

# QUESTIONS TO ASK: HOW TO DISTINGUISH ONE EMPLOYER FROM ANOTHER

---

Ask yourself if you understand the differences between law firms. If not, consider the questions below. Note that some questions should be asked after you have received an offer of employment. Moreover, determine what answers will make you satisfied in your job.

1. If you are interested in a specific practice area, how is that practice area different from other firms with a similar practice? Is that practice area developing, remaining strong, or diminishing at a particular firm?
2. Do you understand the advantages and disadvantages of choosing between satellite offices and main branch offices?
3. Do you know the distinctions, advantages, and disadvantages in choosing between spin-offs of large firms and small or mid-sized firms generally?
4. What is the associate work assignment process? Whether you clerk for the firm for a summer or whether you join the firm after law school, will you be assigned to a particular partner or will you receive work from a variety of partners? Is there someone to monitor your workload? If you have a preferred area of practice, will you be able to work in that area?

In order to assess an employer's corporate culture, evaluate:

**Training and Mentoring Programs.** Does the firm provide good training and mentoring? More specifically, does the firm provide associates with information about the firm's corporate culture by showing associates "the ropes"? Does the firm give associates challenging work assignments that will enable them to grow and develop professionally? Does the firm provide development guidelines for associates at each level of practice? Does it have a formal continuing legal education program? Is there a formal mentorship program? Do the associates think the firm provides good training and mentoring?

**Performance Evaluations.** Does the firm have a well-developed associate evaluation process? For instance, does the firm have a formal, regular, meaningful associate evaluation process that encourages learning and constructive criticism and feedback? Or will you have to rely on receiving feedback informally? Attorneys frequently specify lack of constructive feedback as a reason for leaving an employer.

**Partnership Track.** Does the firm have a commitment to the promotion of associates or is it assumed that most associates won't stay around to make partner? What criterion does the firm use in evaluating associates? Does the firm provide incentives to retain associates, such as merit bonuses or a special "longevity" bonus for associates who stay with the firm after a certain period of time?

**Associate Responsibility.** Along the same lines, what is the level of associate responsibility? Most firms claim they provide their associates with early responsibility. Ask associates how much responsibility they have on cases and transactions.

**Billable hours.** What are the firm's billable hour expectations? How do those expectations compare with other firms? Is billable hour credit given for pro bono work or time spent in continuing legal education or associate development? For employers that do not require you to keep track of billable hours, what is the length of the typical day at the firm? For example, if lawyers say they work "9 to 5" does that mean everyone leaves at 5 p.m. or that you'll be expected to work a twelve hour day excluding lunch and other breaks?

**Compensation-monetary and otherwise.** Look beyond the summer and first year associate salaries. Does the firm offer compensation competitive with other firms at all associate levels? What other expenses are paid for, such as the cost of a bar review course or the cost of relocating to a new city? Are bar dues paid by the firm?

**Openness and information sharing.** Does the firm share information with associates and summer associates? Does it share its business plan with associates? As a summer associate, did the firm answer questions openly and honestly?

**Diversity.** Does the firm accept differences based on age, gender, culture, ethnicity, race and/or sexual orientation? What does the firm do to encourage diversity?

**Firm Atmosphere.** What is the firm's atmosphere? Is it formal? For instance, do the lawyers wear their jackets in the hall to go from one office to another? Is the atmosphere collegial? Do people speak to each other in the hall? How is the support staff treated? Do you get a sense that the lawyers work well together or are they competing against each other? Does the firm culture support and encourage teamwork?

**Quality of Life.** At one large New York firm, attorneys identified the following items as important to their job satisfaction:

- Sabbatical programs
- Parental leave policies
- Backup child care
- Flexible work schedules
- Special banking services
- Corporate credit card program
- Confidential employee assistance programs
- Domestic partner medical benefits
- Casual summer and Friday dress

**Technology Resources.** What are the employer's resources? Does the employer try to use technology aggressively and effectively? Will it give you a pager for 24-hour accessibility? Do you want it to?

**Library and Research Resources.** What are the employer's research resources? Does it have a library? What are its hours? How is it staffed? Does the library have the resources you need to develop the area of practice you want to pursue? What is the firm's policy on access to Westlaw, Lexis, and the Web?