



Attorney Specialization: Have We Gone Too Far?

Legal specialization has become increasingly popular. Even small and midsize firms with limited budgets [feel the pressure](#) to focus—to stand out from the competition by becoming the go-to experts in select niche practices or industries. As a result, firms are divided into silos, and the experts in these silos train new attorneys to become the next wave of specialists. If you can get the right talent and clients in the door, it's a profitable business model. But has it gone too far? As more attorneys specialize, the number of lawyers with a broad understanding of the law is dwindling. This can be problematic for several reasons.

BURNOUT AND TUNNEL VISION

Unfortunately, specialization [can limit](#) an attorney's ability to see solutions outside of his or her area of focus. A broad understanding of the law has historically helped attorneys [connect the dots](#) when cases span multiple practice areas or industries—an important skill that could eventually become rare if specialization becomes the norm. Sure, there will always be BigLaw firms with a broad range of practices, but most can't afford the fees that those firms command. The cycle of niche experts training the next wave of specialists has the potential to bring general legal knowledge to an end: the perfect [recipe](#) for an epidemic of attorneys with tunnel vision.

Specializing in one practice, industry or subject matter also brings a real risk of attorney burnout, particularly as lawyers are increasingly encouraged to choose a specialty early on. Realistically, it can be difficult for an individual to determine what kinds of matters will hold their interest for decades to come. This is one of many factors that can contribute to burnout.

Picture this: you're a young lawyer who has just completed your second year on the job. Just when you think you've got firm life figured out, one of the partners asks if you've considered specializing. "Try to think about the work you enjoy most," the partner tells you. "It'd be great if you could settle on something by the end of the year."

In the coming months, you pay close attention to which matters you find the most interesting. At the end of the year, you tell the partner that you'd like to focus on intellectual property law. "Great!" she says. "We were hoping you'd choose that one." Thrilled, the partner assigns you to work with the firm's lead IP attorney. Under his guidance, you become a successful IP attorney. But after about five years of working in the IP group, you begin to lose interest. The thought of focusing on this one area for the next 30 years sounds miserable. Is there a way out?

In this scenario—for a young lawyer at a large firm with many resources and practice groups—hopefully the answer is yes. The attorney could express a desire to assist with other groups, and with some luck and perseverance, eventually work her way in to practice areas other than IP.

But what about the attorney that doesn't recognize her waning interest until she's been practicing for more than a decade? Or the solo or small law attorney whose entire practice is built on one specialty? Though not impossible, it may be [trickier](#) for these individuals to cultivate business outside their established areas of expertise.



TWO SIDES TO EVERY COIN

Though young attorneys may not typically be asked to choose a specialty quite as early as our example above, it's often expected that they will eventually choose a focus—either a practice area or industry that they're passionate about, or one that would bring profit to the firm.

Of course, specialization has its merits: it can help young attorneys quickly develop their reputations as experts in a given niche. Law firms employing specialized attorneys can also charge a [premium price](#) for these specialty services, which can lead to bigger salaries and better job security. Marketing a specialty practice is also typically easier than marketing broad expertise. However, if an attorney spends time and energy specializing and building a client base, only to get burnt out or if that area of law experiences a sharp downturn, his or her options for expanding down the road may be fairly limited. And, as mentioned, specialization can severely limit an attorney's ability to see the law beyond a narrow scope.

PROBLEMS IN THE PIPELINE

It should come as no surprise that specialization isn't going anywhere anytime soon. At the end of the day, it's a profitable practice. The question is—will the legal industry learn to compensate for the potential issues that come with specialization? Firms may need to brace themselves for an increase in knowledge gaps and burnout. Perhaps firm leaders will figure out how to encourage specialization while maintaining general legal knowledge across practice areas; maybe burnout prevention strategies will be implemented as part of the attorney intake process. The solutions are still to be determined—but firms would be wise to start thinking about remedies now, before the issues start costing them time, money and clients.

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