Don’t Do These 7 Things If You Want to Work in a Large Firm

Do you want to work as an associate and then partner in a large law firm? If so, do the opposite of what I did, other than graduate from an Ivy League undergraduate school. That was a good first step, but everything else was just dopey.

1. Don’t get good grades in college. I didn’t study that hard in college, figuring that just graduating from an Ivy League school would be enough; it’s not. If you’re serious about getting a job with a large law firm, you must get into a really good law school, and one of the best ways to do that is to have top grades from your undergrad institution. I didn’t have good enough grades to get into a top law school. I could’ve overcome that, but I didn’t.

2. Take a lot of time off between college and law school. Many people take time off between college and law school. It may help if you didn’t get the best grades in college or your best grades were in senior year, where the law school would see them on the application, as opposed to applying to law school in your senior year, when those grades are not available. But you should not take too much time off, because then you’d be old as a first year associate. Most senior associates, who would be your bosses and give you assignments, would then be younger than you. I took off seven years, and that was probably a bit too long.

3. Don’t get the highest possible LSAT score you can. In addition to needing the best possible grades, one also needs the best possible LSAT score. I was always good at test taking. Most people who graduate from top colleges are good at test taking. I didn’t think I needed to take an LSAT prep course and could just study on my own. This was foolishness. Almost every aspiring law student takes an LSAT prep course. I now realize that not having taken an LSAT prep course was almost like not taking a bar exam preparatory course. In some ways, it’s even worse. Whereas the bar exam is pass/fail and your score does not matter as long as you pass (though now with the unified bar exam for several states, which have different passing scores, it does matter), one’s LSAT score and how one does compared to everyone else is crucial. Thus, any advantage you get matters. Even two or three points.

See the following articles for more information:
- All About LSAT - Law School Admission Test
- All that You Must Know about the Law School Admission Test

4. Don’t enroll in the best law school you were admitted to. If you want to work for a big firm, you have to get into a top fifteen or twenty law school. Or graduate magna cum laude and/or be on law review in a "lesser" law school. But because one is not guaranteed to graduate magna cum laude or make law review, even among “lesser competition” in an “easier” law school, you’re best bet is to go to a top law school. This is another mistake I made. I got rejected from NYU Law School, got wait-listed and then did not get into Columbia, and I was also wait-listed from Cornell, but got into Fordham. I had not intended to apply to Cornell, but being an undergrad alumni there, Cornell sent me an unsolicited law school application. When I got wait-listed by Cornell and admitted into Fordham, I told Cornell to take me off the waiting list. This was an incredibly stupid decision. Of course there is no guarantee that I would’ve gotten into Cornell, but
Fordham was ranked 29th at the time, and Cornell was ranked 16th. Since then, Cornell has gone up to being ranked as high as tied for tenth, but has never fallen out of the top twenty. On the other hand, Fordham went up to a tie for 25th, but then dropped to as low as forty, and is usually ranked in the low thirties. Throw in the national reputation that Cornell has compared to Fordham, and it’s clear that I would’ve been much better off if I attended Cornell (if I had gotten in) over Fordham.

- **See 10 Factors That Matter to Big Firms More Than Where You Went to Law School: Why the Law School You Went to Ultimately Does Not Matter as Much as You Think It Does to Major Law Firms for more information.**

5. Believe that all your grades in law school are equally important and that your overall GPA is what matters most. In law school, first year grades mean everything, while second and third year grades mean basically nothing. Someone who has a 3.6 GPA in the first year of law school and then has a 3.0 GPA in the last two years and an overall 3.2 GPA is much better off than someone who has a 3.2 GPA the first year and then a 3.5 GPA the last two years and an overall GPA of 3.4. This is because all major firms interview for summer associate positions after the first year of law school, so all they have to go on are first year grades. In light of that, it is of utmost importance to get the best grades possible in the first year. Don’t do anything else other than study. Under no circumstances should you have a job, like I stupidly did (against Fordham’s advice). Another thing to be aware of is whether some or most of your first year law courses are semester-long or year-long. Aside from legal writing, which did not have a final exam but had a final paper, four of my first year courses (Civil Procedure, Contracts, Property and Torts) were year-long. Constitutional Law was in the spring semester, and Criminal law was in the fall semester. Thus in December of my first year I only had one final exam, and I had plenty of time to focus on it even though I was working. Out of approximately 67 students in the two sections that had Criminal Law together, I got the highest grade. I then thought maybe law school wasn’t so tough. Boy was I wrong. When May came around and I had a semester-long final exam in Con Law, and four year-long final exams, I was swamped, did not have enough time to study, and did miserably overall, and I ended with a 3.0 GPA for those grades and a 3.1 for the year with Criminal Law included. I went to numerous interviews after my first year, but I did not get any summer associate offers. Without one of those, one’s chances of getting into a big firm are slim to none.

**See the following articles for more information:**
- Law School Grades and Your Career
- Acing Law School Exams: Grade-A Advice
- Do Grades and School Rankings Matter If Aiming for a Big-Law Job?
- How Can I Find a Job When I Didn’t Graduate at the Top of My Class?

6. Don’t explore other options once you have been admitted into law school (that is not in the top twenty). In my second year of law school I learned two other additional facts I wish I had known before starting law school. First is that law schools that have a night program allow their students to transfer from their night program to the day program after the first year by taking a course over the summer and then taking an extra course in the second year. Most highly ranked law schools do not have a night program, so this advice does not apply most aspiring law students. But Fordham is one of the highest ranked schools with a night program, and I discovered that many evening students – who claimed to be working full time during the day – had actually quit their jobs and were taking a lesser load of courses so that they would have more time to study. They would naturally do better than their evening division peers who were working and didn’t have as much study time, and then they transferred to the day division and finished up in three years. The other fact is that it is possible to transfer to another law school after the first year. If I had known this, and with my top grade in criminal law, I could’ve maybe transferred into Columbia, like one student I knew did.

**See the following articles for more information:**
- Transferring Law Schools after the First Year
- The Pros and Cons of Being a Transfer Student
- Transferring From the Law School Where You Had Been Admitted

7. Don’t start working in an area of law you don’t like. While one does not have a major or specialize in law school (other than patent law, which requires one to have a bachelor of science and then requires passing the patent bar as well), once you start your career after law school, you often can get “locked” into the field you first practice in, unless you make a change within the first 6-9 months. Of course this ran counter to what my school’s career advisers told me, which was not to switch jobs right away, especially as your employer might be a fellow alumni, and that is one of the reasons you got the job (which was the case with me), and that it was not a good idea to burn bridges. But because the chances of getting a job with a major firm are already slim to none without a summer associate or actual associate position under your belt, the experience you get will only be relevant or helpful to a(nother) large firm if it is in demand.
See the following articles for more information:
- The Choices of Practice in Law
- Choosing a Law Specialty: Who Are You and What Do You Want
- The Right Time to Specialize

Conclusion

If you find yourself like I did, with no job lined up after law school, don’t panic and take the first job you get (like I did). Wait for something that will interest you, or at least is in demand with large firms.