economy and what is occurring in different geographic areas of the country. Northern California has traditionally been a strong legal economy due to the technology industry. The Texas legal economy does well when the price of oil is high. The legal economy in New York does well when the finance industry is doing well. Each of these legal economies is affected by geography.

If you are trying to get a position in a market where the economy is not doing well, it will likely make sense for you to instead look for a position in a market where the economy is doing well. You need to look for positions in markets where the economy is the most receptive to you.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

Whether you are applying to a firm with openings or without opening there are unique tactics and strategies that you can deploy to help ensure you are hired or succeed in a law firm. Here are some articles that highlight those strategies and can help you with your career.

[How to Rapidly Get Law Firm Offers \(Even When Firms Have No Openings\)](#)

[How to Be a Successful Attorney](#)

[See Opportunities Where Others See Obstacles](#)

[The One Simple Rule for Succeeding in a Law Firm](#)

You Are Not Applying To Enough Law Firms

Many attorneys limit their searches by applying to fewer law firms. They are very selective in their searches, afraid to get their names out there and have this idea that they should not be looking at a lot of firms in their search. This is complete nonsense. A job search is unnecessarily difficult for many attorneys because they look at so few law firms when they are doing their searches. When you are searching, you should look at as many law firms as practicable. Law firms hire attorneys for business reasons and the more law firms you look at when you are searching for a position, the more likely you are to find one that is going to have a business reason for hiring you. Different types of people match different types of firms. You increase your odds of getting a position to the extent you are willing to look at more law firms.

If you are looking for a position, you are going to have a far better chance of getting a job if you apply to more rather than fewer places. You should find reasons to include and not exclude law firms in your search for a new position.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

You Are Applying to Stale Openings

Law firms typically hire from among the first people to apply to them. When they first have an opening, they are eager to fill it and will ignore applicants who come after they have set up an initial round of interviews with candidates. This is how most law firms work--and the process has always worked. If you apply to firms after there has been an opening for a while, you will have a much more difficult time getting a position than you would if you applied right away.

You should always be among the first to apply to each opening. Being among the first to apply will often ensure that your application sticks out and you are most likely to get hired.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

You Do Not Fit the Mold of What Law Firms Are Looking for

Law firms are looking for a lot when they hire people. However, in general, the mold is this: Law firms want to hire attorneys with 1 to 6 years of experience, with as few lateral moves as possible, currently employed, coming from law firms--or attorneys with substantial portable business. If you have less than one year of experience, or more than six it will be difficult for you to get a position unless you have substantial portable business (the larger the law firm, the more you will need)--once you have more than six years of experience you are considered "senior" and your billing rate will be competitive with partners (who prefer to do their work and clients prefer to do work) and you will be a threat to the established order of other associates trying to make partner ([many of whom have been there since they were summer associates](#)).

If you have lots of moves on your resume, law firms will not be as interested in you--they believe you will be likely to leave your next firm and may be a problem. If you are not in a law firm, it will be very difficult to get a position with a law firm--law firms are unique business entities with a certain set of demands and law firms do not like to hire people from other practice settings--they believe they will pick up bad habits and ways of doing things. If you are unemployed, law firms will believe you were fired--or left your law firm without a position (and therefore may do this again, or cannot be managed). Law firms will also believe if you are unemployed that you may not take the practice of law seriously--even if you left your last position voluntarily--and therefore you are likely to be a problem as well.

If you do not fit the mold, then you can maximize your odds of getting a position by finding and applying to law firms that need your experience--and have business reasons for being interested in you. This means that if you are a senior corporate attorney, you need to find a firm--rare, but you can find them--that has worked for senior corporate attorneys. You need to [work with a legal recruiter](#) that is an expert in finding law firms that are willing to overlook linear thinking and hire people for business reasons. You need to approach law firms without openings, and in markets that most recruiters are not paying attention to--for example, in New York, you can apply to law firms in Long Island. You need to find younger law firms with a lot of work that needs bodies and does not have the time to be concerned with "the mold" about how to hire.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

You Have Problems Interviewing

It is not uncommon for many attorneys to go out on multiple interviews and not get offers, or callbacks, in any of these interviews. This often happens because you have not taken the time to understand what law firms require when interviewing attorneys and make the same mistakes over and over again. In many cases these mistakes are related to telegraphing that you may be a problem if hired--that you will not commit to the work, will not be a team player, will not be fun to work with and may not stick around. Law firms want to hire attorneys who can be managed, will work hard and happily follow the rules. They are organizations that need people to fall in line and march to the same beat. Other times you may not be hired due to cultural differences

between you and the firm--no two law firm cultures are alike. Whatever the reason, you need to do what you can to be a good interviewee and fix any issues you are having.

You need to understand what you are doing wrong, get guidance from someone who can understand what you are doing wrong and fix your issues. Please download our [interview guide](#) here and read it closely. The best legal recruiters will work with you closely if you are having issues in your interviews.

HOW TO MAXIMIZE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING A POSITION:

[Applying to law firm positions](#) is a challenging endeavor--sometimes there are stale openings, or you have trouble interviewing, and many obstacles. Despite those obstacles, you can succeed as long as you don't give up. Here are some helpful articles to provide you confidence and advice in order to overcome those roadblock you might have encountered.

[Why Every Attorney Needs to Apply to a Lot of Places \(and Not Give Up\) When Rejected](#)

[Don't Give Up! Why You Should Work with the Best Law Firm You Can as Long as You Can](#)

[Showing Up: The Difference between Those Who Get Hired and Advance in Law Firms and Those Who Do Not](#)

[Why an Attorney Should Never Give Up after Being Rejected from a Few \(or Many\) Law Firms](#)

[The Best Way to Prepare for a Job Search and Interviews](#)

[What Characteristics Should I Look for in a Legal Recruiter?](#)

Conclusions

It is important to understand just how much you are up against when applying for law firms positions--it is not easy to get positions. Even the most highly qualified attorneys will often have a difficult time getting a position. There are so many factors which make the process of searching difficult and can add lots of time to your search. A large part of the job of a good legal recruiter is believing in you and helping you overcome each of these obstacles--and they are numerous. The more you stick with your search, the more quickly you will find a position.

Share Your Thoughts

Are you having a difficult time getting a law firm position? Are you not getting the traction for those dream opportunities in your career? Don't fret there is a plethora of reasons you might face obstacles, but these roadblocks are not insurmountable. That's why I wrote this article and I hope it is helpful.

Please share your responses to these questions and your thoughts about what obstacles you've encountered as an attorney searching for new opportunities in the comments below.