

Other Areas of Practice

Law firm size matters | Marcel Strigberger

By **Marcel Strigberger**



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(September 18, 2020, 2:52 PM EDT) -- What is Big Law? I consulted one of my most trusted word reference texts, the *Urban Dictionary*. This wise opus defines BigLaw as: "A collection of huge law firms in major cities (particularly NYC) where thousands of Ivy Leaguers and honor students make six figure salaries straight out of law school. They usually quit after a couple of years of virtual slavery, but if they stay in the game, they end up running the country."

I suppose my 40-plus years of solo practice would fall short of Big Law. Actually after a few weeks in, I shed all aspirations of running the country. Canada's loss.

Incidentally, I Googled SmallLaw but all I saw was "Small Law." Alas, not helpful. Small was a lawyer's name.

I started to think what it would have been like to work in a mega lawyer firm. A few subtle differences.

Firstly, partnership? I climbed this ladder instantly. Not bad for someone straight out of McGill law school.

And speaking of struggles, Big Law associates often work up to 70-80 hours per week, arriving at 7 a.m. and even having their supper at the office, generally complementary catered gourmet.

I usually got in around 9:30-10ish, leaving by 6 p.m. I would however enjoy a catered meal, whenever I attended a bar association dinner. To boot, my firm picked up the tab.

What awestruck me is the sheer size of these firms, often occupying several floors. The lobby elevators alternatively note that they stop on even or odd number floors. So, to visit, you must know whether the lawyer is even or odd.

I practised for the most part in an 1800s virtual heritage house in suburban Toronto. It reminded me of the office of Atticus Finch. Not one client ever had to figure out which elevator to use.

I once attended to personally rush serve documents on a Big Law firm. The receptionist (the 44th floor receptionist), made a call and out came a gentleman in a uniform from the mail room. He had a name tag reading, "Mr. Beamish."

Soon, another gentleman wearing a similar uniform, arrived and asked Mr. Beamish if everything was OK. This man's tag read, "Mr. Henry." I wondered whether my presence sparked an emergency situation requiring mailroom backup.

Mailrooms were a surprise. In my office, the mailroom was located on my assistant's desk. The mail man, Charlie, would arrive, say "Good morning Angela," usually adding, "I hope some of these have cheques for Marcel."

I just can't imagine the downtown letter carrier riding up 44 floors, and saying, "Hey Beamish. I hope some of these envelopes contain checks for MacGregor, O'Leary and Goodfellow (Fictitious names, of course. They are actually MacGregor, O'Leary and Goodman).

But the large firms do have perks. I noticed a woman, also in a uniform, pushing a trolley, carrying coffee, tea, and scrumptious looking pastries. My office had something similar. Angela and I would take turns fetching those scrumptious pastries, waiting at the Tim Hortons.

Another enviable perk is excellent tickets to sporting events. Unless you want to pay a scalper \$200 for a \$75 ticket for a Leafs hockey game, (good old days, pre COVID-19) it is virtually impossible to secure a good seat. The large law firms hoard blocks of tickets to entertain clients. I scored a handful of gold seats at a Leafs game, all via friendly Big Law associates, who had to forgo the game as he suddenly had to stay late at the office. I never asked him what catered supper he had.

One problem at large firms is bureaucracy. A friend who worked at one (39th floor) wanted to rearrange his desk to face a window. He needed some committee approval; something like the, "furniture motion committee." They actually denied his application. He eventually quit the firm. Too bad. He was the guy who used to get me those hockey tickets.

Similar desk situations arose in my practice too. Fortunately, the requisite committee never once rejected my environmental plans.

Another feature of large firms is the specialized clientele they attract. I once visited one with a large base of mining industry clients. The magazines in the reception area were not overly alluring to me. I did not expect the latest issue of *MAD* magazine. However, I doubt most of us would have a tug of war over some publication like, *The Mine and You*, or *News from Down Under*. And I for one would pass, however tempting, on an article called, "7 secrets about zinc."

My office reception selection, in fact, had some humour magazines in the mix. I thought it would be a good idea to get clients laughing before turning on the meter.

Initially my practice included a sizable percentage of criminal law work. There were too many magazines out there catering specifically to these clients. I certainly never came across anything like, *Your Guide to Canadian Prisons*.

I have no regrets in having missed out on practising in a Big Law type firm. I do think about those hockey tickets I am forgoing. But then again, given the current COVID-19 pandemic, the hardest hit are those ticket scalpers.

Marcel Strigberger retired from his Greater Toronto Area litigation practice and continues the more serious business of humorous author and speaker. Visit www.marcelshumour.com. Follow him @MarcelSHumour.

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