

## Inside Out > column



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## Small versus big firms

**H**ow does the size of a law firm impact the kind of services a client receives?

**Tina Martini:** In an ideal world, the size of a law firm would not really impact the type of legal service someone would receive. Unfortunately, we don't live in an ideal world, and there are only so many hours in a day. Law firms, like all businesses, only have a certain amount of resources. The question really becomes: What do legal services look like across different sizes of firms?

Understandably, smaller firms have fewer people and so, when you're talking about what kind of experience those firms bring to the table, they can usually offer a deep bench in only one or a couple of areas. But when it comes to having a multitude of practice areas with a deep bench or expansive geography, you don't really see it all that often, just because they don't have the infrastructure.

When it comes to administrative resources, they don't really offer what larger firms have when it comes to things like marketing, professional development, training, pro bono and so forth. Large firms, on the other hand, are often known for a few things. Along with the cachet of their names comes a multitude of disciplines, a deep bench, as well as expansive geography. It is important to look at an attorney for who they are and what they represent to a potential client, rather than dealing in stereotypes. ...

**David Susler:** I have to agree with what Tina said. There are certain stereotypes, but I really don't abide by them. Size is rarely the first thing that I consider when looking for a law firm. It is the substantive expertise that is foremost in my mind. You can get first-rate quality legal services from both small and large firms. It really depends on the nature of the

matter and the substantive experience you are looking for in someone to handle that matter. It is not as simple as cost or fees. Large firms may have developed certain efficiencies and may actually be less expensive than smaller firms on a given matter and the reverse can be true. ...

Many small-firm lawyers and solo practitioners started out their careers in large firms and they present the same level of experience in subject matter that you would find in bigger firms, so you are going to get the same type of quality of legal service. If you have matters across the country or across the globe a large firm may have a certain advantage there because they've got that larger footprint that can match the footprint of a company's needs. ... Ultimately, it comes down to the sophistication necessary for the matter, how important and how valuable that matter is to my company in the grand scheme of things, and the connection I make with outside counsel. ...

**Martini:** ... Depending on the type of matter you are talking about — whether it's a short-term project or a long-term project, if you are looking for an attorney who is going to be your adviser, particularly on a longer-term basis, it's important to look at who they are as an attorney and who they are as a person. Are you able to develop that rapport? What do they bring to the table individually, as well as what does their firm bring to the table? It's a short-term as well as a long-term analysis.

**What does the firm of the future look like?**

**Martini:** Some of the trends we've been seeing are because the economy has been bad over the last 18 months. We are going to continue to see a consolidation in the legal market, which will ultimately drive the development of additional global law firms. We are going to

see mergers, and some firms are going to end up getting bigger. There will be some that end up dissolving or being reborn into different entities. ... That being said, we are going to continue to see smaller firms as well as solo practitioners.

When it comes to the success of a law firm, it is really going to be driven by the individuals in those law firms. Being diligent and proactive is going to be really important, not only when it comes to your clients but also in the running of the business. Of course, you are going to have to be nimble. Of course, you are going to have to react quickly to your clients' needs and in determining what direction the marketplace is driving your business. A law firm is a business at the end of the day.

**Susler:** ... Alternative fees are going to be increasingly the norm ... with less reliance on the billable hour. As to size, I agree with what Tina said. We will continue to see the same mix in the size of firms we have now, though ultimately we will see fewer megafirms. In terms of the types of lawyers that are in firms, we will see the most change in larger firms. I think there will be fewer partners and more non-partner track attorneys who will stay at the firm, such as staff attorneys and of counsel. Firm management is going to continue to be more businesslike, especially at the larger firms. It is going to become increasingly important to stop placing rainmakers into the leadership roles just because they bring in business. There will be more focus on placing people who have a knack and a talent for leadership. It takes a special kind of person to lead a professional services firm. Just because you have a big book of business doesn't naturally translate into being a good leader. ... ■

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