

Top 10 urban myths

THE LEGAL PROFESSION HAS ALWAYS BEEN A SOURCE OF PUBLIC FASCINATION. BUT HOW MUCH OF THAT IS BASED ON REALITY?



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Mockery of lawyers is a widespread cultural phenomenon, and law firms – a business entity formed by lawyers – are by no means immune to it.

The prevalence in recent years of TV dramas revolving around relationships in fictional law firms highlights the prevailing misconception of life in law firms being high-paced, high-powered and glamorous.

Those perceptions often give rise to numerous anecdotes which, like the family crest, are passed down from lawyer to lawyer with the truth usually lost somewhere along the line.

So is there truth in any of these “myths”? Some of these stories sound too far-fetched to be credible while others seem quite plausible.

Let’s take a look at 10 urban myths about law firms. We’ll leave the judging to you.

10. Most Australian Prime Ministers were once partners of top law firms

This most recent of myths was undoubtedly propagated by the recent ascension to power of our current Prime Minister Julia Gillard, herself a former Slater & Gordon partner.

Upon first reflections this doesn’t sound all that implausible. Almost half of Australia’s 27 Prime Ministers have been lawyers and our first – Edmund Barton – was also a High Court judge.

But while lawyers have traditionally been the largest professional sub-group in the federal Cabinet, only Ms Gillard was actually made a partner. The remainder generally had relatively short careers as lawyers in suburban law firms. Hardly the stuff of legend.

9. A good lawyer can only be found at a large law firm

The competition to get a job at a top-tier firm is fierce, dictating that the best lawyers are to be found only in the top-tier firms, right? Surely a small firm would not have great expertise.

Perhaps so, but perhaps that mode of thinking is slightly dated. The tough business-like approach of most large law firms today has had, according to some, a two-tiered effect.

On one side, aggregate partner revenue has never been higher. But as law firms are being run as businesses, the flip side has been the decline of the collegiate culture which, surprisingly to some, is a significant factor affecting overall job satisfaction. The outcome is an exodus of some of the best lawyers to numerous smaller firms.

8. All law firms are the same

To a degree we’re stating the obvious; they’re law firms and law firms practise law. So is there anything to distinguish one law firm from another other than profit margin and field of specialty?

It is often said that culture makes a firm unique and determines its success. I’ll take their word for it.

7. It’s not what you know but who you know

We all know someone who has a mate, whose fourth cousin is going out with the sister of the god-brother of the limousine driver of the managing partner at a big law firm.

Yes, a network of personal contacts is important and, sure, it may enhance the prospects of being hired by a desirable law firm. But unless you can walk the walk, just because you may know someone who’s met Michael Jordan doesn’t mean you can play basketball like him. (Unless you have the same surname as the managing partner, in which case the myth stands.)

6. Small law firms are small because no one wants to work for them

Initially, this sounds quite reasonable. So many law graduates, so few positions available and small firms constantly expressing the need to “expand our practice”.

So why is no one hiring? Ultimately, it comes down to the commercial realities of our era. While every partner may secretly harbour a desire to be *Boston Legal’s* Denny Crane, the proliferation of legal practices means that there are only so many clients. Those Cuban cigars and the 40-year-old Scotch may just have to be put on hold.

5. Lawyers at law firms are trained to forgo sleep

Disproving this myth has not been helped by the old story involving a top-tier firm which, so the rumour goes, installed bunk beds on each floor of its office for lawyers working late. Possibly the world’s first law firm with night shift lawyers.

Far-fetched? According to a UK study, law is one of the most sleep-deprived professions in the world, with lawyers averaging just 6.5 hours per night.

We should be grateful we’re not real estate agents who average 4.5 hours. After all this I’m feeling rather sl... zzzzzz.

4. Law firms don’t encourage work/life balance

It’s not easy balancing work and a home life. Most lawyers are back at home every night baking a roast (if by “home” you mean “office” and by “roast” you mean the “8.45pm catered buffet on offer”).

about law firms



Ok, I'm embellishing. While 50-80-hour work weeks are not uncommon at some law firms, not all are pre-industrial revolution sweatshops.

3. Working in a law firm is intellectually stimulating

I concede that whether something is stimulating or not is largely subjective. I also concede that if a junior lawyer is asked by the managing partner to fetch a coffee and donut with sprinkles from the bakery downstairs, who are we to argue that such activity is not stimulating?

The practice of law is intellectually rigorous but tasks such as proof-reading, researching, note taking and time entering aren't exactly *Boston Legal*-esque.

2. Working at a law firm is a guaranteed way to achieve prosperity

We've all read about those disgustingly wealthy lawyers rolling around in gold bars while being fanned by diamond-studded peacocks imported from India.

Okay, so I've taken a creative approach to conveying prevailing public sentiment but statistics seem to suggest that's rather misplaced.

The most highly remunerated lawyers are employed by the top law firms, however they constitute less than 1 per cent of all legal professionals.

Australia has one of the highest numbers of lawyers per capita. If we apply the supply and demand principles, the average salary is comparable to that of other white collar professions. So much for buying a Porsche in the near future.

1. Working at a law firm is glamorous

We're all familiar with *LA Law*, *Boston Legal*, *Law & Order*, those charismatic lawyers with their exceptional oratory skills, sauntering into the courtroom in their Armani suits.

Ignoring the fact that the American system of advocacy is markedly different to Australia, the vast amount of a lawyer's time is spent doing such "glamorous" tasks as drafting documents, preparing briefs, researching, sifting through evidence and reviewing documents.

While we all aspire to achieve famous courtroom victories, where our superior skills of argument allow virtue to triumph over evil in the pursuit of justice, 90 per cent of all disputes settle, usually with some sort of compromise – somehow, not how we imagined it in law school.

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