

5 REASONS WHY YOU SHOULD MOVE TO AN OFFSHORE FIRM

by Mischa De Nobrega, Senior Consultant - Legal Private Practice, Aquis Search

We have observed a marked uptick in the number of lawyers expressing an interest in moving into the offshore space. This is driven by the growth of offshore firms within the Hong Kong market and generally, but more significantly, lawyers are more mindful of the wider career benefits that such a move can afford. We are seeing lawyers from top tier US and UK law firms change direction and embark on the offshore track. Offshore firms are obliged to position themselves competitively and deliver on these drivers both in terms of attracting talent and ensuring retention going forward.

To make a move to an offshore firm, lawyers are generally required to be admitted in a commonwealth jurisdiction. UK qualified lawyers are able to cross qualify almost immediately and practice BVI or Cayman law. However, since the pool of qualified candidates with UK qualifications and fluent Mandarin skills is fairly limited in Hong Kong, firms may be willing to bring on lawyers who are qualified from other jurisdictions. In essence, non-commonwealth qualified associates have the opportunity to make the move across to an offshore firm and join under the title of “Legal Manager”. In the ideal scenario, these lawyers would later cross-qualify to become England & Wales qualified Associates.

Benefits of Moving Offshore

The increased sophistication of offshore deals has acted as an effective incentive for lawyers wanting to consider their next move. The offshore space offers a completely different platform to that of traditional onshore firms and they can offer the full range of services to their clients, including finance, corporate, investment funds and litigation in their core offshore jurisdictions.

1. Quality of work

Many lawyers are of the view that leaving an onshore firm means a compromise on the high quality of work on offer, but this is certainly not in line with what we have seen. On the contrary, lawyers have relayed to us that they find the work at offshore firms equally technically stimulating. The quality of work provided and the pedigree of lawyers within offshore teams is generally exceptional. Indeed many of the lawyers constituting teams in offshore firms come from a Magic Circle or international law firm background.

2. A new challenge / broadening practice area

Moving offshore affords the challenge of transitioning to an entirely different environment, focusing on broader and more diverse work. Practice areas within international firms tend to be siloed with work pertaining to other practices areas often referred internally and handled separately within the firm. At offshore firms, it is not uncommon for lawyers to undertake a hybrid of corporate, finance and funds work at any given time. This presents a great opportunity for lawyers to build on their existing experience whilst simultaneously branching into different areas of law (with support and guidance available). It is often considered that this multidisciplinary approach makes for a stronger lawyer.

We have enjoyed considerable success in placing lawyers in offshore firms as “retool hires” where they are effectively undertaking a different practice area to their previous firm. Many of the funds roles we have had at offshore firms have been filled by corporate or finance lawyers seeking a change in direction. The offshore firms work hard to offer the training and support available to assist lawyers in making this ambitious transition.

3. Autonomy

Teams tend to be smaller at offshore firms with the consequence being that lawyers are expected to take ownership and shoulder early responsibility. It is not unusual for junior lawyers to have direct interface with clients whereas such contact is managed exclusively at partner level with onshore firms. With this level of accountability and interaction, lawyers have the benefit of acquiring autonomy over their work. This exposure can be very developmental for lawyers from a professional perspective.

4. Pay

It is our observation that offshore firms take a very commercial approach to salary. We see less of the traditional salary lockstep dictated by PQE level. Offshore firms tend to take a meritocratic approach to salary. We have seen offers from offshore firms which are akin to Magic Circle levels in salary terms as well as sign on bonuses to attract highly coveted candidates.

5. Work Culture

Working for any law firm in Hong Kong is demanding, but many offshore firms generally encourage a more collegial and friendly working environment. Although hard work is no doubt an absolute expectation, working hours tend to be more predictable with targets being achievable in a normal working day.

Career Prospects after Moving Offshore

Whether working in corporate, finance, investment funds or litigation, a role with an offshore law firm will certainly add value to your CV. The high-level experience gained from working offshore (as we highlight above) can add great long term benefit; whether it is in terms of making in-roads to partnership or opening doors to opportunities back onshore or in-house. We are firmly of the view that the experience gained is likely to enhance one’s prospects within the legal market. Since many leading UK and US law firms instruct and work alongside the major offshore firms, they are familiar with the quality of the work they produce. The exposure offshore lawyers receive tends to be broad and the mix between transactional work, advisory work, and business development, certainly increases the appeal for both onshore and in-house options. Leaving doors open is always recommended, although we find that most lawyers who have made the move to an offshore firm tend to favour the environment and are disinclined to look back.



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Mischa is a Senior Consultant working as part of the Private Practice Legal team based in Hong Kong.

Mischa is responsible for the recruitment of lawyers at all levels, across all practice areas, into leading international law firms across the Asia Pacific region. She has solid experience working with key decision makers including partners and human resources professionals. Her in-depth knowledge of the Asia legal market equips her to offer valuable advice on compensation and hiring trends.

Prior to joining the Private Practice team, she had a diverse portfolio, with responsibility for finding candidates in the human resources & corporate services space. Mischa worked across multiple industries including commerce, financial services and private practice law firms and successfully placed candidates across all industries.

Prior to joining Aquis Search, Mischa was a Research Assistant for a food and beverage company in South Africa.

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