



FROM LAWYER TO LAW FIRM CAREER PROFESSIONAL

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I. What Do Non-practicing Legal Professionals Do in Law Firms?

Legal professionals serve many critical functions in support of law firms in a variety of roles. Some law firms have a few professionals serving just their talent needs while others employ teams of professionals to support their lawyers in numerous ways. Talent titles range from the more junior coordinator and specialist roles through manager and director roles and often culminate in chief titles within law firms. Many of these roles do not require a JD, but for some roles a JD is strongly preferred or required. The following are some functional roles where former lawyers serve in law firms. Some professionals focus solely on one functional area while in others, they wear many hats.

Recruiting

Recruiting is one of the core law firm functions often performed with the assistance of legal professionals. A great deal goes into maintaining or growing a law firm's pool of talented lawyers and legal professionals are called on to help at every step. Everything from creating a strategic recruitment plan to acting as the face of the firm to recruits falls within the purview of legal recruiting professionals. The following are three main types of law firm recruiting responsibilities:

Law Student Recruiting

Most law firms rely on law student recruitment to produce a pipeline of entry-level associates. This is a far more involved process than simply posting a job on a law school jobs board. Often, firms spend the entire school year getting name recognition on campuses and meeting/wooing law students. Recruiting professionals partner with the firm's recruiting chairs or committees to decide how most effectively to do so to achieve the firm's entry-level recruiting goals. They then execute that plan, finding opportunities for firm lawyers to spend time on campuses with students, creating their own off-campus law student recruiting events, and tracking the results of that outreach. This involves creating close working relationships with the law school career services office professionals (often fellow NALP members). Depending on the size of the firm, the recruiting team may work with a core group of law schools while others may have law school relations across the country.

Another key component of law student recruiting is interviewing. Traditionally, this was done through on-campus interview programs but in recent years more firms have been taking their interviews in-house or doing a combination of on-campus interviewing and direct application interviewing. Either way, the process involves an intense amount of coordination on the law firm side (selecting candidates/interviewers, scheduling/hosting callback interviews, communicating with candidates, managing interview evaluations and offer decision making) which is handled by legal recruiting professionals.

Lateral Associate/Partner Recruiting

Even firms who have robust entry-level pipelines also need to rely to some extent

on lateral recruiting of experienced lawyers. Firms hire laterals to address attrition, to support a growing practice area, to strategically grow in a specific direction, and for many other reasons. The process of finding, vetting, and hiring that lateral talent is often the work of legal recruiting professionals. Similar to law student recruiting, recruiting professionals work with the firm's recruiting chairs or committees to decide how to achieve the firm's lateral recruiting goals.

They identify current or upcoming needs, draft job descriptions, and market the positions. The sources of lateral lawyers are not as clear cut as law students coming straight from law school. These lawyers may come through internal referrals or through external recruiting agencies. Each of these sourcing methods requires a commitment to building and maintaining relationships internally and externally. Once candidates have applied, it is again the recruiting professional's job to manage all aspects of the vetting, interviewing, and offer process.

Summer Program Planning/Execution

Legal recruiting professionals are also responsible for the traditional cornerstone of firm's law student recruiting model—the summer associate program. Most firms still rely on a summer associate program to both vet and court 2L and sometimes 1L law students. Those programs range from simple to elaborate, but most involve numerous events over a six to 10-week program and workflow/evaluations for up to hundreds of students. These programs are large undertakings with many moving parts. Legal recruiting professionals bring all their organizational and relational skills to bear in conducting successful summer programs.

Professional Development

Once the recruiting professionals have done the work of hiring a lawyer, it becomes the responsibility of the legal professionals on the professional development team to focus on the progress of those lawyers. Their efforts span the lifecycle of the lawyer from when they join the firm, through their elevation to partner, and often beyond. Following are five areas in which legal professionals support the growth of firm lawyers:

Onboarding

The handoff from the recruiting team to the professional development (PD) team often occurs at the point of onboarding the new lawyer. PD staff take great care to ensure a lawyer's first days at a firm set the tone for the rest of their career. Onboarding is the first phase of a lawyer's integration process and often includes orientation which provides an introduction to the firm, technical training on all aspects of the firm's support resources, structured social events to allow firm members to welcome the new lawyer, and more. This often means orchestrating many people across the firm to work in concert to pull off a smooth transition for the new lawyer. Some firms are developing specialist integration roles which can sit on recruiting teams or PD teams. Many firms have a professional position that focuses on lateral partner integration, but some roles also focus on associate integration.

Training/Continuing Legal Education (CLE)

A central function of firm PD professionals is to spearhead the ongoing training of firm lawyers. Firms take various approaches to lawyer education that may be directed toward separate audiences and address different skills. Firms usually have some training geared towards associates as they progress towards partnership. Many firms also have robust training programs for all lawyers — staff lawyers, associates, counsel, new partners, and experienced partners alike. Such training can be limited to professional skills that cross practice groups, or it can be substantive and tailored to each practice and degree of seniority. PD professionals will likely be tasked with planning in-house training, mapping out curricula, sourcing instructors either in-house or externally, and hosting the training virtually, in-person, or some combination of the two. In many firms, PD professionals are also charged with tracking and reporting lawyers' required CLE credits, which is a massive undertaking depending on the census and footprint of the firm.

Mentor Programs

In addition to traditional training, lawyer growth has long depended on mentoring. PD professionals are often the individuals responsible for designing and maintaining law firm's formal mentoring programs. This function may include all aspects of the mentoring program from selecting the mentor pairings (or groups), training the mentors/mentees, setting forth a framework for the mentoring meetings (frequency/topics), managing reimbursement for mentoring expenses, and tracking mentoring activities.

Performance Evaluations/Partnership Review

Performance management in the form of annual (or more frequent) associate evaluations and partnership consideration is often handled or supported by legal talent professionals. These responsibilities range from administering the self-evaluation/evaluation process to summarizing associate evaluations or partnership consideration feedback to attending or leading associate performance meetings. These roles often involve managing large evaluation committees and working with partners on the review process. Many of these professionals also play a key role in supporting underperforming or struggling lawyers with resources.

Coaching & Career Transitions

A growing area of PD is coaching and career transitions. Some firms have internal coaches who work directly with lawyers on various aspects of their career at the firm. Coaches often provide a confidential resource for lawyers to work through issues in their career development. Some firms also have PD professionals with a multi-faceted role where they provide career development and coaching support but also help with staffing, evaluations, and other support for the associates. Some firms embed these managers in practice groups working closely with associates and partners. Increasingly, some firms also provide resources to support lawyers who may be

considering a transition in their career. Some firms provide that support in-house or through external coaches. Many firms are interested in hiring former practicing lawyers for these roles and look for certified coaches.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) roles within law firms are recognized as integral to fostering inclusive, equitable, and thriving workplaces. For lawyers considering a career shift toward DEI, their legal expertise, deep understanding of firm dynamics, and commitment to advancing inclusion and expanding opportunity provide a strong foundation. Collaborating closely with departments such as Human Resources, Professional Development, Recruiting, Pro Bono, Marketing/Communications, and Business Development ensures that DEI initiatives are integrated across the firm. Transitioning to a DEI role not only allows lawyers to profoundly affect their immediate work environment but also contributes positively to the broader legal community by nurturing a culture of inclusion and equity. The career pathways in DEI offer diverse opportunities for professional growth while making a significant difference.

Becoming a *DEI Manager or Director* presents a dynamic and impactful role for a lawyer. DEI Managers and Directors are at the forefront of developing and implementing strategies to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion within the firm. They are instrumental in designing policies and programs to foster a diverse workforce, which often includes initiatives aimed at recruitment, retention, and advancement. From conducting comprehensive training sessions to organizing insightful events, these professionals are essential resources for employees regarding DEI concerns.

Lawyers may alternatively excel as *DEI Consultants*, choosing to operate independently or collaborate with consulting firms. Here, they leverage their expertise to offer actionable guidance to law firms and a variety of organizations, aiding in the enhancement of DEI practices. This multifaceted role includes conducting thorough assessments, crafting strategic plans, and offering targeted training and workshops. Consultants gain extensive exposure to industry best practices, helping organizations navigate shifting legal, political and client expectations.

Those with a passion for education may find the role of *DEI Trainer* particularly gratifying. DEI Trainers are responsible for developing and presenting training programs that cover crucial topics such as allyship, inclusive leadership, accessibility, and inclusive talent practices. These professionals are pivotal in raising awareness and equipping employees with the necessary skills to foster a more inclusive work environment.

For lawyers with a penchant for data, the role of a *DEI Analyst* can be particularly appealing. DEI Analysts engage in collecting and scrutinizing data integral to understanding and advancing the firm's diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. By identifying trends, evaluating the efficacy of DEI programs, and providing insightful recommendations, analysts ensure that DEI decisions are data-driven and impactful.

Lastly, taking on the mantle of a *DEI Advocate* offers lawyers a forum to champion policy and practice reforms that foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. This can involve active participation in bar associations, serving on DEI committees, and disseminating insights through public speaking and writing engagements.

Additional Resources and Professional Organizations

Lawyers interested in DEI-focused careers have access to valuable resources through professional organizations like NALP and the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals (ALFDP).

Alumni

One of the more recent functions for which firms have employed legal professionals is alumni relations. Firms (particularly large ones) have begun to realize what an important and often untapped resource their alumni ranks have become. Keeping firm alumni engaged and providing resources for those alumni is a dynamic and far-reaching responsibility. This engagement can include planning events for alumni, hosting a jobs board for alumni, and sending a regular alumni newsletter. Firm alumni relations roles employ many of the same organizational and interpersonal skills as many of the traditional talent functions with an entirely external but known audience. It is also important to note that while many firms house this role under the Talent umbrella, it is sometimes housed in the Marketing/Business Development team.

What other types of law firm roles are often held by lawyers?

While NALP's law firm members are typically employed in the roles previously discussed, opportunities for lawyers in law firms do not end there. Law firms have numerous opportunities for lawyers in:

- Legal Operations
- General Counsel
- Compliance
- Marketing
- Business Development
- Media Relations
- Knowledge Management
- Technology
- AI
- Practice Management

Once inside a firm ecosystem, movement to other roles may be easier than starting an external job search. To learn more start by checking out other related professional organizations like the Association of Legal Administrators (ALA), the Association of General Counsel (AGC), or the National Association of Legal Search Consultants (NALSC).

II. Considerations in Making Your Move

Why People Stay...

Many lawyers who transition into professional roles within law firms find unexpected longevity and fulfillment in their new careers. One of the primary reasons is work-life balance. While these roles are not without stress, they may allow for more predictable schedules, with fewer late-night emergencies and weekend obligations. Unlike practicing lawyers, professionals in these roles may have more flexibility in their schedule to make space for activities that may have taken a back seat in practice.

Another reason people stay is the ability to do mission-driven work. Former lawyers may find satisfaction in building programs that impact people, whether it's mentoring summer associates, designing DEI initiatives, or launching career development frameworks. These roles allow individuals to take part in shaping the culture and future of their firms in lasting ways. They may also find deep connection and enjoyment creating strategic initiatives to further industry practice, such as summer clerk programs, a mentorship curriculum, or an alumni network. The creative freedom and strategic thinking involved in this kind of work is deeply rewarding.

In addition, lawyers who pivot into these roles tend to appreciate managing people instead of client demands. These roles emphasize internal leadership and collaboration rather than the adversarial or isolated aspects of traditional legal practice. And perhaps most compelling for many is the opportunity to leave a legacy — to implement structures, policies, or programs that make a lasting difference. Whether it's through coaching, mentoring, or simply improving systems that help others thrive, these professionals are motivated by the positive and enduring impact they can have on individuals and institutions alike.

Other Considerations

One of the most immediate benefits of these roles is the elimination of billable hour requirements. Without the pressure to hit time-based targets, professionals can focus more broadly on quality, strategy, and creativity in their work. Many also are able to take true time off, disconnecting fully during vacations and weekends, something many lawyers in practice rarely experience.

These roles also provide an opportunity to innovate. Whether piloting new training programs, exploring AI solutions in recruiting, or designing processes for lateral hiring, professionals in these positions have the space to think outside-the-box. Additionally, because these roles often intersect with other departments like IT, marketing, HR, and practice groups, there's a rich opportunity for cross-functional collaboration that provides a more comprehensive view of firm operations.

Finally, as firms invest in building out robust talent teams, many of these positions now offer clear paths for growth and long-term career viability. Titles like Chief Talent Officer or Director of Legal Recruiting are respected, and these professionals are viewed as strategic partners to firm leadership.

Despite the many benefits, there are some important trade-offs. The most significant for many lawyers is the lower salary, particularly at the start. While these roles often become lucrative over time, the initial pay cut can be a difficult adjustment for lawyers used to higher billable-hour-driven compensation.

Another challenge can be limited resources, especially in smaller firms or departments. Professionals may be tasked with overseeing major initiatives without sufficient support, requiring them to be highly self-sufficient and resourceful. Additionally, while perceptions are evolving, there can still be a sense of diminished prestige when leaving client-facing roles. Some firm lawyers may view these professionals as being on a “support” track rather than a leadership one, although this is increasingly less the case as these roles gain visibility and strategic importance.

Lastly, the transition itself can be difficult. These jobs are competitive, and breaking into the field often requires previous experience with firm committees, mentoring, recruiting, or training—work that may not be recognized or valued until after the transition is complete. Those looking to make the move should prepare for a period of proving themselves and demonstrating that they understand the scope and value of the roles they seek.

III. How Do You Get These Jobs?

Moving from law practice to these roles can take time and effort. Below are some ideas and suggestions to get started.

Information Gathering

- Gather information on these roles by reviewing the job descriptions above and on firm websites.
- Networking and informational interviews with NALP members in roles that interest you are respected sources of information and these connections can also help make introductions for open opportunities.
- Networking discussions can also be valuable preparation for interviews for NALP roles.
- Visit the NALP website for job postings at <https://jobs.nalp.org/>.

Tailoring your job search materials to NALP roles

- Prepare tailored job search materials including updating your resume, drafting a template cover letter, and updating your LinkedIn profile.
- Make sure your resume and LinkedIn profile include any involvement you had as a practicing lawyer with activities that indicate your abilities in the roles you are looking for such as experience on recruiting committees, mentoring, or training. Hiring managers are looking for interest in these roles and a commitment to professional development, training, or recruiting.

- There are many candidates who are looking to leave private practice but hiring managers are looking for candidates who have done their homework on the role and know what's involved.

Applying to NALP roles

- NALP Job Board: This is a great resource to review jobs at law firms in various areas.
- LinkedIn and law firm websites: review job descriptions and look at the details of each role.
- Note that law firms have a various titles for similar jobs and law firms arrange their professional staff in different ways. Therefore, a candidate cannot just look for a “professional development manager” role because that could be working on training in one firm and managing evaluations in another. We recommend candidates review all the details in a job description beyond the title to understand the scope of the role and to target their application accordingly.
- Make sure to review all job requirements carefully. Many roles will indicate JD preferred or JD required. Often whether a role requires or prefers candidates with a JD depends on the nature of a role. Many roles in recruiting, business development, marketing, and alumni relations will not require a JD. Roles in professional development, training, coaching, and career development often require or prefer candidates with a JD. There are always exceptions but if you do not hold a JD and the job to which you are applying indicates that is preferred/required, you should review the requirements carefully and make sure you can make a strong case to be hired based on your experience and credentials.

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