Even before law school begins, many students dream of working at a law firm. Most law firms offer relatively high salaries, interesting work, prestige, and the opportunity to litigate in a courtroom setting.

**THREE MAIN CATEGORIES OF LAW FIRMS**

- Large 250+ attorneys
- Medium 51-250 attorneys
- Small 1-50 attorneys

These designations, however, are arbitrary depending on the market. For example, a firm in New York City might have 300 attorneys and only be considered a medium-sized New York firm, while a firm in Salt Lake City might have 100 attorneys and be considered a large Salt Lake firm.

Law firms have certain stereotypes associated with them. Large law firms are seen as competitive, impersonal, high paying, prestigious, and hour-intensive, with gradual opportunity for client contact and real responsibility for cases. Smaller law firms are seen as collegial, family-oriented, low-paying, and mentor-accessible. Additionally, the stereotype is that small-firm attorneys work reasonable hours and have added responsibility, increased client contact, and greater opportunity for partnership.

Although these stereotypes may contain a grain of truth, remember these descriptions are just broad generalizations. Law firms are as varied as the attorneys that practice in them. Small firm “sweat shops” exist where the partners seem only to care about their share of the profits, as do large firms that place family, community, and social obligations high on their list of priorities. Medium-sized firms may have characteristics of both large and small firms. Thus, it is important to look beyond the common stereotypes before deciding which law firm best fits your career goals.

**ADVANTAGES OF LAW FIRM PRACTICE**

**In General**

Because the firm’s client base is constantly changing, work at a law firm is rarely the same from day-to-day. Even if the firm deals primarily with one legal area such as tax, clients bring in a constant variety of legal issues.
These varied issues present a challenge to even the most experienced lawyers and often demand thoughtful, imaginative arguments.

Additionally, a law firm can be a great place for associates and clerks to gain valuable experience. Many judges, law professors, corporate counsel, and politicians began their careers at a law firm. Firms give new attorneys and summer clerks an opportunity to learn the basics of law practice—filing briefs and memoranda, meeting with clients, engaging in discovery, and addressing the court—while providing a safety net of experienced attorneys to supervise and assist when necessary. This hands-on experience is critical for making contacts, learning the ropes of the legal profession, and making the transition from law student to lawyer.

Finally, attorneys are never locked-in to a law firm. Once an attorney feels comfortable with law practice, he or she may stay with the firm, laterally transfer to another firm, to government, to a public interest organization, to a corporation, or start a solo practice.

**Large Law Firms**

A primary advantage of large law firms is that they generally attract the most complex and challenging work. Due to the high stakes involved in major litigation and large transactions, clients in these situations often want to draw on the vast legal and administrative resources of a large firm. Because large firms attract big clients and stimulating work, large-firm attorneys often enjoy an additional advantage—they often rub shoulders with nationally or locally respected attorneys, law firms, business people, companies, government employees, politicians, and government agencies.

A second advantage is that because large amounts of money are often involved in litigation or transactions, clients want a well-researched, polished product. Generally, clients have the means and are willing to pay attorneys large legal fees so that the attorneys can offer a high-quality presentation to the court, the client, or the government agency. These large-firm attorneys also have a deeper pool of resources from which to draw when working on a project.

A third advantage of a large firm is that an attorney may specialize in a particular legal area. Associates and summer clerks are often encouraged to try various practice areas within the firm to determine what areas interest
them. Once the associate selects an area of specialization, a large firm will generally assign a mentor to make sure that the associate is well-trained in that field of law.

Large firms have the resources to provide superior continuing legal education and may often provide in-house training on a wide variety of issues. They also often encourage young associates to gain hands-on experience through participation in firm-subsidized pro bono programs.

Finally, large law firms tend to pay summer clerks and junior associates well.

**Medium-Sized Firms**

Medium-sized firms share many advantages of both large and small firms. Often a medium-sized firm is large enough to have a variety of practice areas but small enough to allow new associates and interns to have substantial responsibility over cases.

**Small Law Firms**

The primary advantage of a small firm is that a relatively new associate or intern will receive substantial responsibility quickly. Small firms generally hire attorneys who can handle cases with a minimum amount of supervision, thus creating ample room for the demonstration of partnership potential.

An additional advantage is that many small firms limit their practice to a particular area, such as tax or real estate. This specialization allows attorneys to become experts in their field.

Finally, small firms provide an opportunity to work closely with other associates and firm partners. Often, everyone at the firm is well acquainted. In many small firms, this informal relationship among the attorneys reflects a supportive, cooperative atmosphere.

**DISADVANTAGES OF LAW FIRM PRACTICE**

**In General**

Law firms also have their share of disadvantages. For instance, clients can be very demanding. Many clients want their problems taken care of as quickly and as inexpensively as possible and can be impatient when they learn that the attorney has other matters that take priority. In addition, long-term
clients know how to reach their attorney whether at home or at the office, and some clients exercise this privilege regularly. Late evening and weekend work are common.

Firms also have the burden of finding new clients. Because institutions and repeat clients make up only one-half of all legal clients, most law firms have a very fluid client base. Firms must therefore expend time and resources to discover and attract new clients to replace previous ones.

Finally, because the client base and the economy are constantly changing, law firms occasionally run into rough economic times. When this happens, firms tend to stop or slow their hiring and increase the workload of their existing associates.

**Large Firms**

The primary disadvantage of working for a large firm is the high billable hours requirement. All of the overhead—the facilities, benefits, and staff—must be paid for by revenues from legal work. To pay for this overhead, each associate must bill a minimum number of hours each year. Because larger firms tend to have more overhead than smaller firms, large firms generally require more billable hours from their attorneys. Attorneys in large firms do not work nine to five. 10 to 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week, is common. Many of these hours may be spent doing such mundane tasks as proofreading large documents for errors or doing due diligence document review.

A second disadvantage is that because of the large size of the firm, attorneys often know only a small percentage of their colleagues in the office. The size and the rapid pace of large firms discourages attorneys from meeting one another socially. In a firm of 500 attorneys, it is not uncommon for an attorney to know only 100, or 20%, of the other lawyers in the office. The office politics (e.g., distribution of work, chance to make partner, training, and compensation) among the attorneys who do know each other can be daunting. Often partners in these firms do not even know all of the other partners. This can cause attorneys to feel isolated or unimportant within their firm structure.

Finally, large firms often demand perfection. For attorneys that are not inclined to open a citation manual while writing a brief, large firm practice
is difficult and frustrating. Because large firms and clients want the work to be excellent, and because the associates want to produce excellent work, associates spend many hours at the office—a significant portion of which may not be billed.

**Medium-Sized Firms**

Medium-sized firms share many of the disadvantages of both large and small firms. Overhead might be high, requiring associates to work longer hours, but the cases might be smaller and more routine.

**Small Firms**

Partnership in a small firm often depends on how quickly the firm grows. If the firm experiences a slowdown in business or does not grow as quickly as expected, associates might be forced to look elsewhere for partnership opportunities.

Another disadvantage of small firm practice is that, unless the firm specializes in a particular area, attorneys must generally be willing to take every case that comes to them. This means that an associate might work on a $500,000 estate case one day and a trespassing cow case the next day. While this variety makes for interesting work, some attorneys might become frustrated with the seemingly trivial cases that are assigned to them.

Finally, small firms generally do not have the level of prestige and recognition that a medium-sized or large law firm might have. If an attorney is planning a lateral move after several years at the firm, experiences at a smaller firm may not be as marketable as the same experiences at a large firm. Also, firm name recognition is often an important factor when firms and companies hire experienced attorneys.

**Finding a Law Firm Job**

Large law firms begin interviewing potential associates and summer clerks in late August and begin hiring in late September. This interviewing and hiring process continues through October and occasionally stretches into November, but students interviewing after September often have a difficult time finding a job with a large firm. Therefore, it is essential that second- and third-year law students apply to NALP (The Association for Legal Career Professionals) employers in August. In addition to applying to firms
interviewing on campus, students should also research other firms they would be interested in working for and apply to them directly. Students interviewing with large firms should be cautious not to limit their opportunities. Although many large firms recruit from BYU through on-campus interviews, only a small percentage of students receive offers from these firms.

Large firms generally have a two- or three-tiered hiring process. Often, the student will have an initial screening interview with a member of the firm. If the student passes this screening process, he or she will then have a callback interview with a panel or committee made up of firm partners and associates. This interview will often include a lunch or dinner with members of the firm. In most firms, if the student passes this interview he or she will be hired. In a few firms, however, the student will be invited to interview a third time, often with one of the senior partners. Large firms generally look for students with high grades and journal or moot court experience.

Medium and small firms typically begin hiring as soon as they can forecast their future workload. These interviews may begin as early as September or as late as April. Occasionally the interviewing and hiring process for these firms will extend as late as May or June. This means that law students looking for work with medium and small firms should never give up! If a student has not received a legal job by April, he or she might still get a dream job in May.

Students interested in working for medium and small firms should begin submitting resumes directly to employers in August or September. Students should update their resumes and transcripts regularly, and with each update should include a cover letter stating that they are still interested in a position. More importantly, students should follow-up with each submission.

For More Information


The Martindale-Hubbell lawyer locator is the best place to start for a comprehensive law firm search. Be sure to do an “advanced search.”

NALP Directory of Legal Employers – [www.nalpdirectory.com](http://www.nalpdirectory.com)

Exhaustive information about the nation's largest law firms.

Vast online subscription resource includes resume tips, career advice, and the best firms to work for.

Vault Career Insider (BYU Law Subscription) - careerinsider.vault.com/wps/portal/careerinsider?parrefer=2027

The subscription provides free, unrestricted privileges to the largest, most comprehensive online career resource available.

Law Firms’ Websites

Most law firms have recruiting and contact information online.