

Above the Law: Cohen Ziffer's Managing Partner On Why Choosing A Boutique Firm May Be The Best Career Move You Make

When it comes to the legal profession, Biglaw firms have always seemed to rule the roost, controlling even compensation and bonus structures. But if you take a closer look, you'll realize that boutique firms are staking their claim on the legal market, offering up everything that Biglaw firms have, and more. What is it about boutique firms that should give attorneys pause when making career choices?

I recently had the pleasure of chatting with _____, managing partner of Cohen Ziffer Frenchman & McKenna, a well-regarded boutique firm, to get his thoughts on the matter. Here is a (lightly edited and condensed) write-up of our lively conversation on building his boutique firm from the ground up, and how boutique firms like his are competing with Biglaw on everything ranging from compensation to culture to gaining hands-on experience.

Staci Zaretsky (SZ): Cohen Ziffer Frenchman & McKenna is just a few years old, but the firm is already rivaling the bonus structure of Biglaw firms. Tell me a little bit about how the structure of your boutique firm enables you to make major financial moves like this.

Ken Frenchman (KF): Actually, in our very first year, in our very first associate offer letter, we were offering a bonus structure consistent with the top firms in the Am Law 100. And the reason for that is

simple: we have always believed recruiting top-level associates is the only way to compete against top-level firms and get the results that our clients are looking for, and frankly, paying for. In terms of how we are able to pay for it, we consider it an investment in our future. But we also make sure that we are rewarded for our success in the courtroom. We handle some of the biggest insurance recovery cases out there, and we often partner with our clients such that when our clients do well, we do well. Thus, from a recruitment side of things, we believe the more talented our younger lawyers are, the more success we have in the courtroom, and the more profitable we are as a firm.

SZ: You've helped build your firm from the ground up. What steps have you taken that have had the biggest impact on the firm and its culture?

KF: Hiring was not only the first step, but it continues to have the most significant impact on the firm and its culture. The firm at its core is the people who work here. We are in a service business, in a very competitive field of high-achieving people. Who we hire undoubtedly is crucial to who we become as a firm. And we have hired energetic, enthusiastic, intelligent, and hard-working lawyers from the very beginning. It started with the partners who we invited to start the firm with us. We hired people we know and have worked with before. From there, as we expand, we focus on people who we truly feel can be valuable members of the team, who can add to our culture, who can present diverse perspectives, and who are fun to be around. We spend a lot of time with our colleagues, so we look for people who we like. But creating a diverse and positive work environment has always been of the utmost importance to us. It is critical for our clients, the quality of our work, and our business as a whole.

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