Small Law Firm vs Large Law Firm: Legal Secretaries Like Them Both!

As they say, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." Legal secretaries are at odds over which size law firm makes the best employer.

There is no consensus. Legal secretaries have expressed a variety of reasons why they prefer different sized law firms. They explain that large, medium and small law firms, as well as sole practitioners, each has its own appeal and advantages as an employer. Thus, all law firms have something to offer legal secretaries.

Legal secretaries want to work for a law firm that they believe is fair and reasonable in terms of compensation and benefits, policies and procedures, distribution of responsibilities and opportunity. They need to respect their employer and feel comfortable knowing that they are valued.

For the purposes of this article, I have opted to discuss the basic differences between large law firms and small law firms. I have categorized large law firms to include the largest mid-sized law firms, and have categorized small law firms to include the smallest mid-sized law firms. Mid-sized law firms are similar in many respects to both large and small law firms. I will not elaborate on sole practitioners at this time due to the varying degrees of opinions I have received.

Large Law Firms

Large law firms offer structure, and then more structure. Many legal secretaries want the security of knowing they are working for a large law firm with lots of support services. The largest law firms are very similar in terms of compensation and benefits, policies and procedures and opportunity. For example, most large law firms offer a competitive base salary that is typically based upon a 35-hour work week, or a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. work schedule (with a one hour lunch period) Monday through Friday. Additionally, the benefits packages are similar, although the costs associated with healthcare may vary.

Large law firms also offer policies and procedures that are designed to be fair to all legal secretaries. This uniformity, although strict, is required in order to maintain a sense of structure and order. Legal secretaries are able to perform according to a set of rules and guidelines as a planning device. Policies and procedures also help alleviate employee complaints of favoritism and special treatment.

Large law firms are well known to offer various support services, including a variety of evening, floating, word processing and temporary staffs. These staffs are available to help with overflow and heavy workloads, especially if a critical deadline is approaching.

Additionally, large law firms have facilities, administrative and technical personnel available to assist with day-to-day issues that may arise. This could include a computer-related matter, a broken chair, or even a question pertaining to employment.

Large law firms are also known to offer a variety of employment options. In addition to floating and evening positions, they also may offer, although on a limited basis, part-time and job-share opportunities. This flexibility provides legal secretaries an avenue to remain with their respective law firms should they want a change or should they experience a personal situation that may affect their employment options.

Many times, the mere fact that a legal secretary is employed with a large law firm enhances their suitability to seek employment with another large law firm. Having experienced the culture and conformity of one large law firm allows for a smoother transition to the next firm. Legal secretaries may know what to expect and how to conduct themselves within a law firm of similar size and scope.

Small Law Firms

Small law firms are almost the exact opposite of large law firms. They offer less structure along with less support services. Do not be concerned. This may be exactly what legal secretaries appreciate about small law firms. Remember, many legal secretaries find small law firms very attractive as employers, and this is one of the notable differences. The level of intimacy within a smaller firm tends to be more evident, and legal secretaries claim that it is nice to be able to know everyone within the firm on a first name basis.
This may surprise many legal secretaries, but there are several small law firms that are competitive with large law firms in terms of compensation and benefits. The difference may be that these particular law firms have few staff changes, and may be less likely to have an available legal secretarial job opening. Thus, this may be one of the reasons why this is a little known fact.

The typical small law firm may not regularly offer the compensation and benefits of a large law firm, but then again, the small law firm may not typically seek experienced legal secretaries for their openings. Thus, smaller law firms may tend to more regularly recruit less experienced legal secretaries and offer salaries based upon this limited experience. In fact, small law firms are more likely to employ entry-level legal secretaries without any law firm experience, and develop these novices.

The smaller the law firm, the more flexibility they are able to offer legal secretaries in terms of work hours. According to many legal secretaries, this is a major factor in remaining with a small law firm. Of course, this flexibility is earned over a number of years due to performance, trustworthiness, and reliability. It does not develop during the first week of employment.

Another advantage of working for a small law firm is the multi-task orientation of the role. Legal secretaries of small law firms tend to do-it-all. If they do not mind filling in for an absent legal secretary and helping answering telephone calls, then they may not mind doing some advanced legal secretarial (and even non-secretarial) tasks and projects. Also, the smaller the law firm, the greater likelihood that the office manager is a legal secretary with management responsibilities.

Some of the largest small law firms (mid-sized law firms) tend to offer the structure of a large law firm, while the smallest law firms tend to offer little structure. Providing structure, or a set of operational guidelines, tends to be the responsibility of the office manager or office administrator. Small law firms usually have an office manager or firm administrator who may be responsible for managing several areas simultaneously, including human resources, facilities, financial, and technology. Thus, legal secretaries may have only one person to solve their employment-related matters. This allows for a more manageable solution to many of the day-to-day challenges that face legal secretaries.

Legal secretaries employed with small law firms may feel a better sense of connection with the work they are performing. They may be more involved with every aspect of a case file - from start to finish. Additionally, legal secretaries may be simultaneously involved with more than one area of law practice, expanding their legal knowledge and experience. Once legal secretaries from smaller firms get a taste of this exposure to different areas of law, they may never want to concede this option to a larger law firm.

Conclusion

The preference of which size law firm a legal secretary prefers is usually a personal issue. It may be based upon where they feel most comfortable and how they view themselves within the role. While there is more security and structure with a larger law firm, smaller law firms offer unique opportunities. Many legal secretaries from small law firms eventually join larger law firms should they feel that their careers will be better served. Plus, there are many more higher paying job vacancies that become regularly available within larger law firms.

The debate over which size law firm is a better employer will rage on. Both sides of the issue present reasonable and attractive arguments. I believe that all law firms have something positive to offer. Legal secretaries understand that their employment options are broad-ranging, and that if a change of employment is necessary, they want to find the best available situation. And, since there is little consensus about which size law firm makes the best employer, the "beauty is in the eye of the beholder."