

Are you sure you want to go in-house?

Legal professionals call us on a daily basis asking us to find them the 'perfect' in-house opportunity. As we explore further, it seems that many of the legal professionals who are looking to go in-house want to do so because they assume that an in-house position means more interesting work, shorter hours, and even lucrative stock options. Although these are all admirable goals, we believe that it is impossible to generalize that all in-house positions offer the utopian work environment we've described. In many area of the country, as the economy continues to sour and entire corporations are being shut down, law firm life is suddenly becoming more attractive to some. More and more, in-house legal professionals call us wanting desperately to return to, or enter, private practice. Since this trend is at odds with the constant requests for in-house opportunities, we have decided to dispel the myths about private practice. In the end, it is not accurate, nor productive, to assume that law firms are somehow the lesser of employment options for legal professionals in the legal market. Below, we have outlined a few of the considerations for legal professionals considering leaving their private law firm.

Economic Security: Many legal professionals often want to get into a company for the stock options, in the hopes of a windfall at the IPO stage. However, that dream has often come crashing down for many legal professionals who left their law firms in an attempt to make it big. The Cinderella stories of massive economic gain have all but dried up, and legal professionals are returning to private practice in droves.

The point? While some people reason that legal professionals in private practice have a 'ceiling' in terms of compensation, the average salary for a legal professional in private practice still exceeds the salaries of most Americans. At some of the biggest firms, with overtime the paychecks of legal professionals can be staggering. More importantly, many large law firms have been around for decades, sometimes over a century. For the most part, these firms aren't going anywhere, even in a bad economy. This economic stability is unmatched in other industries. Although law firms occasionally 'go under', law firms are, in general, much more stable than companies in any other industry. This is especially true of the full service firm. When the economy is good, the real estate and corporate legal professionals are busy. When it turns sour, the bankruptcy and litigation legal professionals can pick up the slack in terms of billing and profitability. Most law firms diversify their client base to such an extent that the failure of any one or two clients will not compromise the bottom line. Law firms are built for survival in even the toughest economy.

Billable Hours: While this is not a problem for most legal professionals, for paralegals it is often a big complaint. We often encounter paralegals whose primary goal in a career change is to reduce the pressure of billable hour requirements that seem to be only associated with private practice. Depending on your career and life goals, it is often perfectly reasonable to seek situations that will require something



less than the typical billable hour requirements of a paralegal at a busy law firm. However, we do not agree that private practice necessarily means an unreasonable grind, nor should one expect a laid back lifestyle at an in-house position. Legal professionals in large corporations often work the same type of hours as legal professionals in private practice, which sometimes includes late night and weekend work.

Many in-house departments of corporations are set up like law firms, where different departments within the company are considered 'clients,' and in-house paralegals are required to bill and record how they spend their time with the internal clientele. For the companies that do not require their paralegals to bill their time, a paralegal working long hours has no record for the purpose of year-end productivity bonuses, as law firms do.

On the other hand, law firms are increasingly amenable to flextime, reduced hours, or telecommuting situations for valued legal professionals. In the end, it is impossible to generalize what the time and billable hour requirements are for either law firms or corporations, and simply incorrect to assume that the grass is greener on the other side. At the end of the day, the fact of the matter is that most legal professionals with sophisticated practices work hard, whether in private practice or in-house.

Training and Development: Frequently, a legal professional with less than one year in a law firm environment wants to go in-house. In the law firm setting, however, that lawyer's training has only just begun.

Private law firms offer, either formally or otherwise, the type of training that will insure that a legal professional's skills develop at the appropriate pace. Often, there are multiple layers of people the legal professional can turn to for assistance with tasks they are carrying out for attorneys. However, in certain in-house situations, the legal professional may have very few people to turn to for assistance, or have very little mentoring. This means that the legal professional must rely heavily on himself or herself for guidance.

We encourage any legal professional considering a career change to avoid generalizations and preconceived notions of what it means to be working with a law firm, and, instead, to focus on what jobs are best suited to their particular credentials and abilities. We've heard the success stories for in-house positions-we believe they do happen. However, we also believe that law firms get an undeserved bad rap among legal professionals-and we should know. As former "law firm staff" ourselves, Law Firm Staff's recruiters are ready to talk to you about the pros and cons of law firm life.