

Law Firm Titles: The Difference Between Law Firm Managing Partners, Partners, Income (or) Non Equity Partners, Associates and Of Counsel Attorneys

Summary: Law firm titles are like any other titles within a business. From associate to partner, each defines a rank and responsibility of that position.

In every business there are titles for certain individuals.

This is true for law firms as well.

If your interest lies in the practice of law, it would be helpful for you to know what law firm titles are and to whom they apply.

When one speaks of associates, partners and managing partners, it is easy to conclude that this person is referring to lawyers; lawyers who work specifically within law firms.

And as three-quarters of [lawyers physically work in law firms](#), according to [The Balance Careers](#) law firm titles, the roles of law firm attorneys, and the number of roles utilized can vary based on the size and complexity of the firm.

So what are the 5 law firm titles you should know about if you want to go into the profession of law? Keep reading to find out.

Managing Partners

The managing [partner sits at the top of the law firm hierarchy](#). As a senior level or founding lawyer of the firm, managing partners oversee day-to-day operations, and often head an executive committee comprised of other senior partners.

Managing partners also establish and guide the firm's strategic vision.

Law Firm Partners

[Law firm partners, also called shareholders](#), are attorneys who are joint owners and operators of the firm. The types and structures of law firm partnerships can vary. Sole proprietorships--firms with just one attorney--general partnerships, limited liability companies (LLCs), professional associations, and limited liability partnerships (LLPs) are the most common.

Most law firms embrace a two-tiered partnership structure: equity and non-equity. Equity partners have an ownership stake in the firm and they share in its profits. Non-equity partners are generally paid a fixed annual salary. They might be vested with certain limited voting rights in law firm matters.

Non-equity partners

Non-equity partners are often, although not always, promoted to full equity status in one to three years. They're [frequently required to make a capital contribution to the firm to become equity partners](#), which effectively "buys them into" the role.

Associates

Associates are typically younger attorneys who have the potential to become partners. Large firms divide associates into junior and senior associates, depending on merit and experience level.

The typical lawyer works as an associate for six to nine years before ascending to partnership ranks or

"making partner." When--and if--an associate makes partner generally depends on a combination of factors, including the associate's legal acumen, his client base, and how well he fits into the firm's culture.

"Of Counsel" Attorneys

Attorneys who are "of counsel" aren't technically employees of the firm. They usually work on an independent contractor basis.

Lawyers who serve in this role are usually very experienced, senior lawyers who have their own books of business. They have strong reputations in the legal community. Some of-counsel attorneys are semi-retired lawyers who were formerly partners of the firm. Others are hired to augment the firm's client base or knowledge base.

Non-attorney Titles

There are plenty of other employees within a law firm that don't practice law, but who nonetheless have a huge hand in how the law firm operates.

Summer Associates

Summer associates, also referred to as summer clerks or law clerks, are law students who intern with a firm during the summer months. An internship can be unpaid in smaller firms, although large firms often have well-established summer associate programs that serve as a tool to recruit young, talented lawyers. These positions are often highly competitive and well-paying.

A successful summer associate might receive a permanent offer of employment to work for the firm upon graduation. So spending one's off months from school as an intern can lead to a better position down the road.

Paralegals

Paralegals are trained to assist attorneys in the delivery of legal services. They might work for law firms, corporations, the government, or in other practice environments, but always under the supervision of a lawyer. Paralegals can't give legal advice. They can't represent clients in court, establish legal fees, or sign documents that will be filed with the court.

Legal Secretaries

Legal secretaries, also called administrative assistants, legal assistants or executive assistants, perform the daily clerical functions required for the efficient operation of a legal office. Beyond the usual filing, typing, dictation and phone-answering duties of the secretary, legal secretaries possess specialized skills unique to the legal profession.

Conclusion

Just in the way that any business group has titles among their employees, much of the same is true with law firms. While they may be confusing at first, especially for the fact that the majority of the people in a law firm do the same thing - practice law - each has a distinct role in the law firm's functionality, and finally its success.