

# Working in a Small Law Firm:

## Deciphering 4 Common Complaints

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Anyone who has worked in multiple law firms knows that they each maintain their own environments. From the extremely conservative to the laid back and comfortable, navigating the firm culture can be a tricky feat. Even the firm size can affect the experience of lawyers and staff members.

Big firms often have the financial resources to offer extensive support systems and cutting-edge technologies that help firm members perform their duties. On the flip side, smaller firms may be financially limited in what they can provide and implement within the practice. As a result, firm members may have to perform a wider span of tasks.

While each small law firm offers a unique experience, there are some concerns that tend to stretch across office lines. This post will discuss and decipher four common complaints about working in a small law firm.

### **Complaint #1 – Multi-tasking**

Small law firms often work with limited staff in order to minimize overhead. While this can mean greater profits for the firm, it can also mean more diverse duties and tasks for staff members. In a small practice, attorneys may take on administrative tasks, like invoicing. They may also take on duties that would otherwise be handled by legal support staff, like drafting routine pleadings or document review. A single administrator may spend each day working on numerous tasks, from answering telephones to filing court papers.

Some small firm attorneys complain about the need for multi-tasking because it takes their attention away from the actual work of legal representation. They would prefer to concentrate on their cases rather than

the administration of the firm. Adding to these challenges, within a small law firm, even newer attorneys may jump into substantive legal tasks... sometimes without much supervision, which can add to the stress of multitasking.

### **The Upside**

With fewer lawyers and managers, small firms often have a shorter partnership track. So, the multi-tasking also offers an opportunity for learning more about the business side of the firm, which can prove advantageous for lawyers who want a fast track to the top. The structure of a small firm can lend itself to greater attorney participation and influence on the overall direction of the practice.

Even administrative staff members can benefit from the fewer employees of a small law firm. With less competition, staff members have a greater chance to showcase their value for promotions and raises.

## **Complaint #2 – Long Hours**

The limited staff of a small law firm may also result in longer work hours for attorneys and staff members, particularly during times of heavy caseloads. Also, when emergencies do arise, small firm staff may be called upon to handle them. Some legal professionals prefer to have a more static schedule and find unexpected work hours unsettling. They want to know that they are coming in and leaving at set times each day, without worrying about surprise calls into the office. So, the flexibility that may be required within a small law office does not appeal to them.

### **The Upside**

The adaptable culture of a small law firm can result in more flexible work schedules for firm members. An attorney may work longer hours on Monday, while taking Friday off for a three-day weekend. Small firms tend to operate with a more team-centered environment, which lends itself to greater accommodations among members. For attorneys with family

obligations or outside interests, a small law firm may offer the flexibility they need.

### **Complaint #3 – Less Specialization**

Small law firms often act as general practices handling numerous types of matters across a wide spectrum. As such, their attorneys operate as generalists with broad knowledge about numerous practice areas. This is a vast difference to the highly specialized nature of legal work in a large law firm. Unless working in a niche small firm, these attorneys may miss the specialization of a specific practice area.

#### **The Upside**

When lawyers, especially new lawyers, work on a variety of practice areas, they have the potential to become more knowledgeable in handling various areas. This can prove beneficial for lawyers who do not want to work in a particular niche. They may find consistently working on similar matters boring, so having a diversity of cases is much more interesting.

The small firm experience can also prove beneficial for lawyers who want to specialize, but they are not sure which practice area they most enjoy. By working on different matters, they have a chance to explore different types of cases until they find a niche that they truly enjoy.

### **Complaint #4 – Greater Client Contact**

While it may sound like a positive, many attorneys do not enjoy extensive client contact... which is why inadequate communication is the top complaint made by legal clients. With limited staff numbers, small law firms require their attorneys to have greater communication with clients, even about nonurgent matters that would normally be handled by an administrative staff member.

In a large firm, support staff members are often in place to screen calls before putting them through to an attorney. In a small law office, attorneys may find themselves answering calls or returning even general emails.

## **The Upside**

On the flip side, greater client contact could mean a better chance to establish a positive attorney-client relationship. As mentioned earlier, inadequate communication is a common complaint against law firms. Greater client contact offers a valuable opportunity for exceptional customer service. When clients get to speak with their attorneys directly, they feel more appreciated and heard. Lawyers that enjoy one-on-one communications with their clients may also enjoy this aspect of working in a small law firm.

Small law firms offer a unique type of firm culture. While some legal professionals may find these characteristics concerning, others may find that they thrive within the small firm environment.

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### **About Erika Winston:**

*Erika Winston is a freelance writer with a passion for law. Through her business, Personal Touch Edits, she helps legal professionals deliver effective written messages. Erika is a regular contributor to [TimeSolv](#) and a variety of other publications.*