

By Sandeep Baweja

Life at a Small Law Firm

Working at a small firm has many advantages to counteract the lure of large firms

Fairly recently, I joined a smaller law firm, and three particular aspects of my new situation reassure me that I made a good decision. The most attractive aspect of practicing at a small law firm is the flexible lifestyle it affords. You control your schedule at a small firm to a much greater extent than you do at a large firm—subject, of course, to the demands of your clients, and, if you are a litigator, to pleading deadlines and court hearings. Partners do not necessarily expect you to be at their beck and call unless there is a pressing, time-sensitive need. Nor are you burdened with the overwhelming billable hours requirements of large firms. At a smaller firm, you have time for family, friends, bar activities, or simply yourself.

In addition to having a life outside the office, the beginning lawyer at a small firm has the significant advantage of gaining useful experience from the start. At a smaller firm, lawyers are quickly thrown into the fire. In my case, after joining a smaller firm, I feel that I am actually practicing law for the first time in my six-year career.

At large law firms, associates are fed slices of a large case, and they are deprived of the benefit of the bird's-eye view of the case. It may be several years before you are given primary case responsibility at a large law firm. So if you want to truly practice law sooner rather than later, and if you want direct client contact early in your career, then make the move to a small law firm. You will learn more—and more quickly—and you will be more invested in your work.

The third advantage to working at a small firm that I most appreciate is how I am treated. The difference between associates and partners at a small law firm is not as pronounced as it is at a large firm. If you bring a client to the firm, for example, you are actually given credit rather than an ambiguously promised “due consideration” in your year-end bonus. Partners are genuinely interested in your improvement, and not just for the purpose of obtaining better work. They care about your professional development more than at a larger firm, and they are more willing to provide guidance and counsel.

The Disadvantages

At large and small law firms, the dynamics of personal relationships with partners, fellow associates, and staff can make or break your experience. At a small firm, fewer people generally mean closer contact, and the dynamics of this situation play an especially significant role, for better and for worse. At a small firm, another person's bad day may become your bad day, another person's problems may become your problems, and someone else's bad mood may become your bad mood. If a partner is being unreasonably difficult with a particular secretary, for example, that unreasonableness may get passed along, and you can guess who the recipient will be. Stay focused on your work and avoid the people who are being unreasonable that day.

At a small law firm, a bad relationship can make your life difficult—and this is especially true for an associate. The key ingredient to positive relationships with anyone is always respect. Never underestimate the power of showing respect for colleagues and staff. Perceive everyone as part of a continuum, not a hierarchy, and you will avoid having the majority of your waking hours be a bad experience resulting from bad relationships. Add a dash of humor, and you should thrive.

Another limitation of employment with a smaller firm is compensation. If you want a big salary and expect reimbursement for most expenses, you should work for the large firms. If you are willing to take a pay cut in exchange for a better life and for more rewarding on-the-job experiences, the small firm is where you belong. At smaller firms, what you do not make in salary is made up to you in other ways.

At large firms, associates are spoiled not just in terms of salary. Their cages are gilded with secretaries, copy rooms and staff, paralegals, and numerous other resources. At a small law firm, in contrast, the staff will certainly strive to help when they can, but on days when they are overburdened, you will be on your own. One day while working at a small firm, for example, I approached one of the secretaries and asked for something to be faxed. After an awkward silence of roughly three seconds, I was politely told to go fax it myself.

There may be days when you will spend hours doing your own administrative and support work—whether it be faxing, typing letters, preparing discovery, or making copies. None of this is billable. In addition, do not expect staff members to work overtime for your project, even if they do so on a partner's project. Although the hours you work at a large firm may be more demanding, at a small one you can still expect to work at the office well into the night hours or during weekends, without support. At times you will need to finish a project well in advance, just in case it is delayed by its low rank in the pecking order. The solution to this problem may lie in being respectfully pushy at times and, at other times, simply doing it yourself.

I have become a better practitioner in a shorter time as a result of working at a small law firm. I enjoy my work more and take increased meaningful interest in the outcome of the firm's cases. Practicing at a small law firm is enjoyable and is recommended if you can cope with the financial and logistical disadvantages. The advantages are quite rewarding—personally and professionally. ■



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