

Firm culture matters most

We believe that any legal professional's happiness and success in a legal organization have more to do with a particular law firm culture (which is sometimes also referred to as the "personality of a firm") than with any other factor. This article discusses (a) the importance of firm culture, (b) why some legal professionals do not give strong consideration to firm culture when joining a firm, (c) the reason a failure to seriously consider firm culture prematurely ends many careers, and (d) why making a lateral move provides the best opportunity to evaluate firm culture and the course of your career.

A. The Importance of Firm Culture

Just as the work, salary, and prestige level can vary from firm to firm, the cultures of firms can be very different. Consider the following examples about the cultures of various firms:

- There are firms where style is definitely valued over substance.
- There are firms where substance is definitely valued over style.
- There are firms where people wander around in Birkenstocks and call each other "dude."
- There are firms where staff members must address partners as "Mr." and "Ms."
- There are firms where associates need to make appointments with partners before speaking with them.
- There are firms where partners chew tobacco in the office and during firm meetings.

- There are firms that value your family connections more than your work ability.
- There are firms that believe everyone who puts in a solid effort over the course of six or seven years should be made partner.
- There are firms that have been "collapsing" for years but portray themselves to members as "strong and powerful."

Some of the examples above are set forth from the perspective of an associate because the experience of all staff members in a firm culture in many ways often reflects the experiences of the associates in the firm. We could go on and on. Suffice it to say, however, that your success and happiness as a legal professional may have more to do with your thoughtful and intelligent decision to join a firm that best fits you culturally than with your legal skills. **People simply want to be around people they like, and when people like each other there is a lot of benefit that comes to both sides of the relationship.**

OBSERVATION 1:

We all have certainly heard of how Albert Einstein flunked out of grade school. Perhaps Einstein was too concerned with the theoretical rather than the practical. Whatever the reason, Einstein simply did not experience success in the environment he was in at the time because the school, and the people in it, could not understand where he was coming from. Do the people in your firm understand where you are coming from? In the law firm environment, when a

given legal professional and the firm see eye-to-eye, success is far more likely than in situations where they do not.

B. Legal Professionals Sometimes Fail to Give Strong Consideration to Firm Culture When Choosing a Firm

The problem with the way some legal professionals manage their careers is that they are motivated primarily by prestige and money factors more than the cultures of various firms in making their decisions between possible places to practice.

When a legal professional evaluates offers based upon where they believe they fit in the best, that legal professional is far more likely to find happiness and success in the practice of law. The problem, however, is that most legal professionals simply do not think this way. The reason we believe this is so is because legal professionals are simply competitive by nature.

In almost all respects, the largest, most prestigious and highest paying firms are the hardest to get the best positions in. The pressure to join these firms typically commences when a legal professional first joins a firm. Law students and practicing attorneys often evaluate each other based upon their ability to get positions with these types of firms, and staff members do the same. For most legal professionals, the pressure to get these types of jobs is enormous.

In many respects this is perfectly predictable. In order to get into top law firm environments, many legal professionals have long been motivated to attain high levels of achievement in order to succeed. Those who succeed in college, paralegal

academy, or law school at exceptionally high levels more often than not are those who make the decision to sacrifice free time and comfort in the short term to enjoy better lives in the future.

The problem with this type of thinking is that it can often lead legal professionals to make horrible decisions in how they run their professional careers. If a legal professional is thinking in terms of what they can do to look best to others, they may often be more focused on this thinking than on what is best for them individually. None of this is to say that there are not numerous advantages from being part of a truly significant law firm. The point is that this should not be the only consideration a legal professional bases their career choices on.

OBSERVATION 2:

The stereotype much of the general public has about attorneys is not a good one: In a lot of respects, the general public sees attorneys as ultra competitive, money and power hungry individuals. Many attorneys in fact personify these traits and have subordinated much of their happiness in life to the pursuit of money, respect, power, and admiration from their peers. This perception leads many attorneys to base their presumed happiness on things like having the largest house, the most expensive car and other traditional accoutrements of the "American Dream."

C. The Failure to Consider Firm Culture Prematurely Ends of Limits Many Careers That Could Have Otherwise Been Highly Successful

It is easy to find out a law firm's compensation structure, or their billable

hour requirements (which will provide an indication of the work load that can be expected by all staff members), but those are the simple and superficial distinctions to make among firms. It is not as easy to gauge a firm's prestige level - however, that can usually be done with help. It is more difficult to evaluate a firm's culture, and whether that culture is where you will be happy and remain so over the course of your career.

One of the largest mistakes legal professionals make when evaluating competing offers between firms is believing that money is the most important factor they should be considering. While money is certainly an important component of any analysis, it is not the most important factor in determining a given legal professional's happiness over the course of their career. If you think money is an important consideration in joining a firm, you may be making a horrible mistake. If you go to the right firm, you may be practicing law in four years and have a stable career and life. If you go to a firm just because of monetary considerations, you may wind up so disgruntled with working in a law firm that you are not working at all.

The above observation is compounded by the irony that many legal professionals wind up in the largest and most prestigious firms precisely because they show so much promise and have excelled to such a degree in their legal careers. We have seen resumes of legal professionals who worked in first rate New York law firms but ended up spending their careers aimless, on career paths that do not sound compelling to many highly educated legal professionals. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with

this type of career path. The problem is that many of these same legal professionals may believe they are finding happiness in jobs apart from the law when there is a possibility they could have found happiness in a law practice if they had chosen a firm that matched their interest culturally.

OBSERVATION 3:

On a day-to-day basis, in each of our offices, we speak with legal professionals who began their careers with ultra prestigious high-paying law firms. Many of these persons left those firms two to seven years into their careers there because they became so disillusioned. Most of them say things like "I would never work in another law firm - I would only work in industry or in an in-house legal environment." The resumes of these legal professionals are sometimes littered with one firm job after another where the next and then the next firm were virtually identical in terms of culture to the firm they joined first.

Of course these legal professionals are not happy practicing in a law firm: They have only worked for one type of law firm during their entire careers. The problem is that these persons may have worked in a firm culture which was such a bad fit for them that they never got the opportunity to really find out what it was like practicing law with a group of people they like, respect and profit emotionally from working with. Not all legal professionals are the same. Fitting in with the community of legal professionals that make up a particular law firm is the key to long-term success and satisfaction in law firm life. Not fitting in is the key to failure or the decision to take another career path.

Consider the choice of where to live, and compare the process of making that decision

with the decision to join any particular firm. Some of us prefer the lifestyle in New York to Los Angeles, or prefer San Francisco to Seattle. Preference for one city or neighborhood is entirely personal and individual. The considerations are whether we feel accepted and appreciated in a community and whether we see people around us that share the same goals and aspirations. Whether that city supports and enhances our lifestyle becomes a driving force in a person's decision.

You should constantly ask yourself, "Is this firm a place where I will feel accepted? Will I be surrounded by people with the same values and goals? Will this firm compliment my lifestyle? What is the culture of the firm?"

We are not saying that geography is the same as culture. However, the same factors that drive us to feel happy and accepted in a particular town or city are relevant when choosing a firm. All in all, the key is to spend some time studying different firms and come to some conclusions about what type of firm you believe you are best suited to join.

D. Making a Move is Sometimes Your Best Chance to Find Your Perfect Firm Culture

Many of our candidates, when preparing for an interview, want help identifying those questions that will help them unearth the true culture and environment at a firm. In short form, the question that needs to be answered for each legal professional is simply "will I like it at this firm?" Unfortunately, try as we may, we cannot always answer these questions as well as we would like. The culture of a firm may

vary from practice group to practice group, and it is impossible to pin down with any meaningful certainty whether or not a good firm is always a good fit. Often, the only way to learn this is to actually go to the interviews and speak with the persons you may be working with.

It's important to remember that the interview process as a legal professional, especially for attorneys and specialty law firm staff members such as IT professionals, is much different than when as a student you interviewed for a summer clerkship. A law firm is typically not really concerned with 'competing' for any one particular candidate. In this heightened competitiveness, it can sometimes be difficult for the legal professional interviewing for the job to get the sense of whether this particular law firm is made up of a group of lawyers with whom they want to spend the rest of their career. Keep your best interests at heart and do everything you possibly can to ensure that you find this firm. Obviously, your task is to get the job; however, you also need to understand the firm's culture. Law Firm Staff, Inc. has identified several ways in which you can evaluate whether a particular firm is right for you.

1. Preparation is the First Key to Evaluating Firm Culture

You've gotten an interview. Before the interview, research as much as possible to determine the 'objective' factors: How big is the office? What is the salary? What are the minimum billable hour requirements? In our opinion, this objective fact gathering is helpful in determining how well the firm is doing financially and how it has grown over

time. On the cultural level, though, these factors are less important. It is the less obvious criteria and subjective information that make the difference in figuring out a firm's culture.

Partner/Associate Ratio: This objective indicator can be important in determining the more subjective issue of overall satisfaction with a firm. Do you thrive in a collaborative yet competitive atmosphere? Do you prefer to work with partners or associates? If you are the type of person who performs well in a competitive environment and enjoys having opportunities to distinguish yourself with your work product, you may very well feel comfortable in an environment where there are more associates for each partner. Likewise, some attorneys may be more interested in a place where there are fewer associates for each partner, and partnership is more a function of staying around than distinguishing yourself. Think about what type of environment is going to help you thrive as an attorney. Will you do better in a situation where you are primarily assigned to one partner, or where you are free to work with a variety of individuals in a practice group?

Diversity: It may also be important for you to look at the firm's commitment to diversity. We don't know of any firm that doesn't have an anti-discrimination policy. However, some firms are more proactive in this area than others. Is it important to you that there are a good number of legal professionals of color at the firm?

Home v. Satellite Office: Where is the firm's main office located? Is it one of the laid-back west-coast firms? In some cases, the personality of the main office carries over to each of the firm's satellite offices,

regardless of where those offices may be. Frequently, satellite offices of large firms score big points in associate satisfaction surveys. Although we don't believe that it's fair to generalize, we do believe that some of the best opportunities for personal growth exist in satellite offices.

Keep in mind that some firms may be as different from office to office as two separate firms in the same city. Can you rely on your friend in Dallas to tell you about life in their Los Angeles office? Maybe not. Find out about the firm as a whole, and then how the offices relate to and identify with each other. Moreover, you may prefer the lifestyle in the head office of the firm if becoming involved in firm management is important to you over time.

Conversely, however, many legal professionals working in satellite offices feel less secure about their careers because management decisions may be made far away, and this relative lack of security naturally carries over to other legal professionals within the firm. Additionally, because management decisions are made far away, the firms are often less secure in promising promotions to their legal professionals in a satellite office. Because these decisions may be made only through the main office, satellite administrators may have little idea about a particular legal professional's prospects for advancement. Senior legal administrators in a satellite office may also be uncertain about the course of their own careers!

On rare occasions, a large firm will open a satellite office to suit one particular client or practice group, only to close that office relatively quickly based upon management

decisions in the home office. These decisions may take the senior administrator in the satellite office by surprise. None of this is to say that all satellite offices are bad - in fact, good satellite offices are the rule rather than the exception - it is just to say that you need to be careful in evaluating the culture of a satellite office. Ask yourself and your interviewers whatever questions you feel might be helpful. Does the office appear stable? Who are its clients? Does the office generate its own clients or serve those of the main office only? Does the satellite office have a history of promoting associates to partner?

Location, location, location: Where is the office located? Of all the factors, we find that this tends to be the least important factor in evaluating a firm's culture. A California firm known for having attorneys wearing Birkenstock sandals at work (not all of them are...) may have a New York office with that same type of atmosphere. The Washington D.C. branch office of a New York firm may get the benefit of highly sophisticated corporate deal work. However, even in Hawaii or Miami, for example, there are going to be radical distinctions among the firms. This distinction is paramount and important. The city makes little difference in a lot of respects. There are laid back firms in Chicago, down the block from offices where you wouldn't think of entering without your most formal business attire. The key is understanding the various cultures of the firms themselves.

Clientele: Who is the firm representing? Is the firm representing young Internet start-ups or large tobacco companies? Many firms represent a mix of clients, but investigating

the industries that a particular firm targets can say a lot about the firm. How risk averse is the firm? Will they undertake representation of a young company who may not be around in 5 years? Or will a firm forgo business in an effort to preserve a few solid relationships with long-standing clients? How much of the firm's revenue is based on any one particular client? If a law firm never allows any one particular client to represent more than a small percentage of its overall business, you know that this firm is not willing to allow its long-term economic health to rely on that of the companies it represents. Firms that represent entrepreneurial clients can also be fast paced and exciting places to work. Smaller clients may also tend to be less conservative and crave insight.

As firms become more institutionalized and reliant on revenue streams from larger clients, they become more conservative and more risk averse for fear of losing that client. That's when associates and partners become really conservative, and a culture develops where people worry about saying the wrong thing and a "cover your rear" mentality can develop. We have all heard the story - in some form - of the secretary who made some small error and cost the big firm its biggest client. This type of culture can be good for some people in that it carries a lot of predictability and is comforting to many legal professionals.

As you can see, the types of clients a firm has can help shape the culture. None of these observations apply to all firms, but there are some consistencies which merit observation. This can even carry over to the dress code firms have. Many law firms instituted business casual dress to attract

the younger technology clients. To attract today's dressed down industries, some law firms encourage their lawyers to wear casual clothes to the office to 'mirror' the environment of their clients. In other cases, only white shirts and ties for men are acceptable while meeting and working with a client. Many firms try to strike a balance by staying casual during the uncomfortably hot summer months and returning to business attire for the rest of the year.

Firm Governance: How a law firm conducts its day-to-day business is important. Lawyers have to run the business of their law firm, and how they choose to structure the firm can say a lot about its culture. The business model a law firm chooses often reveals the core values of the organization. Generally, firms are governed in one of several ways.

The democratic firm allows each lawyer and staff member to become involved in the decision making, from new hires of legal professionals, to compensation to long term planning. Most firms, because they are organizations of legal professionals and because they ultimately exist to provide legal services, grant a greater measure of control to the people working in the firm. For many large firms, the democracy may only include partners, so it is not necessarily realistic that a secretary will be making any type of management decisions - or even weighing in with an opinion. However, many democratically run firms do have some level of staff involvement in the firm's governance, such as on pro bono committees or with respect to firm events. This type of culture is entirely inclusive, although sometimes with the

result of having too much administration bogging down each individual legal professional's already heavy workload. The values reflected here are participation and integration, which may come at the cost of expediency of consistency.

Many law firms govern using a small, centralized committee of decision makers, which results in greater consistency in terms of firm vision and management. However, this culture is more exclusive in terms of firm governance, which may turn off the legal professional that wants to be a part of the decision-making and planning efforts of a firm. In this system of firm governance, it's important to find out how these leaders are chosen and the values they hold dear.

At the end of the day, however, what is more important than the method of governance is the reason behind why a particular firm chooses the business model it does. Asking a law firm's associates or partners why things are the way they are helps one understand a firm's culture and vision for the future. If you hear that the goals of the business match yours, you have likely found a culture in which you will be happy and succeed.

Word on the Street: You probably know the reputation of the firm where you're interviewing. Is it known around town as a sweatshop or a 'quality of life' firm? BE CAREFUL! While we believe that tracking down fellow legal professionals or colleagues at a particular firm to ask about their particular experience has value, broad generalizations about a firm's culture are often just that: generalizations. Even if

a reputation is mostly on target, you may be looking to join a practice area or work with a partner that is decidedly unlike the overall firm culture.

But what does 'reputation' mean in terms of evaluating a firm? Although it's not necessarily wise to make assumptions about a firm based on reputation, what people say about a firm may help you define whether you fit into the culture. What does it mean to be a 'white shoe' firm? Historically, the phrase 'white shoe firms' is associated with large New York firms with strong corporate practices. There are, however, 'white shoe' firms in every major legal market, including Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington D.C. Often, the clients of these firms will be Fortune 500 companies and other large institutional clients with long-standing relationships with their particular firm. One advantage of this type of firm is security. Because these firms have such strong ties to their clients (sometimes ties that date back over 100 years!), the chances of those clients, or the relationships with those clients deteriorating may be less likely. This environment, in general, will be more formal than others, and is less likely to embrace trends in business casual apparel.

"Lifestyle" or "quality of life" is another way the legal community may refer to a certain firm. These terms have become somewhat hackneyed of late, but still have value in terms of defining a particular firm. A quality of life firm is fairly self-explanatory, which is to say that the firm has placed a premium on allowing associates to have a life outside of the firm. What does that mean? Sometimes, it means a slightly lower billable hour requirement than at

other firms. Other times, it may mean that the firm's management is more amenable to other situations other than typical full-time associate and staff positions, including part-time, telecommuting, flextime, or non-partnership track. The popularity of this term has caused it to be somewhat diluted. We find that there are very few firms willing to define themselves as anything but firms that value legal professionals' quality of life. Don't take these types of labels at face value, and investigate what that term means within a particular firm.

You may also want to look at the politics of a particular firm. Some firms actively recruit attorneys of various national origins, races, or sexual orientations. Some firms have a commitment to pro bono that rewards legal professionals for their dedication to non-billable pursuits. Many firms are politically active, and are sometimes made up of law partners who have held prestigious posts in a variety of elected offices. Some firms are famous for having ties with certain parties or administrations; others have 'raised' prestigious judges or professors. Do the research to determine whether the firm in question seems to be comprised of the same kind of attorneys as you are, or as you aspire to be.

2. The absolute best way to evaluate whether a firm is right for you is to meet with the legal professionals at the firm, and to focus on the interview process.

When you are in an office for an interview, what is the single most important way to find out what the firm culture is like? Ask. Certainly, at the interview stage, you may feel like you are simply getting the 'party line.' However, you are familiar with acting like a lawyer, whether you are licensed as

an attorney or not, and you are capable of evaluating the sincerity and enthusiasm in the response. Ask each and every person to describe the culture and community in the firm, and ask them to tell you what that means to them. Ask your interviewers to compare their firm to other firms in the same market so that you can begin to make some distinctions. Remember that all of the legal professionals made the same decision you'll be faced with after interviewing: "Why this firm?" Find out how each lawyer got in front of you, and ask them how they feel about their decision to practice at that firm. Learning the individual stories of the attorneys you meet will go a long way toward helping you make your decision. Asking this type of question will also ingratiate the interviewer to you.

Look around the office as you are directed to your interview(s). See how the partners and associates treat the legal professionals in the support staff. Notice how the support staff treat each other. Don't overlook a slip-up in this area. The staff members know you are considering the culture of their firm, and they should be careful or well managed enough to see that you are given the right impression. You may be the type of person who enjoys being able to come into the office and crank out her work for the day, or you may enjoy spending time 'shooting the breeze' with other lawyers. See whether individual office doors are closed or open. Pay attention to people's work styles, and compare them to yours. You may enjoy a more 'old-school' law firm environment, or you may thrive in a more modern 'team' approach. Notice whether people call each other by their first names, or whether they are more formal. Although you should

always be aware of the fact that you are being evaluated, and act accordingly, keep your eyes and ears open to more than just the answers to your questions.

Again, be careful. Sometimes legal professionals interviewing for a position swing too far in terms of evaluating: spending all of your time in this process wondering "what can the law firm do for me?" will prevent you from showing a potential employer that you are a good match for them. This is a two way street, so showing a law firm what you are made of is just as important during an interview as evaluating the firm.

3. What does An Offer Say About Firm Culture?

Here's where it gets easy. Receiving an offer from the firm with whom you interviewed is the single best indicator that they are a good fit for you. Although it may be difficult to imagine after going back to a law firm time and time again to interview, receiving an offer of employment means, at a minimum, that a particular firm 'gelled' with you more than with any other candidate applying for that particular position. Remember, a law firm will not extend an offer to someone they don't like, don't respect, and with whom they don't want to spend their time.

Still don't know? Ask to go back. Sometimes a callback schedule wasn't as well rounded as it could have been, in terms of including a variety of associates, partners, or different practice groups. Law firms are generally very accommodating in terms of scheduling post-offer lunches or meetings. Everyone in this process understands that accepting a new offer is a big decision, and generally

everyone will be amenable to providing you with any additional information you may need. Sometimes it's easier to evaluate your fit in a particular firm when you don't feel the pressure of having to 'perform' in an interview.

E. Conclusions

The key to true job satisfaction is determining which firm's culture suits you and your career. Finding the right culture will allow you to find a job that won't feel like work. What is going to make the difference over time is not a \$5,000 per year salary differential; it's whether you feel comfortable and appreciated in a particular environment. No matter what the reputation of the firm, going through the process of discovering who the people are and what they think of you and your skills will be the best indicators of long-term satisfaction and success.

Luckily, finding your place is not only up to you. Law Firm Staff, Inc. is knowledgeable about the various firm cultures, and we can help you determine the firm community that is right for you.