

What You Need To Know About Law Firms: The Culture, The Clients, Compensation, And More

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Introduction

In the U.S. and throughout the world, there are thousands of law firms looking to hire law students. The choice of which firm is right for you rests with you. Keep your priorities in mind as you search for summer and permanent positions at law firms. Keep them in mind as you seek employment. Here you will find suggestions and resources to help you make an informed choice of a law firm. This report provides a great resource for assessing firms' Gender Equity and Family Friendly policies.

A. Firm "Culture"

Even if you dislike your colleagues, you will probably spend more time with them than with most of your friends and family members. Under their tutelage, you can learn and develop into a good lawyer if you respect their judgment, enjoy their company, and believe in your ability to learn. Examine the company's "culture." Does it reflect the notion of collegiality? Are the doors in the office open or closed? Do you have a dress policy at your company? Do the attorneys have political opinions? What is the treatment of the support staff by the attorneys? Is there a way for attorneys at the firm to interact socially? What committees are focused on the concerns of associates and embrace associate engagement? When analyzing the culture and fit of the firm, consider all of these elements.

It is possible to gain insight into a firm's culture by interviewing students and alumni.

B. Clients and Legal Issues

Client types, client contact, and legal issues faced by your clients can greatly influence your job satisfaction. Depending on whether you are an attorney, serving large corporate clients or individuals may be more appealing. Individual attorneys represent individuals facing various legal issues, including Family Law, Employment Law, Trusts and Estates, Tax Law, Tort Law, and Real Estate Law. Lawyers who represent corporate clients will often be involved in corporate legal matters such as securities offerings, acquisitions, environmental law, and commercial real estate.

Each area of practice requires a different set of skills. Is it your passion to analyze complicated laws and regulations? Would you rather enjoy environmental law, telecommunications law, or tax law. Would you rather spend time researching, drafting motions, and arguing in court instead of having much client contact? Maybe you should look into appellate law. In order to gain a better understanding of what your responsibilities will likely be, consider what the junior associates are doing in a particular practice group. Find the practice area that best suits your skills and interests by first understanding your skills and interests. A firm that rotates its associates across departments may aid younger associates who are not sure which practice area to pursue.

[Learn More About This Video](#)

C. Professional Development

Firms offer associates a variety of professional development opportunities and policies, such as training opportunities, mentorship programs, performance reviews, and promotions. Firms differ in how much, what type, and how well they support their employees. Associates at some firms are given benchmarks for meeting career goals, and they are encouraged to discuss progress on a variety of matters with a variety of partners to help them achieve these goals. Analyze the degree of involvement of associates in business matters at the firm. What kind of involvement do associates have in the firm committees? Do they recruit? Attend business development meetings? If so, this indicates that the firm is committed to developing its associates into leaders. Associates are assisted in navigating their career paths by professional development directors at many firms.

Associate development also includes the attorney review process. In a setting where expectations are clearly defined and performance is regularly evaluated, and feedback on work is provided, associates are more likely to prosper. The majority of law firms conduct some type of formal or informal performance review of their associates. Discover how often associates are evaluated and whether partners are expected to review all of the associates with whom they work or if associates have input into their own opinions on their own.

D. Compensation and Benefits

Compensatory systems can have a significant impact on a firm's work environment. The most famous lock-step firm

Swaine & Moore, uses a lock-step system in which attorneys in each class year, including partners, are paid the salary and are usually awarded the same bonuses at the end of the year. Due to the growing challenge of competing for partner talent, some firms have moved away from lockstep to more flexible lockstep-merit systems or variable lockstep with ranges of pay per class year. Davis Polk & Wardwell, for example, changed its compensation structure for partners from a pure lock-step system to a modified lock-step system in 2020. There are a handful of firms that have a pure merit-based compensation system. In merit-based systems, firms frequently evaluate associates according to their number of billable hours, their quality of work, their pro bono hours, as well as their commitment to the firm through activities like recruitment and participation on internal committees and business development.

The best compensation system varies from person to person. Having a lock-step compensation structure for partners can result in a less competitive culture with more time and resource sharing. However, there is no reward for outstanding performance under the lock-step system, which may reduce competition. In spite of the merit system compensation structure, it also create pressure to surpass performance goals at each level. An attorney might, however, receive a lower salary if she works fewer hours if she is in a merit-based system. The comp structure of a firm that interests you may affect its work environment. Ask attorneys at that firm about its compensation structure. As well as understanding the partner compensation system, you need to pay attention to how it influences the culture and attitude of a firm's associate training and mentorship program. It is possible for partners who are rewarded only for billable hours with clients to be less interested in business development.

Based on their location and size, salaries in different firms vary widely. Some students overlook the fact that there are many considerations when looking for employment opportunities besides salaries offered by major law firms. Almost all New York or California now pays a starting salary of around \$190,000 plus bonuses, and salaries in other large cities are higher. The cost of living can vary greatly between different cities. Keep this in mind before you relocate. While a starting salary in NYC seems superb, it may surprise you that it is equal to \$78,645 in Austin, TX, and \$95,503 in Chicago.

The end-of-year bonuses of many firms bolster employee salaries in good economic times. Most of these awards are merit-based and may consider hours billed, quality of work, overall contribution to the firm, and pro bono hours. There are firms that explicitly evaluate community activities and leadership. As an additional bonus, some firms offer entry-level associates and judicial clerkships additional compensation; on the basis of the time credited to the clerkship and the resulting clerkship placement, which the attorney is placed, the total compensation package is determined. More firms are beginning to provide bonuses and paid sabbaticals to associates who stay more than five years with the firm.

E. Billable Hours

A high salary for a large firm comes at a high cost-billable hour. The majority of law firms charge their clients by the hour for their services (the majority also offer litigation contingency fees, but even these types of billing require management of billable hours). Firm profits increase as attorneys bill more hours. The time spent working on behalf of each client must be billed (usually in six-minute intervals). The billing hour requirements for associates are sometimes outlined in terms of "expected", "minimum," or "average.". The average number of hours per year is generally between 1800 and 2,500.

For students who do not want to spend so many hours working or who are looking for outside activities, a smaller firm in a smaller city might be a better choice. In spite of the lower salaries of these companies, the improved quality of life may be the trade-off compared to the higher salaries offered by the larger companies. Further, some firms offer multiple billing options for associates as an alternative to one hourly billing option. The choice is between earning more compensation for a larger number of billable hours or receiving less compensation for fewer hours. It remains to be seen how these new systems will perform.

F. Pro Bono and Split Public Interest Summer Opportunities

As the name implies, pro bono legal services are provided to persons of limited means or to organizations that have the needs of limited means without any expectation of compensation. Typically, this includes nonprofits and social causes in the areas of civil rights and the environment. Students who choose to work for law firms often seek out firms that offer meaningful pro bono opportunities.

Pro bono work is a common feature of firms' websites. These programs have vastly different formats, as well as degrees of commitment and organization on the part of firms. There are several key characteristics to consider when evaluating a pro bono program:

- A clear and meaningful definition of pro bono must be included in any pro bono policy
- Providing institutional support and serving as a role model for partners
- Contribute to the firm's priorities and pro bono commitments as an associate
- Pro bono hours are credited on the same basis as billable hours

Working for a firm that offers a sponsored split public interest summer is one way to do pro bono work during the summer. Summer associates can work part of the summer at their firms and the other part at public interest organizations, receiving the full compensation for the summer. Consider working with a firm that offers a sponsored summer program to work with a firm that is community-minded and pro bono friendly.

G. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts

Diverse talent is increasingly difficult to recruit and retain at law firms. According to the 2019 Inclusion Blueprint report, smaller firms show less diversity representation than large enterprises when it comes to inclusion practices.

An inspection of a firm's website can give you some insight into its diversity efforts. The diversity section of many firm websites, for example, highlights the firm's recruiting efforts, provides a statement of nondiscrimination, and describes its support for law students and attorneys. Investigate whether the leadership of the firm includes diverse attorneys. Ask for diverse attorneys to be available for callback interviews. Obtain information about the firm's culture of openness and affirmation.

H. Work/Life Balance Policies

The work/life balance policies of firms play an important role in determining students' choices. The best way to gauge a firm's efforts is to gain knowledge of their parental leave and flexible work policies, which may include remote work options. Despite having written policies, many smaller companies handle these matters just as well, albeit on a more ad hoc basis. Additionally, work-life/balance policies are meaningless if firms target attorneys by implied or explicit dissuasion.

A majority of large companies have written parental leave policies covering adoptions and domestic partner children. As well as providing leave, some companies provide stipends to help with adoption costs. A law firm's policy may be based on an attorney's gender or role as a primary caretaker. Learn whether non-primary caregivers are eligible for leave. You should find out what effect, if any, taking a leave of absence has on your advancement with the firm. Inquire as to whether attorneys who have taken a leave have gone on to make partners after taking a leave.

Companies offer a range of flexible work options, including part-time work, job sharing, remote work, and flex time. Flexible work options are almost always available for attorneys with family obligations (children, spouses, or parents); fewer firms offer them to be exercised for personal reasons. Alternative work arrangements may be available only to attorneys who have been with the firm for a certain period of time (often a year). The availability of alternative schedules in certain practice groups varies from firm to firm. Various firms require part-time attorneys to work a specific number of hours (often 60%) of full-time attorneys. Some firms compensate attorneys for exceeding agreed-upon hours with additional leave, others adjust their salaries, and others include it in the end-of-year bonus calculation. Some firms limit partnership offers to full-time attorneys.

The COVID-19 pandemic has now forced employers to make decisions on how to return employees and attorneys back to work. You should observe the ways in which firms you are interested in handle these matters.

I. Partnership Track

You do not need to plan on remaining at a firm through partnership if you are only interested in exploring it briefly. The traditional model for law firm partners is one where equity partners share in the firm's profits. There are now several models of partnership in many firms. Additionally, some firms have non-equity partners who do not share in profits and do not have a say in decision-making. A non-equity partner may take several years to become an equity partner, whereas an equity partner can become a non-equity partner.

take several years to become non-equity. Learn what it is. Other firms tend to promote only from within instead of partners.

J. Law Firm Rankings and Reputation

There are numerous ways in which law firms can be ranked as mentioned above. ALM Intelligence offers surveys and lists, including the AmLaw 100 and 200, the law firm A-List, the Midlevel Associates Survey, and the Summer Survey. A variety of rankings are also provided by Vault (available in the Vault Online Library) including the Top Firms; The Best 20 Firms to Work For; regional rankings; and diversity rankings. Chambers USA ranks firms according to practice areas. It is important to understand the universe of employers being ranked (typically only the largest law firms); the ranking criteria (subjective attorney opinions or objective data); and the publisher's agenda (if any). Rankings are to use when researching potential employers, however, do not assume that a well-ranked company is your ideal employer.

When researching law firms, some students gauge the relative "prestige" of law firms, then seek out the most "prestigious." Having said that, prestige has the same problem with beauty as it does with beauty. Even if a firm is ranked #1 on the 100 list (for example), it will not necessarily be the best place for you to work than one that is not even on the list. When searching for employment at a firm that is most compatible with your work style, personality, and practice interests, prestige is not an option.

K. Transition Opportunities

The opportunity of moving on to another firm is an important factor for some students when selecting a law firm. As you plan your career path, you should keep certain factors in mind regardless of the transition you wish to make. Furthermore, many law firms dedicate a section of their website to "alumni," which shows how attorneys who quit their firms have progressed in their careers.

Learn as much as you can about the field and connect with people in that field if you have a particular transition in mind. Consider volunteering, attending bar association events and committees, participating in community programs, and networking opportunities. You may have to sacrifice your big firm salary once you make the transition. Avoid gold-digging.

Those considering a career in legal academia should be aware that there are many factors that will be far more important to their candidacy than the firm in which they work after graduation. In addition to publications, judicial clerkship experience, advanced degrees, recommendations are also important. The law teaching market is often hard to crack for candidates with more than four years of experience, even though a few years of practice is generally an asset.

Types of Law Firms

From single-attorney firms to multi-state, multi-staffed organizations, law firms come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Law firms are generally capable of handling most types of legal challenges, regardless of the size of the client.

You can choose from a wide variety of law firms depending on your legal issue, often classified by size, type of practice (for example, litigation, criminal defense, or transactional), location, or topic (for example, tax law, family law, or personal injury). Choosing the right law firm is the key to finding a successful solution to legal problems, regardless of how complex the matter may be. It is important to determine which law firm to hire based on a number of factors, including your financial needs, geographic location, work preferences, and specific legal needs.

There are various types of law firms available in most areas as listed below:

Solo Law Firms

One lawyer runs solo law firms, as the name implies. In addition to handling general legal matters, solo practitioners sometimes specialize in certain areas of the law, such as patent law. Solo law firms offer several benefits, especially for clients with a single legal issue or who want to reduce costs. Solo law firms generally offer lower rates than their larger counterparts, and they can often hire outside staff to reduce costs or assist with specific tasks, such as paralegals or attorneys. Hiring an attorney working on your case alone can also provide you with more personal attention.

However, solo law firms may be limited by inexperience or lack of resources - especially if the attorneys are recent graduates who are just setting up shop, or if they do not have access to fee-based legal resources and information.

Small Law Firms

Small legal firms, often called "boutique" firms, have two to ten lawyers and allow them to collaborate on complex cases with other lawyers. Small law firms often have the "feel" of solo practice - having one-on-one attention as the lawyers work together - but may also allow attorneys to cover a broader range of legal topics because of the close-knit circle.

Large Law Firms

A large law firm can range in size from several dozens of lawyers and employees to several thousand, which can include lawyers, paralegals, administrative staff, human resource specialists, librarians, and other employees. Their offices are often located in multiple cities, states, or countries.

Firms with large legal departments, such as corporate, employment, and real estate departments, specialize in a variety of fields of law.

Moreover, large firms can tackle most kinds of legal work, including business transactions (such as mergers and acquisitions) and litigation matters (particularly white-collar crimes). In addition, large law firms often represent clients from both public organizations, and even individuals who may face legal issues across several practice areas.

Litigation vs. Transactional Law Firms

The type of legal services provided by law firms can sometimes be distinguished. Lawyers can specialize in civil litigation, representing clients in court cases - or they can specialize in legal transactions such as accounting disputes, product liability disputes, and insurance disputes.

It is rare for lawyers within a law firm to cross over between fields of practice. As an example, lawyers who are transactional attorneys usually represent clients in court hearings and trials usually remain within the field for their entire careers. The same is true for litigation attorneys who do drafting-intensive work for corporate clients.

Criminal Law Firms

In criminal defense, law firms specialize in representing private clients who can afford to hire their own attorneys (as opposed to being represented by a public defender). In order to help reduce the serious penalties often associated with criminal convictions, people facing criminal charges often seek assistance from a criminal defense lawyer throughout the criminal process.

Furthermore, since the laws and procedures involved in criminal proceedings are very complex, lawyers who work in criminal defense firms are usually very knowledgeable and skilled about the laws. They also tend to have relationships with judges and bar and judges. If you are looking for a criminal lawyer in your area who can represent you in a criminal matter, it is a good idea to speak to a variety of criminal lawyers in your area and look at their experience, track record, and location.

Law Firms by Practice Area

Law firms may also be broken down by legal topic area in addition to size, location, and type of practice. A practitioner may choose to either the type of legal issue you might be facing or the area of law an attorney practices.

Conclusion

Choosing the right law firm can be challenging based on your career goals and lifestyle. You should also use the interview process to learn more about a firm's policies after reviewing these resources.

Questioning certain matters at the right time can be challenging. Firms will have to respond to questions regarding flexible work, and quality of life issues and may decide to implement policy changes. In the interview, you should demonstrate your interest in the firm's work and your work ethic, so you should include these questions as just a

of your questions. Some of the most important questions to ask during the interview should be saved for after the extended.