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Millennial Lawyers Explain Why They Flock to New York's Midsize Firms

The leaders of New York's midsize law firms say they are uniquely suited to give millennials meaningful work, recognition for their accomplishments and a better work/life balance—all values that studies show are attractive to that generation.

BY SUSAN DESANTIS

The leaders of New York's midsize law firms say they are uniquely suited to give millennials meaningful work, recognition for their accomplishments and a better work/life balance—all values that studies show are attractive to that generation.

In a series of interviews, millennials who abandoned larger and smaller law firms in search of more satisfying jobs say they have found midsize firms to be, so to speak, the happy medium. And midsize firms because of their ability to change more rapidly are reaping the benefits, said Jonathan Fitzgarrald, managing partner at Equinox Strategy Partners, which advises law firms about generational issues.

"Millennials are trying to understand why something that on its face looks archaic is being done



Kimberly Lau, left, a partner at Warshaw Burstein, working with other attorneys Hilary Korman, John Greene and Kimmia Salehi in a conference room at the midtown firm.

Photo: David Handschuh/NYLJ

over and over by really smart, intellectual people," Fitzgarrald said. "I think that's good for business because it keeps law firms evolving. It keeps law firms progressing. It stops them from just stagnating."

Of course, all millennials do not think alike, but there are certain values they share

according to studies by PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte and other firms. Millennials do not want to sacrifice everything to be a partner one day, and some don't want to become a partner at all. They want to have a positive impact, spend time with their family and friends and pursue hobbies.

“I like the idea of doing impactful work that allows you to leverage technology and do something that you think is valuable. I think that’s a lot of what we strive for,” said Stephen Bielecki, an associate at Kleinberg Kaplan, a firm with 60 attorneys and offices on Fifth Avenue.

Bielecki, 31, whose practice focuses on the formation, structure and operation of hedge funds, said he developed an expertise in cryptocurrency and blockchain technology when putting together a CLE presentation for other lawyers at the firm.

“This particular experience for me has confirmed that, yes, what I’m working on is valuable,” he said. Midsize firms, he said, offer the “ability earlier than you



Nneoma Maduike. Courtesy photo

might have at a giant firm to take ownership of practice areas or knowledge areas.”

Nneoma Maduike, 34, of counsel in the Banking and Specialty



Stephen Bielecki

Finance Group at Otterbourg, said of her generation: “We all have the same exact preferences and expectations about what comes from workplaces and work experiences.

“One of the things that I think is unanimous is flexibility in our work environment,” she said, such as the ability to work remotely. “I think the majority of my peers across the spectrum, we tend to prefer that flexibility in whatever form it is.”

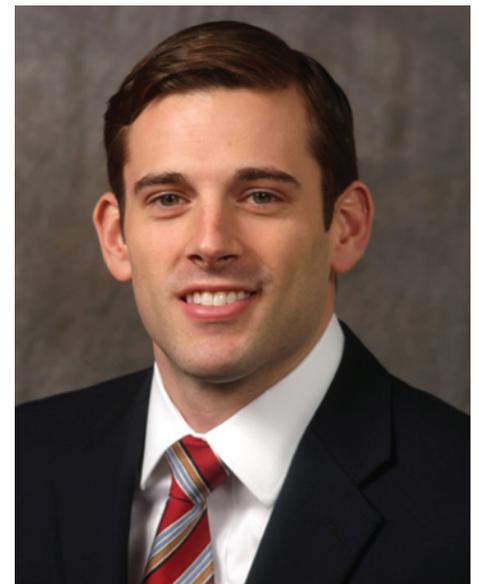
Maduike, who practiced in significantly larger firms before coming to Otterbourg, said, “We tend to feel a need to be part of the process, to feel that our contributions do matter.”

“You don’t become a cog because you have direct access to people who are willing to provide you with mentorship and substantive work. In that way, midsize firms always have an advantage. There’s no competition,” she said.

Adam Rafsky, 33, an associate at Farrell Fritz in New York City, which has 90 lawyers, said the advantage midsize law firms have is often a “sheer function of size.”

“The managers of the firm are more able to be in tune with their associates. It’s just a numbers game,” he said. “Whereas in a big firm, how can you know 300 associates? I think because it’s a small setting we’re able to foster meaningful relationships.”

The size of the firm also leads to more meaningful work opportunities, Rafsky said, “because we are smaller and leaner, it’s



Adam Rafsky. Courtesy photo

very important that millennials remain productive.”

Kimberly Lau, a partner at Warshaw Burstein who was born in 1981, is one of the oldest of the millennial generation. Lau said her age gives her a different perspective than some of her younger colleagues because she remembers

“what it was like to use rotary telephones and not necessarily have so much screen time.”

Lau, who specializes in Title IX college disciplinary matters,



Kimberly Lau. NYLJ Photo/David Handschuh.

left a smaller law firm because she wanted more support and resources. She said a midsize firm was big enough to take on such a specialty but not so big that there would be conflicts of interest between her clients—students and faculty—and the institutions of higher education that prefer big law firms.

Warshaw Burstein is flexible and willing to invest in its partners’ growth and learning “because it helps the whole firm. These were the things I was looking for that I knew I wasn’t going to get at a large firm and I certainly wasn’t getting at a small firm,” she said.

Michelle Pham, 30, an associate at Pryor Cashman’s Times Square office, came to the firm after spending two years at Clifford Chance.

“I’d say the biggest draw and the reason why I made the jump is because I think, at least for me, I felt I wanted a firm that not only would allow me to grow as an attorney and work on my craft as an attorney but also support my professional development beyond my practice,” she said.

She’s able to go out networking on a weekday, take on pro bono work, volunteer and still be seen as a hardworking associate.

“I just found that a firm like Pryor Cashman, a midsize firm, allowed me to be more well rounded and that was really important to me,” she said.

Pham said she has lots of friends at big law firms and knows those firms allow lawyers to work remotely in response to the desires of millennials.

But she said, “Those policies don’t cut through the culture that at the end of the day, it is a big law firm and you’re there to work.”

The leaders of midsize law firms say it’s important to keep millennial associates happy because then they’re more productive and less likely to leave.

In an interview and Q&A, Richard Stehl, the chairman of Otterbourg, which has 50 attorneys, said, “At a midsize firm, one of the nice things about being a young associate is that you do very meaningful work very early in your career. I think that kind of recognition and responsibility is very meaningful to the millennial group and, as a result, a lot of



Michelle Pham. NYLJ Photo/David Handschuh.

firms try to poach from us, but our associates tend not to go because of meaningful personal relationships.”

In another interview and Q&A, Ronald Shechtman, managing partner at Pryor Cashman, said it was his firm’s ability to give associates major responsibilities early in their careers that improved the morale of millennial associates.

He gave this example: “Several years ago, we hired a lateral associate (who was recently made partner at our firm) from a prominent large firm. I can remember seeing him in the hallway not long after he joined us and asking how he was settling in. He said to me, ‘I’ve worked on more matters in my first months here than I did in four and a half years at my previous firm.’”

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