

If the firm fits

Big or small? It's a decision that will shape your career.

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The size of the firm in which law graduates start their careers will have a big impact on the future of their professional lives. Indeed, differences in opportunities offered by large and small organisations are significant. While larger firms generally afford candidates access to higher-profile cases and a wider knowledge base, more compact boutique-style firms are viewed as an option that will lead to a higher degree of practical hands-on experience.

"Of those who are newly admitted solicitors, about 50 per cent go to large law firms, that is, law firms with 20-plus partners," Law Society of NSW president Hugh Macken says. "About 25 per cent fall into what you would loosely call sole practice, that is, one-principal firms. And about 25 per cent go everywhere else – medium-sized firms and governments. A considerable number go overseas following admission."

Macken says both options have their fair share of pros and cons.

"The advantages of a big firm are, one, remuneration – they pay more," he says. "Two, it's a big work environment and there's usually a lot of people in your age group. Three, it's probably quite rightly seen as somewhat glamorous. They also tend to fall into very specialised areas of practice. You go to banking, you're in banking. You go to mergers and acquisitions, you're in mergers and acquisitions."

While the pay packet may not be as enticing as those offered at larger organisations, opting for a small firm might suit other candidates better. For starters, Macken says, the workload will be more diversified and have greater variety.

"Perhaps there's also a lesser expectation in terms of the hours that you would put in," he says. "There's also the opportunity for more intimate, personal face-to-face work with clients, more of a human



touch for those who want to actually sit down and perform work for Joe Citizen and have that interaction. [For] employed solicitors in large law firms, their clients tend to be more corporate."

Elias Yamine, a lawyer with Clark McNamara Lawyers, says he opted for the small-firm approach out of a desire to experience a wide range of disciplines.

"Basically I wanted to get hands-on experience in a number of areas of law and I thought the best way to do that would be to start with a small firm that did quite a number of areas, from family law to criminal law to civil litigation to property matters," the 27-year-old says. "I was initially working in Parramatta in a small firm with just a sole practitioner. I've now moved to the city, working for a slightly larger firm with seven solicitors. The areas of law that I practise in are mostly for corporate clients. It's quite a good mix of work."

Meanwhile, Heidi Fairhall, 29, says there were two main reasons that attracted her to the large-firm route via Blake Dawson.

"The obvious thing that attracted me to a larger firm was the status – I think people generally in the industry tend to respect pedigree," she says. "But the most important reason was that I was interested in a specific area of law – employment law – from the word 'go'. Blakes had an extremely good profile in employment law and did a lot of high-profile employment-law cases."

COURTING EXCITEMENT

It's not often that fact is more exciting than fiction, but Robert Ishak (above) says the everyday workings of the law are a definite case in point.

"I got the fire in the belly in the later years of high school," says Ishak of his initial interest in the legal profession. "One could say TV shows like *The Practice* and *Ally McBeal* [got me interested] but the truth of the matter is that it's far more exciting than TV shows."

Admitted in December 2001, Ishak, 31, spent time at two Sydney law firms before deciding to go out on his own. In July 2005, he started William Roberts Lawyers along with partner Bill Petrovski. Initially a two-man practice, the Pyrmont-based commercial litigation specialists have since grown into a successful 20-man concern.

"We realised that we could do things easier and more efficiently and more profitably than old-school law firms ... [Our] clients have transparent access to their files online, so they don't often need to call you to find out the status of a matter. They can just log in and have a look for themselves."

As you might expect, Ishak has no trouble pinpointing the most enjoyable aspect of his chosen area of expertise.

"To me, the thrill of participating in litigation and the administration of justice is an irresistible proposition when compared with sitting behind your desk at a conveyancing practice. It is exciting."