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May 1, 2017 · 13 min read



This is part one in a series on “Big Law” firms from the perspective of a former Big Law associate. Part two discusses how to succeed as a Big Law summer associate. Part three discusses how to succeed as a first-year Big Law associate.

Notwithstanding the lawsuits and vocal critics on the Internet, ambitious college students and recent college grads continue to apply to law school. Law school applications have slowly begun to emerge from their nadir several years ago. Some even speculate that there has been a “Trump Bump” in the legal education market.

Future trends are unclear, but it’s likely that law school will remain an attractive option for a good number of intelligent people.

Regardless of your exact reason to pursue law school, it can be a worthwhile investment *if* you do your research and understand the consequences of your decision.

Making a haphazard decision may lead you down a road of suffocating debt and delayed dreams.

Nevertheless, a good number of people attend law school because they want to supercharge their career and make more money. There are some fallacies with this idea—among them being that it is difficult to obtain the highest paying jobs after graduation—yet this is a common justification for future law students.

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Big Law

It's well known that the highest paying jobs out of law school are at so-called "Big Law" firms. These are law firms that have 500 or more attorneys and have offices in cities around the world. Their clients are often corporations and high net worth individuals. Big Law is known for high pay, a demanding work environment, and attractive exit options.

I attended Penn Law School from 2011 to 2014. After graduation, I moved to New York City to begin working for a Big Law firm. In March 2017, I left Big Law after nearly two and a half years as a litigation associate.

Big Law can be an intense experience, yet it taught me valuable skills that I'll leverage in the future. It's definitely inspiring to work with such intelligent, hardworking colleagues on difficult legal questions.

A good number of law students think that Big Law answers many of the questions they have about their future career. The compensation is obviously attractive, especially with recently announced associate raises in summer 2016. Equity partners at Big Law firms can make millions of dollars. Even if they fail to become equity partners, Big Law can offer attractive exit options for mid-level and senior associates. What's there to lose?

Sure, Big Law can provide an initial convincing answer on the question of paying back your law school loans. But this choice may lead to even further questions.

Is the ultimate goal to become a partner? This may be more difficult than you expect. Are you prepared to strain some of your personal relationships after working late nights on a pending deal or court appearance? Are you comfortable with taking criticism in a high-stress environment? Does a lack of feedback bother you?

While the monetary rewards of Big Law can be great, it's not for everyone. You need to know what you're signing up for before you take the leap.

Nevertheless, it's your decision whether to pursue Big Law. But having said this, even if you want to go down this path, it's not a cakewalk to enter the Big Law pipeline. You'll need to be proactive and develop a solid strategy that you can execute at the beginning of your 2L year.

The remainder of this post contains my experiences and tips—from both the interviewee side and interviewer side—on how to enter Big Law. This is not a comprehensive “how to” guide, but rather a description of some of the basics and how to maximize your chances.

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Path One: The Traditional Route to Big Law

The easiest way to obtain a full-time Big Law associate position is by participating in a Big Law firm's summer associate program, which occurs the summer between your 2L and 3L years.

Big Law summer associate classes were quite large in the early to mid-2000s, but these numbers dramatically decreased after the Great Recession. While these numbers haven't reached their high water mark before the recession, summer associate classes have grown. Still, it's difficult to obtain a summer associate position.

So really, the question is the path to becoming a summer associate at a Big Law firm. The most common way is for rising 2Ls to participate in their school's on-campus recruiting program.

On-Campus Recruiting For Rising 2Ls

Representatives from Big Law firms participate in on-campus recruiting, which occurs before the start of your 2L year. Typically one or two attorneys from a Big Law firm will interview candidates on a law school's campus. These interviews often range from 15 to 20 minutes.

The interviewing attorneys are looking to hear more about your background, your law school experience, and your interest in their firm. They'll also take a hard look at your transcript and extracurricular activities (most notably, any involvement with journals).

Now, the extent of your on-campus recruiting program depends on the law school that you attend. If you attend one of the "Top 14" schools in the *U.S. News & World Report* law school rankings, congratulations: you have significantly increased your odds of finding a summer associate position.

This is because, generally speaking, Big Law firms tend to have a heavier footprint at Top 14 schools compared to non-Top 14 schools. The most obvious reason is that Top 14 schools are considered to be the most prestigious. They have the toughest admissions standards and, consequently, admit the applicants with the highest undergraduate GPAs and LSAT scores.

By contrast, the extent of your on-campus recruiting program will vary if you attend a non-Top 14 school. A somewhat useful proxy (albeit, a flawed one) is that your opportunities for Big Law will decrease once you travel down the *U.S. News* law school rankings.

Still, local prestige does exist and it can help if you are seeking Big Law in your law school's market. As one example, my experience is that New York City Big Law firms have a good presence at the Fordham University School of Law, even though it isn't ranked in the Top 14.

I was lucky to attend a school where many Big Law firms came to recruit. We were given a healthy number of opportunities to interview with Big Law firms. We used a numerical ranking system to signal our interest in specific firms, and then Penn used its internal system to allocate interview slots for students.

Unfortunately, the amount of interview slots isn't the same at every law school. Lower ranked schools will have fewer interview opportunities

for rising 2Ls. Further, at lower ranked schools, those with the highest 1L grades will often get the most opportunities.

This is why your law school choice is so important. If you're expecting to obtain a Big Law summer associate position and you attend a low ranked school, you're going to (a) need to be at the top of your class or (b) hustle in order to have any shot at Big Law.

Callback Interviews

If interviewers are sufficiently impressed with your on-campus interview, they will invite you to participate in a callback interview. You will work with the firm's recruiting department to arrange travel to the firm's office (depending on the location where you interviewed) for additional interviews with practicing attorneys. The callback experience typically ranges from a couple of hours to half a day (or more) if you join a group of attorneys for lunch.

The interviews themselves are much like your initial on-campus interviews. The attorneys will review your transcript, speak about your law school experience, your interest in the firm, and your career goals.

You'll also be given opportunities to ask questions. You need to have questions prepared; there is no avoiding this. If offered, lunches are great chances for you to get to know more about the firm in a less intense environment.

After your callback interview, the firm's recruiting team will reach out to you in the next several days, regardless of whether you are given an offer. You'll then have several days to contemplate your offer and (if you're lucky) juggle multiple offers.

If you obtain a summer associate offer, congratulations! You're on the road to a summer of fun, networking, and yes, work. While your odds of obtaining a full-time associate offer have greatly increased, you still need to make a good impression to receive an offer. Stay tuned for my next post on how to succeed as a summer associate.

Path Two: Hustling

The smoothest way to become a Big Law summer associate is for rising 2Ls to do well during their initial on-campus interview, ace their

callback interview, and then accept a summer associate offer from that firm.

Students who strike out during on-campus recruiting or who don't have many opportunities to interview with firms on campus—particularly at lower ranked schools—will have to be more creative. The odds are quite long but that doesn't mean it's impossible.

Below are some ideas to maximize your chances if you're struggling to obtain callback invitations. By pursuing some of these steps, you may be able to get an interview. From there, anything can happen.

1. **Networking Events:** During 2L recruiting season, Big Law firms tend to hold networking events near law schools and in major cities. These are good opportunities to meet practicing Big Law attorneys and pass along your resume. When following-up, you have to be persistent and take the initiative to advance the process. On a separate note, if you're able to go to a firm's networking event before interviewing with that firm, you'll be able to mention this fact, which will work in your favor.
2. **Hospitality Areas:** You may want to interview with a particular firm visiting campus, yet you are unable to schedule an interview slot. That firm may have a hospitality suite in your interview facility where the firm's attorneys are able to answer questions. Those suites will have a place where you can drop off your resume. At the very least, you can leave your resume and meet some of the firm's attorneys. It's better than nothing.
3. **Mass Mail:** You can reach out to Big Law firms that don't interview at your school. It'll be most effective to first create a template cover letter that you can adjust for the specific firm that you are targeting. Once you've finished customizing the template, send the cover letter, your resume, and transcript to the firm's recruiting division. Ideally, you'll get a response to schedule an interview.
4. **Personal Connections:** If you're desperate to obtain a Big Law summer associate position and don't have many callback invitations, it may be time to call in some favors. Speak with friends, family, law school professors, your law school's career services department, members of your local bar association, weak

connections on LinkedIn, and anyone else that you think can help. You'll need to be creative but there may be some unique opportunities here.

Path Three: 3L On-Campus Recruiting

While the above describes the typical process for 2Ls, there are separate opportunities for rising 3Ls. If successful, you would begin working at the Big Law firm after you take the bar exam. 3Ls interested in this path may have (1) been no-offered after participating in another Big Law firm's summer associate program; (2) struck out during 2L on-campus recruiting, or (3) decided to begin pursuing Big Law.

There are undoubtedly fewer interview opportunities compared to 2L on-campus recruiting. The 3L recruiting market is very difficult, and few students enter Big Law through this path.

If you're trying to pursue Big Law as a rising 3L, I'd recommend that you spend a good amount of time speaking about your summer work experience after your 2L year. Firms will be asking about it, and you'll want to positively spin that experience to explain why you're now pursuing that particular Big Law firm. You'll also have to consider moving to a different market, if necessary. Just realize that the odds may be stacked against you and that you'll need to hustle to have a shot at Big Law.

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How I Did It

My experience was somewhat different than similarly situated students at Top 14 schools.

Initially, I followed the typical path to pursue Big Law. During my 1L year, I found an internship with a judge in the criminal division of the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas. I was comfortable with my 1L grades and researched each firm that I was pursuing, even creating a "cheat sheet" for each firm that I could review just minutes before each interview. Simply put, I felt prepared to face the on-campus interviewing process.

The experience didn't go according to plan. Admittedly, I was nervous and the high stakes of the situation affected me. I felt like I was doing a poor job selling myself and showing off my knowledge of each firm.

After a good number of my interviews, I started to get a bad feeling that I had blown it, especially when I didn't receive any callback offers at the conclusion of the second day of interviewing. While I had more interviews coming up, I was nervous that I completely botched the recruitment process.

Because of this, I sprung into action. I consulted the Vault list of the top 100 Big Law firms, cross-referenced that list with the firms I met or firms that visited my school but I had not yet met, and made a list of the remaining firms. I created a template cover letter and personalized it for the firms I wanted to pursue. I then sent my application package to firms in New York and Michigan (where I attended college) and hoped for the best.

Several days later, I received callback invitations from several firms (one in Michigan and two in New York City). Ultimately, I settled on becoming a summer associate at a large international law firm. I chose this firm for several reasons, among which were its global reputation and that, compared to other firms, I felt most comfortable with the people.

The moral of my story is that the recruiting process may not be as smooth as you envision. If you're serious about Big Law, you need to do everything possible to maximize your number of interview slots during on-campus recruiting, attend networking events, submit your application materials to firms not appearing on campus, and consult your personal network as necessary.

Some Additional Tips

Here are some additional tips on how to maximize your chances of obtaining a Big Law position, whether that's through the 2L or 3L recruiting cycles.

1. **Don't Slack on Your Research:** While this is an obvious point, I understood the importance of preparation when I was interviewing candidates. True, it's difficult to adequately prepare

for all of your interviews if you have 10 or 15 on deck. But you need to try your best to have some sense of how the firm differentiates itself, why you're targeting the specific firm, and, importantly, how to pronounce the firm's name. This won't necessarily help you leap over other candidates, but you'll avoid some major unforced errors. Researching the interviewer(s) before your interview can also signal that you've taken the time to do some research. Even more impressive is mentioning that you spoke with a current associate or partner before interviewing with the firm. It shows that you are truly interested in the firm and will take the initiative to do your own diligence.

2. **Be Aware of Behavioral Interview Questions:** Sure, you're going to need to have solid answers to questions like "Tell me about yourself" and "Why are you interviewing with our firm." But a recent trend is law firms asking you to analogize how you would use your experiences and background to solve typical problems that summer associates encounter. While these questions may initially seem tricky, you can prepare for them. Think about certain experiences you've had in law school (even before law school) that can illustrate your ability to overcome challenges, take initiative, work long hours, pay attention to detail, and grind out work while under pressure.
3. **Don't Just Pursue Prestige:** If you're lucky enough to attend a Top 14 school, you'll have a healthy selection of firms to target. It's going to be tempting to apply to the highest ranked firms in the Vault 100. This is common and it's true that prestige does play a role among Big Law firms. Still, I'd argue that highly underrated factors are the firm's culture and the personalities of its attorneys. You're going to be spending a good part of your day with your fellow associates and partners. While Big Law is inherently stressful, it can be even more stressful if you simply don't like your colleagues. Unfortunately, there isn't a precise way to determine whether a firm has "nice" attorneys or not. The best workaround seems to be (a) observing the personalities of the attorneys you speak with during your callback interview, and (b) speaking with current and former attorneys at the firm.
4. **Make a Conscious Effort to Stand Out:** As an interviewer, candidates blur together. After speaking with 20 candidates in a single day, it can be difficult to remember which candidate said

what. So you're going to want to find a way to make your interviewers remember you as they vet candidates. But more importantly, you want to stand out for the right reasons. I found it useful to have a list of interests at the bottom of my resume. This way, not only can you differentiate yourself from another interviewee who has similar grades as you, but it allows the interviewer to break the ice at the opening stages of your interview. By referencing some unique interest or hobby that you have, you'll make it easier for the interviewers to remember you at the end of a long day.

It's Difficult, But Not Impossible

The fact remains that your odds of breaking into Big Law depend on the prestige of your law school, your 1L grades, your interviewing skills, networking, and your ability (and desire) to hustle. Don't go into law school banking on finding a Big Law job after graduation. Recognize that the road may be impassable (especially if you attend a lower ranked school). But when all is said and done, give 100% effort and try your best. You never know what may happen.

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