

The Death of Big Law

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LARRY E. RIBSTEIN**

Large law firms face unprecedented stress. Many have dissolved, gone bankrupt, or significantly downsized in recent years. This Article provides an economic analysis of the forces driving the downsizing of Big Law. It shows that this downsizing reflects a basically precarious business model rather than just a shrinking economy. Because large law firms do not own durable, firm-specific property, a set of strict conditions must exist to bind the firm together. Several pressures have pushed the unraveling of these conditions, including increased global competition and the rise of in-house counsel. The large law firm's business model therefore requires fundamental restructuring. Combining insights from the theory of the firm, intellectual property, and the economics of legal services, this Article discusses new models that might replace Big Law, how these new models might push through regulatory barriers, and the broader implications of Big Law's demise for legal education, the creation of law, and lawyers' role in society.

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INTRODUCTION

Few industries have suffered more visibly from the financial meltdown of 2008–2009 than the nation’s largest law firms (what this Article refers to as “Big Law”). After a half century of rapid growth, many large and established firms have dissolved or gone bankrupt since 2000,¹ and others have significantly downsized. According to an annual survey concluded at the end of September 2009, the top 250 law firms lost 5,259, or 4 percent, of their lawyers, including 8.7 percent of their associates; 15 of the top 75 law firms dropped more than 100 lawyers each.² It was by far the worst decline in the thirty years of the survey. Law firms disclosed that they laid off 12,196 people in 2009, including 4,633 lawyers and 7,563 staff.³ Another survey at the end of 2009 found that 40 percent of big law firms had reduced associate starting pay, 44 percent were considering doing so in 2010, while 60 percent of the firms had deferred associate start dates in 2009, and 43 percent expected to do so in 2010.⁴ Law firm instability reached the partner ranks, as a record number of 2,775 partners left or joined Am Law 200 firms in 2010, a 10.6-percent increase in partner mobility over the previous year.⁵

Big Law is suffering not merely from a short-term decline in the general economy or in the overall demand for legal services. Indeed, the rise in litigation and regulation signal an increasing need for lawyers. Rather, Big Law’s problems are long-term, and may have been masked until recently by a strong economy, particularly in finance

1. See *infra* Part I.F.1 (discussing some prominent examples). For a comprehensive review and analysis of the downsizing of Big Law, see Bernard A. Burk & David McGowan, *Schumpeter, Coase and the Future of the (Law) Firm* (unpublished manuscript, 2010, on file with author).

2. See Leigh Jones, *2009 Worst Year for Lawyer Headcount in 3 Decades*, *Says “NLJ 250” Survey*, NAT’L L.J., Nov. 9, 2009, available at <http://www.law.com/jsp/law/LawArticleFriendly.jsp?id=1202435276422>.

3. See *The Year in Law Firm Layoffs—2009*, LAWSHUCKS.COM, <http://lawshucks.com/2010/01/the-year-in-law-firm-layoffs-2009> (last visited Mar. 23, 2010). These numbers understated the problem, taking into account the total personnel loss reflected in the National Law Journal data. See *NLJ Numbers Indicate Abundant Stealth Layoffs*, LAWSHUCKS.COM, Nov. 10, 2009, <http://lawshucks.com/2009/11/nlj-numbers-indicate-abundant-stealth-layoffs> (noting that NLJ shows that there were 5,259 fewer lawyers in the top 250 compared with the previous year, and that some firms had shed more lawyers than they reported in layoffs).

4. See Debra Cassens Weiss, *40% of Firms Cut Starting Associate Pay, While 44% Consider 2010 Cut*, ABAJOURNAL.COM, Dec. 1, 2009, http://www.abajournal.com/weekly/article/40_of_firms_cut_starting_pay_for_associates_while_44_consider_2010_cut.

5. See *The 2010 Lateral Report*, AM. LAW., Feb. 2010, at 53.

and real estate. The real problem with Big Law is the non-viability of its particular model of delivering legal services.

In a previous article, I analyzed the traditional Big Law business model as a mechanism for bonding lawyers' promises of faithful performance.⁶ I showed how this model called for law firms to establish incentive and compensation devices that encourage members to invest in developing the firm's reputation rather than solely their own books of business. I also discussed how professional ethics rules—particularly including rules restricting limited liability, non-lawyer ownership and non-competition agreements—impede the growth of large law firms.

This Article presents a much more pessimistic view of the future of Big Law. It shows how additional stresses, including better-informed clients and intensified competition in the global market for legal services, now threaten Big Law's already precarious equilibrium. Big Law's problems now extend beyond unaccommodating professional rules and can be solved only by adopting significantly different business models that involve ownership of firm specific-property and that can attract outside financing. Indeed, even these changes may not be enough. In the future, the sale of legal expertise may move beyond client advice by law firms to include completely different types of businesses.

This Article focuses on the structure and function of large law firms. Its goal is to analyze big law firms as a type of business firm and to question whether these firms are economically viable under modern business conditions. The Article is not primarily concerned with the future of law practice or of the legal profession generally, except to the extent that these broader developments offer alternatives to Big Law. Although this focus might seem to be relatively narrow, this Article shows that the precarious business structure of Big Law has potentially significant implications for the legal profession and society.

Part I of this Article examines Big Law's inherent structural flaws and the forces that are destabilizing it. Part II discusses new approaches to delivering legal services that are likely to replace the existing model. In general, firms selling legal information will own intellectual and other property and produce products rather than focusing on rendering individualized advice to clients. Part III discusses the changes in the regulatory framework of the legal profession that are necessary to facilitate these changes in the Big Law business model, and how these changes might come about through competition, contracts, and financial innovation. Part IV presents concluding remarks and discusses some broader implications of these important changes in the practice of law.

6. See Larry E. Ribstein, *Ethical Rules, Agency Costs and Law Firm Structure*, 84 VA. L. REV. 1707 (1998).

I. THE BREAKDOWN OF BIG LAW'S TRADITIONAL MODEL

This Part begins by summarizing the standard economic model of the law firm and this model's implications for the structure and governance of large firms. In brief, law partners are both employees who earn money from their human capital and co-owners of the firm. It may be unclear what value is produced by the firm as distinguished from the individual lawyers. The most persuasive explanation of firm-level income is that the firm effectively charges clients for the value of its long-lived reputation. This Part discusses how this model is breaking down from its inherent weakness and the additional stresses imposed by the current economic environment of law practice. This leaves the question of what might replace Big Law's traditional reputational capital model.

A. *The Basic Reputational Bonding Model*

Large law firms' value derives from their function of ameliorating the inherent asymmetry of information between lawyers and clients. It is hard for clients to shop for the most skilled and trustworthy lawyer because as non-experts they may not be able to accurately judge the quality of the lawyer's services even long after they are rendered. This makes legal services a "credence" good that requires special reliance by the customer on the seller.⁷

This information asymmetry may exacerbate agency costs between lawyers and clients. These costs arise because clients typically delegate power to the lawyer over some portion of their affairs, and lawyers' and clients' interests differ.⁸ For example, lawyers may shirk because they do not get all the gain from more careful work, or may spend too much time because they are compensated according to time spent rather than amount accomplished.⁹ It may be impossible for clients to determine in advance which lawyers present the highest risks.

7. See Michael R. Darby & Edi Karni, *Free Competition and the Optimal Amount of Fraud*, 16 J.L. & ECON. 67, 68-69 (1973) (discussing the general nature of credence goods); Ellen R. Jordan & Paul H. Rubin, *An Economic Analysis of the Law of False Advertising*, 8 J. LEGAL STUD. 527, 530-31 (1979) (describing credence qualities as requiring the non-expert to rely on the seller). By contrast, consumers can evaluate "search goods" before use, and "experience goods" after repeated uses. See Phillip Nelson, *Information and Consumer Behavior*, 78 J. POL. ECON. 311 (1970).

8. See generally Jonathan R. Macey & Geoffrey P. Miller, *An Economic Analysis of Conflict of Interest Regulation*, 82 IOWA L. REV. 965 (1997); Ribstein, *supra* note 6.

9. See Donald C. Langevoort & Robert K. Rasmussen, *Skewing the Results: The Role of Lawyers in Transmitting Legal Rules*, 5 S. CAL. INTERDISC. L.J. 375 (1997) (stating that lawyers may inflate work by overstating legal risks); Richard H.

Law firms can help clients by monitoring and screening potentially untrustworthy lawyers. The law firm's long-lived reputation for honest and faithful service can bond its promise to monitor and screen.¹⁰ Clients are willing to pay extra to buy legal services from a big firm because they know that a cheating firm incurs a penalty in the form of a diminished reputation and a lower price for its services. The reputational bonds posted by individual lawyers may have less value than those of firms because young lawyers have not yet developed a reputation and lawyers nearing retirement have little future income left to forfeit as a penalty for breach of trust. A law firm in effect "rents" its reputation to its lawyers just as a roadside franchise restaurant uses the franchisor's reputation to draw customers.

B. Law Firm Structure

In order for large law firms to perform their reputational bonding function they must motivate their lawyers to provide the mentoring, screening, and monitoring that supports the firm's reputation. The problem is that lawyers constantly must allocate time and effort between building the firm's reputation and building their own clientele. If the ties binding lawyers to firms unravel, lawyers' temptation to build their personal human capital and client relationships may outweigh their incentive to invest in building the firm. The firm then may become just a collection of individuals sharing expenses and revenues that has little or no value as a distinct entity. The following Subsections discuss the elements of law firm governance necessary to provide the right incentives.

1. LAW FIRMS AS PARTNERSHIPS

The standard corporate hierarchical structure in which passive owners delegate management functions to expert managers may not work for professional firms. Alchian and Demsetz argue that law and other professional firms must be partnerships because non-expert

Sander & E. Douglass Williams, *Why Are There So Many Lawyers? Perspectives on a Turbulent Market*, 14 J.L. & SOC. INQUIRY 431 (1989) (noting that more lawyers can result in greater aggregate demand for legal work because lawyers can create work for themselves).

10. See Benjamin Klein & Keith B. Leffler, *The Role of Market Forces in Assuring Contractual Performance*, 89 J. POL. ECON. 615 (1981). For criticism of reputational bonding as applied to law firms, see Ted Schneyer, *Reputational Bonding, Ethics Rules, and Law Firm Structure: The Economist as Storyteller*, 84 VA. L. REV. 1777 (1998) (questioning whether the corporate clients of large law firms really rely on these firms' reputations).

owners and managers cannot adequately monitor professionals.¹¹ However, as law firms grow, even expert monitoring is stretched thin. This puts the emphasis on aligning incentives through pay, promotion, and liability. As discussed in the following Subsections, these devices are subject to their own strains in large law firms.

2. COMPENSATION

Lawyer-owners of a law firm need to be rewarded for the firm's overall success to motivate them to contribute to this success by monitoring the other worker-owners. Lawyers who are paid solely based on their individual books of business obviously will focus on their personal clients and neglect building general firm business. This incentive is reinforced by the fact that the lawyer's book of business may determine her market value outside the firm and therefore her mobility.

The most direct way to compensate lawyers based on the firm's success is simply to give them shares of the firm's profits that are adjusted only to reflect lawyers' seniority and not their individual rainmaking or billing contributions.¹² Seniority-based sharing motivates lawyers not only to maintain the firm's reputation, but also to admit only the highest quality partners.¹³ Under equal or seniority-based compensation, admitting a new partner reduces incumbent partners' income unless the new partner brings in enough additional net income to offset the additional share. Firms that depart from equal or seniority-based sharing may be tempted to admit low-quality professionals and try to get away with charging clients more for these lawyers' time than they are worth. If the market accurately values the lawyer's services, the firm can adjust the lawyer's compensation accordingly.

Seniority-based compensation also can enable lawyers to invest their human capital in a diversified portfolio of careers and thereby to minimize the risks inherent in shifts in the economy.¹⁴ This compensation method keeps the income flowing to all lawyers in good

11. See Armen A. Alchian & Harold Demsetz, *Production, Information Costs and Economic Organization*, 62 AM. ECON. REV. 777 (1972).

12. See Ronald J. Gilson & Robert Mnookin, *Sharing Among the Human Capitalists: An Economic Inquiry into the Law Firm and How Partners Split Profits*, 37 STAN. L. REV. 313 (1985) (discussing seniority-based compensation as a way to diversify away risks affecting the value of partners' individual human capital).

13. See Jonathan Levin & Steven Tadelis, *A Theory of Partnerships* (Stanford Law & Econ. Olin Working Paper No. 244, 2002), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=311159>.

14. See Gilson & Mnookin, *supra* note 12.

times and bad. Reducing risk can enable diversified firms to hire talent at a lower price than less diversified rivals.

Seniority-based compensation is vulnerable to lawyers' temptation to free ride on their colleagues' monitoring and screening efforts and focus on maintaining their own books of business.¹⁵ The firm may have to rely more on other monitoring and incentive devices than on compensation.¹⁶ It also may have to depart from equal or seniority-based compensation to keep rainmakers, give up on human capital diversification, and pay lawyers who happen to be in "hot" areas more to retain them.

3. PROMOTION

Law firms provide incentives not only through compensation but also in how they choose partners. They ensure their lawyers' quality by putting associates through an "up-or-out" tournament at the end of which they are either promoted to partner or asked to leave.¹⁷ The tournament helps instill firm culture in associates¹⁸ and ensure that only the most productive lawyers become owners. This reinforces equal or seniority-based compensation by increasing the likelihood that lawyers will contribute to building the firm. The tournament is an important aspect of the so-called "Cravath system" for maintaining careful selection and training of associates and maintenance of a strong firm culture.¹⁹

15. See *id.* at 374.

16. See Roger Bowles & Goran Skogh, *Reputation, Monitoring and the Organisation of the Law Firm*, in *ESSAYS IN LAW AND ECONOMICS: CORPORATIONS, ACCIDENT PREVENTION AND COMPENSATION FOR LOSSES* 33, 33-47 (Michael Faure & Roger Van den Bergh eds., 1989) (discussing tradeoffs between dismissal, profit-sharing, and monitoring).

17. See MARC GALANTER & THOMAS PALAY, *TOURNAMENT OF LAWYERS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BIG LAW FIRM* (1991). The "out" part of this "up-or-out tournament" has been explained as binding the firm not to cheat on its implicit promise by trying to keep successful associates without making them partners. See Ronald J. Gilson & Robert H. Mnookin, *Coming of Age in a Corporate Law Firm: The Economics of Associate Career Patterns*, 41 *STAN. L. REV.* 567 (1989).

18. With respect to the importance of firm culture, see Ronald J. Daniels, *The Law Firm as an Efficient Community*, 37 *MCGILL L.J.* 801, 822-25 (1992).

19. See GALANTER & PALAY, *supra* note 17, at 9-10; William D. Henderson & Leonard Bierman, *An Empirical Analysis of Lateral Lawyer Trends from 2000 to 2007: The Emerging Equilibrium for Corporate Law Firms* (Ind. Legal Studies Research Paper No. 136, 2009), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1407051>; Bill Henderson, *Part II: How Most Law Firms Misapply the "Cravath System,"* Legal Professors Blog, http://lawprofessors.typepad.com/legal_profession/2008/07/part-ii-how-mos.html (July 29, 2008).

Even a well-executed tournament system may be unstable. The Cravath system was established in a less competitive law firm environment than prevails today. Once a Cravath-type firm has to start generating higher profits in order to retain its stars, it may have to resort to lateral hiring and increasing the ratio of associates to partners. The firm then might have trouble committing to seniority-based compensation and to the up-or-out tournament.

4. VICARIOUS LIABILITY

Law partners' joint and several liability for the law firm's debts helps ensure that partners will support the firm's reputation by carefully selecting and monitoring colleagues who might create liabilities. Vicarious liability therefore tends to reinforce the equal-sharing compensation model. It also helps keep firms intact because lawyers who leave remain responsible for liabilities incurred during their tenure. As discussed below, however, vicarious liability is a casualty of the evolution of law firms, which poses another challenge to the reputational capital model.

C. Client Demand for Big Law

Ronald Gilson at least partially explains the demand for Big Law in terms of information asymmetry between lawyers and clients.²⁰ As discussed in Part I.A, clients have problems judging the value of expert services. The client therefore relies on a "rainmaking" partner with whom the client may have a long-term relationship to recommend one or more specialists who will perform the particular services the client demands.

This referral-based theory of the firm meshes with the reputational capital theory. The law firm's reputation helps bond the referring partner's implicit representation that the referral is motivated by the client's best interests rather than the expectation of a kickback from the specialist.²¹

20. See Ronald J. Gilson, *The Devolution of the Legal Profession: A Demand Side Perspective*, 49 MD. L. REV. 869 (1990).

21. See Burk & McGowan, *supra* note 1 (linking the referral and reputational theories). This may help explain why referrals are permitted within law firms but not outside them. See *infra* note 168 and accompanying text. Gilson argues that the client is protected from bad referrals by its continuing relationship with the rainmaker. See Gilson, *supra* note 20, at 896. Even so, the firm's reputation is still useful to protect the client who has a long-standing relationship with the firm rather than with particular partners in the firm. Gilson & Mnookin, *supra* note 12, at 349-52, argue that the kickback incentive is muted by how income is allocated within the firm between the

This information-based theory of Big Law helps explain large law firms' durability. Since the client's ability to rely on the rainmaker is based on a long-standing relationship, the client could incur substantial costs from firing a firm and looking for another one.²² Even if large firms generally have substantial reputational capital, a client may not easily be able to trust a particular firm to meet its particular needs. Law firms therefore can count on long-standing repeat business from large corporate clients.

Information and referrals do not, however, explain why law firms have hundreds of partners and associates. One explanation is that legal work often involves a peak load problem. Clients may need law firms to undertake on short notice such demanding work as legal research, document review, legal advice on complex issues, and multiple court appearances in connection with litigation and acquisitions. Sophisticated work on large transactions or litigation may call for lawyers with different specialties, non-lawyer experts, and costly technology. Large firms can keep sufficient human and technical resources on call to meet these needs because they can amortize the cost across many clients and cases.

Large firms' ability to meet the peak load problem is not, however, a sufficient explanation for large law firms because clients theoretically can enter into spot contracts for the services they need. Clients might outsource needs such as legal research, contract review, or document handling, or hire smaller law firms and let these law firms outsource to meet peak load demands. To be sure, repeated negotiation and pricing of these contracts may be costly. Coase used these costs to explain the formation of firms.²³ But clients and law firms could mitigate these costs by making long-term contracts that do not require a single firm to own hard assets or employ a lot of lawyers full-time.

The problem with contracting for specific services is that it may not provide clients with the quality assurances they need. Thus, the reputational bonding theory returns to explain why clients would prefer a long-term relationship with a firm on which the client can rely to monitor a potentially shifting stock of specialists and support workers.

Beardslee, Nanda, and Coates suggest a theory of "legal capacity insurance" to explain why corporations need to maintain relationships with outside law firms rather than relying on in-house counsel and spot

rainmaker and the specialist. But this allocation is, in turn, shaped by the firm's interest in motivating its lawyers to protect the firm's reputation.

22. See Gilson, *supra* note 20, at 897-99.

23. See Ronald H. Coase, *The Nature of the Firm*, 4 *ECONOMICA* 386 (1937), reprinted in *THE NATURE OF THE FIRM: ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, AND DEVELOPMENT* 18 (Oliver E. Williamson & Sidney G. Winter eds., 1991).

contracting.²⁴ Because clients' needs are likely to be correlated with those of rivals, firms need to develop long-term relationships with several "preferred providers" that will implicitly promise clients access to their services, and which clients can trust based on past experience and reputation. This helps bind clients to particular firms.

A problem with the "legal capacity insurance" explanation of Big Law is that corporations could alternatively rely on networks of specialists who work alone or with different firms. The benefits of being able to rely on a large firm's lasting reputation and substantial support services must be compared with those of having the flexibility and market discipline of alternative suppliers.

In short, while there are theoretical reasons why clients would rely on Big Law, large law firms also compete on the margin with alternative suppliers of similar services. The rest of this Part shows why these alternatives are becoming increasingly attractive.

D. Big Law's Fragile Equilibrium

So far, this Part has explained how Big Law can produce reputational capital and why clients may be willing to pay for it. The problem is that the value of reputational capital can be quite fragile since it depends both on the firm's sustaining it and clients needing it. As we have seen, the firm's reputation lasts only as long as lawyers gain more from investing in it than they do from building their own clientele. This, in turn, will be the case only as long as large firms can attract and bind major corporate clients.

Big Law's value therefore is vulnerable to rapid unraveling when the forces binding lawyers and clients to the firm weaken. Law partners also may face a prisoner's dilemma when their confidence in the firm wanes. If they suspect their partners will not continue to be loyal, they may choose to "grab" clients and leave the firm or focus on preserving their exit route by building their clientele even if everybody might benefit by working to build the firm.²⁵ Shifting expectations can quickly change the firm dynamic from cooperation to competition.

Grabbing and leaving is only part of a vicious cycle that is threatening law firm stability. As firms' reputational capital declines,

24. See Michele DeStefano Beardslee et al., *Hiring Teams from Rivals: Theory and Evidence on the Evolving Relationships in the Corporate Legal Market* (Conference on Empirical Legal Studies Paper, 2010), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1442066>.

25. The seminal article on "grabbing and leaving" is Robert W. Hillman, *Law Firms and Their Partners: The Law and Ethics of Grabbing and Leaving*, 67 TEX. L. REV. 1 (1988). See also Milton C. Regan, Jr., *Law Firms, Competition Penalties, and the Values of Professionalism*, 13 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 1 (1999).

they can sustain their profits and size only by hiring more rainmakers to generate business. This, in turn, puts significant short-term pressure on firms to increase associate leverage and billable hours to pay the partners even if a more viable long-term strategy would be to focus on achieving greater efficiency and quality control. Increased leverage can reduce screening and supervision and thereby erode reputational capital.

E. Pressures on Big Law

Given the inherent vulnerability of the reputational capital model, even a little market pressure on the model can threaten its survival. This Section discusses the factors that are combining to destabilize Big Law's already fragile ecosystem by putting pressure on one or more significant aspects of Big Law's business model—that is, client demand for the particular benefits offered by large law firms, and Big Law's ability to sustain its reputational capital.

1. THE RISE OF IN-HOUSE COUNSEL

The reputational capital model of Big Law assumes clients need help judging the quality of legal services. However, as with any input, the alternative to buying outside is “making” in-house—in this case by hiring in-house counsel to provide direct legal advice and information about outside lawyers. When clients have the technical expertise to dispense with specialists and can figure out on their own which individual lawyers are reliable and meet their specific needs, they will have less need to buy outside legal services based on personal relationships with individual lawyers or to rely on a stable of “preferred provider” Big Law firms.²⁶ The increased role of in-house counsel is therefore a significant threat to Big Law.²⁷

The rise of in-house counsel is itself at least partly a response to the other developments discussed in this Article. The supply-side pressures on law firms to increase prices discussed above increase firms' incentive to invest in developing their in-house legal departments.

26. See *supra* text accompanying note 24.

27. See THOMAS D. MORGAN, *THE VANISHING AMERICAN LAWYER* 114 (2010) (noting that 25 percent of lawyers are employed in single-client situations, of which 40 percent are inside corporate counsel); Gilson, *supra* note 20, at 901–02 & n.75 (arguing that the increase in client sophistication from the rise of in-house counsel “predicts a dramatic change in the pattern of client relationships and firm structure” and that “the national law firm may be an idea whose time has come and gone”).

In-house counsel's ability to surmount information asymmetry problems in legal representation does not necessarily mean that corporations can dispense with outside lawyers. Corporations likely will remain constrained by limits on their ability to monitor professional services and to staff to handle peak loads.

The important question for present purposes is not whether corporations will continue to buy outside legal services, but whether they will continue to rely on Big Law. Although there is evidence that corporations still rely on long-term experience and relationships in engaging outside law firms and rarely fire their long-term firms, some corporate legal officers are aggressive in frequently switching law firms.²⁸ Also, corporations apparently are relying on teams of lawyers rather than firms.²⁹ Indeed, as discussed below, recent breakups of Big Law firms indicate a trend toward movement of practice groups even as firms dissolve. Thus, even if corporations are not moving legal work inside, they may be reducing their reliance on Big Law firms. This could reflect corporate legal officers' skepticism about Big Law's ability to deliver long-lived reputational bond and "capacity insurance." This skepticism is further supported by other developments discussed below that are eroding traditional Big Law advantages.

2. REDUCED SIZE AND SCALE ADVANTAGE

Big Law gets some of its competitive advantage from its ability to mobilize on short notice substantial human and technical resources, particularly including legal research and document storage and retrieval. Technical advances that include, among many other things, computerized legal research, fast Internet connections, and declining costs of data storage and retrieval decline,³⁰ have eroded some of Big Law's scale advantage.

3. INCREASING PARTNER-ASSOCIATE RATIOS

Big Law firms have found that they can increase the number of associates whose billings produce profits without commensurately increasing the number of partners who share these profits. In the short-term, this enables firms to hire star rainmakers who bring in lucrative business. However, the growth has several long-term costs that have threatened the viability of the large law firm.

28. See Beardslee et al., *supra* note 24.

29. *Id.*

30. See generally RICHARD SUSSKIND, *THE END OF LAWYERS? RETHINKING THE NATURE OF LEGAL SERVICES* (2008).

One problem with the strategy of increasing profits by growing the number of associates is that the firm's profitability may not actually be increasing once risk is taken into account. Hiring more associates paid with fixed salaries is analogous to borrowing at fixed interest rates. In both cases leverage magnifies the effect of future losses as well as profits. The firm has to pay its associates, just as it must repay its debt, in bad times as in good. Thus, law firms, like other firms, cannot necessarily increase their value just by changing their capital structure.³¹

Increasing the ratio of associates to partners can reduce the value of the firm's reputational capital. As discussed above, an important potential advantage of law firms is that their partnership structure, equal financial sharing, up-or-out promotion policies and vicarious liability help ensure that they can maintain their reputations for high-quality and good-faith service. However, adding associates may undermine this structure. In order to maintain their per-partner profits, firms cannot start promoting or firing large numbers of associates.³² Instead, Big Law has replaced the classic tournament with what has been called an "elastic tournament" in which firms keep the associates as employees.³³ This reduces the role of the tournament as a mechanism for screening and training new partners.

Increasing associate leveraging also pressures law firms to change their business mix in ways that may reduce their long-term value. In order to keep their associates working and billing hours, firms branched into work-like structured finance, which lent itself to large amounts of routine work and significant economies of scale.³⁴ Some of this work could be sent down the labor food chain to contract attorneys,

31. See Franco Modigliani & Merton H. Miller, *The Cost of Capital, Corporation Finance and the Theory of Investment*, 48 AM. ECON. REV. 261 (1958) (showing that under certain assumptions firms' value is indifferent to their capital structure). To be sure, law firms face fewer legal constraints on firing associates than they do on not paying their debts. On the other hand, firing associates may involve significant reputational penalties and make future hiring more costly.

32. With respect to promotions, see Nate Raymond, *Law Firms Promote Fewer Senior Associates to Partnership*, N.Y.L.J., Nov. 30, 2009, available at <http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1202435897457> (noting evidence that law firms are reducing promotions, and quoting a law firm consultant that "[p]rofits are squeezed at big firms this year, and they don't want to dilute partnership income any more than they have to").

33. See Marc Galanter & William Henderson, *The Elastic Tournament: A Second Transformation of the Big Law Firm*, 60 STAN. L. REV. 1867 (2008).

34. Indeed, one firm, Thacher Proffitt & Wood, took the lead in this work, only to crash quickly when the work was washed away by the financial meltdown. See *infra* text accompanying note 86.

outsourcers, or even to machines.³⁵ This makes Big Law more vulnerable to competition from lower-cost suppliers.

4. CHANGING CLIENTELE

Big Law's "capacity insurance" function³⁶ might point to a limited future. Only a limited class of clients and transactions needs this insurance—that is, large diversified financial institutions and participants in big financial transactions and mergers and acquisitions. Large acquisitions—which involve myriad contractual and regulatory issues and need to be handled on a fast yet customized basis—are the classic Big Law transaction because they require large teams of lawyers from multiple departments. For example, Comcast's \$30 billion purchase of control of NBC Universal from General Electric took seventy-nine lawyers—thirty-eight from Comcast's firm, Davis Polk & Wardwell, which provided corporate, tax, real estate, and intellectual property advice from two offices on the resulting complex joint venture; ten from Gibson Dunn & Crutcher on behalf of minority seller Vivendi; and thirty from Weil, Gotshal & Manges on behalf of GE and NBC Universal.³⁷ It is hard for a single lawyer to walk out the door with this type of business. Thus, financial firms traditionally have had long-lasting relationships with large firms such as Goldman with Sullivan & Cromwell, JP Morgan with Davis Polk, and Cleary with Salomon.

Acquisition activity may be a threat as well as a boon to big law. Mergers and other restructuring, particularly in the financial services industry, can unsettle client relationships through management changes. Moreover, to the extent that restructuring involves disaggregation of firms, it can reduce the need for the sort of large, vertically integrated companies that need the services of the largest law firms.³⁸

If large law firms lose the "capacity insurance" business, their value and durability may decline. Clients that just need high-quality advice by individual lawyers or teams of lawyers will need relationships with these individuals and networks rather than with large, multi-service firms. Moreover, as Big Law's traditional clients become less "sticky," firms may have to rely more on rainmakers to attract new business.

35. See *infra* text accompanying notes 111–116.

36. See *supra* text accompanying note 24.

37. See Michael Corkery, *Comcast-NBC Universal Deal is a Legal Boomlet*, WALL ST. J., Dec. 3, 2009, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703735004574574283775883214.html>.

38. See LARRY E. RIBSTEIN, *THE RISE OF THE UNINCORPORATION* 234–35 (2010).

5. LIMITED LIABILITY

The reputational bonding model of Big Law has been supported by law partners' traditional vicarious liability for their firms' debts.³⁹ Personally liable partners have an incentive to monitor co-partners and associates and guard against taking on business that could significantly increase the firm's risk of malpractice or regulatory liability.⁴⁰

Large firms, however, have moved to limited liability structures. This resulted partly from increasing regulation. Until the late 1980s, uninsured malpractice liability rarely if ever threatened large firms' viability or their partners' pocketbooks. The potentially ruinous professional liabilities associated with the savings-and-loan collapses of the late 1980s and early 1990s increased the likelihood of individual partner liability and therefore motivated them to change bar rules to permit law firms to adopt limited liability. The development in Texas (the epicenter of the savings and loan collapse) of the limited liability partnership eased law firms' path to limited liability by enabling them to adopt limited liability while technically remaining general partnerships.⁴¹

While limited liability may have facilitated law firm expansion over the last twenty years by reducing the risks of adding more potential sources of liability, it also may have weakened Big Law internally. Limited liability increases lawyers' incentive to gamble with the firm's reputation by hiring more associates than the firm can effectively screen and monitor. Limited liability also may have contributed to destabilizing Big Law. Lawyers who are personally liable for their firms' debts have an incentive to try to rehabilitate a declining firm so that it can pay the creditors rather than risking being jointly and severally liable for the firm's unpaid debts.⁴² By contrast, lawyers with limited liability can jump ship without worrying the firm's liabilities will follow them.⁴³

39. See *supra* Part I.B.4.

40. See generally Larry E. Ribstein, *Limited Liability of Professional Firms after Enron*, 29 J. CORP. L. 427 (2004).

41. See ALAN R. BROMBERG & LARRY E. RIBSTEIN, BROMBERG & RIBSTEIN ON LIMITED LIABILITY PARTNERSHIPS, THE REVISED UNIFORM PARTNERSHIP ACT, AND THE UNIFORM PARTNERSHIP ACT (2001), § 1.01 (2005) (discussing the history of the LLP).

42. See 2 ALAN R. BROMBERG & LARRY E. RIBSTEIN, BROMBERG & RIBSTEIN ON PARTNERSHIP § 7.14 (2004) (discussing continuing partner liability for dissolved firm's debts).

43. Lawyers' ability to exit is constrained to some extent by the potential for fraudulent conveyance liability for distributions while the firm is insolvent. See 11 U.S.C. § 548(b) (2006) (providing for recovery of fraudulent transfers by partnerships); BROMBERG & RIBSTEIN, *supra* note 41, § 7.02. For example, former partners of Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison agreed to pay more than \$22 million to settle

The effect of limited liability is complicated by states' qualification of liability protection by holding law partners liable for failure to supervise. Unlike full-fledged vicarious liability, lawyers can avoid this liability by not engaging in certain general types of supervisory activities.⁴⁴ Partial limited liability therefore can have the effect of reducing firms' internal monitoring even as compared with complete limited liability.⁴⁵

To be sure, the relationship between vicarious liability and reputational capital is not completely straightforward. Liability is only one element in firms' reputation-maintenance efforts, since acts that trigger liability are just one of many threats to firms' reputations. But vicarious liability nevertheless helps ensure vigilance even by partners who otherwise might be inclined to stress their own clients over their monitoring obligations to the firm.

6. INCREASING GLOBAL COMPETITION

Big Law operates within a margin defined in part by global competition. Clients may come to wonder why they should pay large fees to sustain Big Law's profits, and thereby its fragile financial structure, when they can spend less to hire equally skilled lawyers in other countries.

One source of global competition is the emergence of global legal and financial centers such as London, Singapore, and Hong Kong that compete with New York, where Big Law traditionally has dominated. These centers are attracting financial work that, as discussed above, has been a mainstay of Big Law business. This became evident when, after Sarbanes-Oxley increased U.S. regulation of foreign firms cross-listing in U.S. markets, substantial securities business and associated legal work moved from New York to other markets, particularly including London.⁴⁶

claims arising out of payment to these partners of distributions and bonuses while the firm was insolvent. See Brenda Sandburg, *Ex-Brobeck Partners Cough Up \$22 Million*, RECORDER, Feb. 23, 2005, available at <http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1109120820688>.

Limited liability theoretically could contribute to law firms' stability by helping them grow larger, since the survival of a small firm is more easily threatened by departure of a few clients or partners. In this sense, limited liability arguably increases the durability and value of a law firm's reputational capital. See Ribstein, *supra* note 6, at 1729. However, reduced stability may dominate to the extent that limited liability weakens the firms internally.

44. See BROMBERG & RIBSTEIN, *supra* note 41, § 3.04(c).

45. See Ribstein, *supra* note 6, at 1728-29.

46. See Joseph D. Piotroski & Suraj Srinivasan, *Regulation and Bonding: The Sarbanes-Oxley Act and the Flow of International Listings*, 46 J. ACCT. RES. 383

Another threat to Big Law is the outsourcing of legal services to India and other places with lower labor costs than the U.S.⁴⁷ This has given rise to an industry consisting, among others, of outsourcing firms⁴⁸ and intermediaries that advise on the outsourcing.⁴⁹ Shifting work from Big Law associates working in large U.S. cities to India could threaten the traditional Big Law model of leveraging substantial associate hourly billing into partner profits. Moreover, U.S. corporations and law firms could adopt some of outsourcing firms' cost-control management processes, which might put pressure on Big Law profits.

To be sure, legal outsourcing currently focuses on the commodity end of legal work, including risk management, contract review, and patent searches, rather than the sophisticated transactional work that is Big Law's comparative advantage. However, as Big Law has moved to this work to keep its pipeline filled⁵⁰ it has become more vulnerable to competition from commodity suppliers. Also, the legal outsourcing industry is dynamic. It has already created a significant supply of global legal services that could be tapped to serve a broader market. Outsourcing's future growth depends to some extent on the development of new technologies for monitoring outsourcers.⁵¹

(2008) (finding that the likelihood that small firms would choose to list in the U.S. on NASDAQ rather than the London Stock Exchange's Alternative Investment Market decreased following the enactment of Sarbanes-Oxley).

47. See Jayanth K. Krishnan, *Outsourcing and the Globalizing Legal Profession*, 48 WM. & MARY L. REV. 2189 (2007) (analyzing the nature of increasing outsourcing of American legal work to India); Milton C. Regan, Jr. & Palmer T. Heenan, *Supply Chains and Porous Boundaries: The Disaggregation of Legal Services*, 78 FORDHAM L. REV. 2137 (2010) (analyzing law firm decisions to rely on suppliers outside the firm's boundaries to provide legal services); David A. Steiger, *The Rise of Global Legal Sourcing: How Vendors and Clients Are Changing Legal Business Models*, BUS. L. TODAY, Nov./Dec. 2009, at 39.

48. See David Lat & Elie Mystal, *Outsourcing: What Indian Firms Have Planned for the Future of Biglaw*, ABOVEHELAW.COM, June 9, 2009, http://abovethelaw.com/2009/06/outsourcing_what_indian_firms.php (discussing a 300-lawyer outsourcing firm that does work for Big Law and medium-sized firms, charges fixed fees that can be significantly lower than associate time for comparable work).

49. For example, Fronterion advises law firms and corporations with independent advice on legal outsourcing strategies and firms. See FronterionLLC, <http://www.fronterion.com> (last visited Mar. 23, 2010).

50. See *infra* text accompanying note 86.

51. See George S. Geis, *Business Outsourcing and the Agency Cost Problem*, 82 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 955 (2007) (discussing how outsourcing is increasing with the reduction in monitoring costs). For another general theoretical perspective on outsourcing see Margaret M. Blair & Erin A. O'Hara, *Outsourcing, Modularity and the Theory of the Firm* (Vanderbilt Law & Econ. Research Paper No. 09-19, 2009), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1443357>.

Big Law's clients themselves theoretically could hire cheaper foreign lawyers and avoid the middleman of a U.S. law firm. This practice is currently limited by the fact that outsourced lawyers are not licensed in the U.S. to represent U.S. clients. Big Law avoids this problem through a rule that enables lawyers to outsource as long as they exercise reasonable supervision over the supplier.⁵² Corporate clients could exercise comparable supervision through in-house counsel, which already hire outsourcers to assist them in their own work. This could effectively expand the capacity of in-house counsel offices and reduce the amount of work clients need to send to outside lawyers.

7. DEPROFESSIONALIZATION OF LAW PRACTICE

U.S. lawyers are protected from open-ended competition by regulation that allows only those licensed by a state to practice law to represent clients residing in that state and appear in that state's courts.⁵³ By forcing firms to seek advice from licensed lawyers in a highly regulated economy, these laws preserve the pivotal role of law-only firms in transactional work. Licensing laws also back attorney ethical rules that dictate Big Law's organizational structure by restricting outside financing, non-competition agreements, and state competition regarding regulation of law firm structure.⁵⁴

The role of licensing in protecting lawyers⁵⁵ and competition's threat to licensing requirements⁵⁶ are discussed in more detail below. This Subsection focuses on the specific threat to Big Law from the erosion of licensing requirements. First, multijurisdictional law firms strike at licensing by individual states. Under current law lawyers may not represent clients or practice in courts in states where they are not licensed to practice. Yet the increasing demands of interstate and international business make it hard to confine lawyers' work within specific geographic spaces. Licensing rules have evolved to some extent to accommodate these demands by letting lawyers do significant work outside states in which they are licensed. Several states permit lawyers who are not admitted locally to act in some capacities as in-house

52. See ABA Standing Comm. on Ethics and Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 08-451 (2008), available at <http://www.abanet.org/cpr/docs/08451.pdf>; Ass'n of the Bar of the City of New York, Comm. on Prof'l & Judicial Ethics, Formal Op. 2006-3 (2006), available at <http://www.abcnyc.org/Ethics/eth2006.htm>.

53. See *infra* Part III.C.

54. See *infra* Part III.

55. See *infra* Part III.A.3.

56. See *infra* Part III.B.1.

corporate counsel.⁵⁷ Also, lawyers can work in their firms' branch offices outside their home states without being locally admitted.⁵⁸ These practices ultimately could erode each state's power to license lawyers. States might officially concede the game and agree to a "driver's license" approach in which a lawyer licensed in one state may practice everywhere.

Second, corporations increasingly are relying on their own employees for important legal advice, as discussed above.⁵⁹ This phenomenon erodes lawyers' distinct professional status. Rising litigation costs and Big Law fees could add to clients' motivation to bring legal work inside. Legal-type work also could diffuse throughout the organization, blurring distinctions between professional lawyers and non-lawyers whose work deals with law.⁶⁰

Third, even if firms do not bring legal work inside, the rising costs of legal representation may push clients to alternatives to law firms such as non-lawyer law consultants,⁶¹ accounting and economic consulting firms,⁶² and mechanized legal advice through sophisticated software.⁶³

8. THE DECLINE OF HOURLY BILLING

Big Law's business model is built significantly on how it charges for its services—that is, by the hour. This mode of pricing is odd in the sense that clients do not buy lawyer hours anymore than customers buy the hours spent on building a car. Rather, clients buy solutions to legal problems. Time spent usually is not even a rough proxy for the value of this product. An attorney may spend days on fruitless research or document review but have a quick flash of insight that wins the case or makes the transaction successful.

57. See generally Center for Professional Responsibility, American Bar Association, Corporate Admissions Standards: Court Rules Providing Admissions for In-house Counsel, <http://www.abanet.org/cpr/mjp/mjp-uplchart.html> (last visited Mar. 23, 2010) (chart tabulating state rules on practice by in-house counsel, listing about a dozen states with such rules).

58. See CHARLES W. WOLFRAM, MODERN LEGAL ETHICS § 15.4.1 (1986).

59. See *supra* Part I.E.1.

60. See generally Herbert M. Kritzer, *The Future Role of "Law Workers": Rethinking the Forms of Legal Practice and the Scope of Legal Education*, 44 ARIZ. L. REV. 917 (2002).

61. See generally Tanina Rostain, *The Emergence of "Law Consultants,"* 75 FORDHAM L. REV. 1397 (2006).

62. See *infra* Part II.F.2.

63. See Larry E. Ribstein, *Lawyers as Lawmakers: A Theory of Lawyer Licensing*, 69 MO. L. REV. 299, 324 (2004) (discussing the shifting boundaries of unauthorized practice, particularly as a result of technological innovations).

One explanation for time-based billing is that it represents a rough compromise of lawyers' and clients' needs. Hourly billing gives firms a simple way to monitor their lawyers.⁶⁴ As long as clients are willing to pay for each hour billed, law firms have a luxury few other firms have of determining their employees' productivity by precisely matching readily observable inputs (time) with revenues. Without hourly billing, law firms might continue to monitor lawyers internally by counting hours, but their inability to bill these hours directly to clients would reduce the accuracy of this productivity measure. From clients' standpoint, hourly billing at least seems to provide more assurance than a simple bill "for services rendered."

The problem with hourly billing for clients is that, while it may seem to give them more accountability than billing by the job, the assurance is misleading if clients have no way of knowing how many hours were necessary to do the job well.⁶⁵ After all, clients hire lawyers precisely because clients are not legal experts. Hourly billing therefore can exacerbate lawyer-client agency costs because it tempts law firms to spend unnecessary time and client money. This temptation has increased as a result of associate leveraging through which law firms build revenues, and therefore profits per partner, by hiring more associates and having them bill more hours. The current pressures on Big Law reduce their incentives to try to build long-term goodwill by exploring alternative billing mechanisms.

Given these obvious problems with hourly billing, it is logical to look for explanations of its persistence other than lawyer and client convenience. One promising explanation is that the hourly fee is a function of the law firm's reputational capital.⁶⁶ Specifically, given the risk of law firm cheating from over-billing hours, only firms with substantial reputations can get away with charging by the hour. At the same time, these firms attract more complex work for which the number of hours required may be substantial and uncertain. Indeed, there is survey evidence associating hourly billing (as well as high flat fees) with higher law firm reputation.⁶⁷

64. See Fred S. McChesney, *Team Production, Monitoring, and Profit Sharing in Law Firms: An Alternative Hypothesis*, 11 J. LEGAL STUD. 379, 386 (1982) (showing high correlation between hours billed and compensation).

65. See Nuno Garoupa & Fernando Gomez-Pomar, *Cashing by the Hour: Why Large Law Firms Prefer Hourly Fees Over Contingent Fees*, 24 J.L. ECON. & ORG. 458, 469-71 (2008).

66. See Janet Kiholm Smith & Steven R. Cox, *The Pricing of Legal Services: A Contractual Solution to the Problem of Bilateral Opportunism*, 14 J. LEGAL STUD. 167, 169 (1985).

67. *Id.* at 183.

To the extent that hourly billing is a function of law firm reputation, it might be expected to decline with the dissipation of Big Law's reputational capital.⁶⁸ It would also follow that the same forces discussed above that are eroding Big Law's competitive advantages reduce its ability to rely on the billable hour. This includes clients' increased sophistication and information, particularly as their in-house legal departments develop,⁶⁹ and competition by outsourcing and other firms offer superior revenue models. Indeed, some firms have long mixed hourly billing with such approaches as performance bonuses,⁷⁰ contingent and flat fees, and law firm equity investments in clients.⁷¹ The hard times of 2008–2009 apparently have induced some clients to pressure firms to offer flat-fee billing for many services.⁷²

Law firms may tend to view these developments as a temporary effect of current economic forces. But while hard times may affect the *level* of prices, they cannot be completely responsible for a change in

68. See *The Billable Hour Debate is Not About the Billable Hour*, ADAMSMITHESQ.COM, Dec. 10, 2009, <http://www.adamsmithesq.com/archives/2009/08/the-billable-hour-debate-is-not-about-the-billable-hour.html> (arguing that the billable hour ultimately may become a casualty of several forces, including increased client mistrust).

69. See *supra* Part I.E.1.

70. See LINCOLN CAPLAN, SKADDEN: POWER, MONEY, AND THE RISE OF A LEGAL EMPIRE 102–04 (1993).

71. Attorney investments in clients were common during the tech boom in Silicon Valley. A leading example was Craig Johnson's Venture Law Group: it not only provided legal services, but also gave business advice and served as an intermediary in obtaining financing, taking sometimes lucrative equity positions in the startups in lieu of fees. See Stephen Miller, *Currents—Remembrances: Lawyer's Twist on the Firm Tapped Into Start-Up Frenzy*, WALL ST. J., Oct. 7, 2009, at A16, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125486675503468885.html>; Larry E. Ribstein, *Craig Johnson's New Model for Law Practice*, Ideoblog, <http://busmovie.typepad.com/ideoblog/2009/10/craig-johnsons-new-model-for-law-practice.html> (Oct. 7, 2009). Wilson Sonsini also has had a lucrative investment fund in which partners were required to invest according to their stakes in the law firm, as well as funds for voluntary investments. See Zusha Elinson, *Chasing the JACKPOT: The Highs and Lows of Wilson Sonsini's Investment Fund*, RECORDER, Dec. 7, 2009, available at <http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1202436088682>. For a policy analysis of lawyer investments in clients, see Christine Hurt, *Counselor, Gatekeeper, Shareholder, Thief: Why Attorneys Who Invest in Their Clients in a Post-Enron World Are "Selling Out," Not "Buying In,"* 64 OHIO ST. L.J. 897 (2003) (providing a policy analysis of lawyer investment in clients). Ethical rules permit the investments as long as the transaction is fair and the client gets full disclosure. See MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 1.8 (2009).

72. See Nathan Koppel & Ashby Jones, *"Billable Hour" Under Attack In Recession, Companies Push Law Firms for Flat-Fee Contracts*, WALL ST. J., Aug. 24, 2009, at A1, available at http://online.wsj.com/article/SB125106954159552335.html#mod=todays_us_page_one (noting survey of Fortune 1000 companies showing that money spent on alternative billing arrangements rose to \$13.1 billion in 2009 from \$8.6 billion in previous year).

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pricing *methods*. Law firms also might see alternative billing as affecting only relatively small parts of their practice, and not reaching more sophisticated and unpredictable work, such as complex litigation. However, firms theoretically can break down even the most complex projects into discrete tasks as to which lawyers and clients have enough experience to charge on some basis other than counting hours.

The decline of hourly billing could have important effects on the structure of Big Law. Law firms no longer would have the luxury of simply throwing more time into projects for which they can expect to get paid. This, in turn, could affect Big Law's labor pool. Big Law has been able to justify high hourly rates for associates in part by hiring associates with the right law school pedigrees. This has driven up the cost of talent, as Big Law recruits from a sliver of the overall labor market. The cost pressures resulting from fixed fees may force Big Law to be more creative about hiring and training talent. Moreover, as fixed fees replace monitoring of number of hours and hourly rates, law firms have an incentive to get more efficient work out of higher-paid senior lawyers.⁷³ A shift from hourly billing also contributes to and reflects the commodification of law practice. Firms may evolve from rendering specialized services to delivering products. This meshes with the alternative business models discussed below in Part II, including trends toward legal products and research and development.

F. The Unraveling of Big Law

This Section summarizes some effects of the problems and developments discussed above in this Part—that is, the death and shrinkage (through layoffs and deferrals) of Big Law, and the “devolution” of big law firms into smaller and less hierarchical firms that more closely resemble the classic equal partnership discussed at the beginning of the Article.

1. CASE HISTORIES

It is instructive to review press accounts of some of the more notable law firm failures over the last several years for signs of the inherent problems in Big Law discussed above.

Brobeck, Phleger & Harrison. This firm unsuccessfully tried to transform itself into a big business. Under the leadership of high-profile managing partner Tower Snow, Jr., Brobeck focused on high-margin areas of business, poured money into marketing, replaced the standard law firm worker cooperative with “Russian-style centralized

73. *Id.* (discussing effect of Pfizer's switching to fixed-fee billing).

management system,” expanded from 540 to 754 lawyers in one year (summer 1999 to summer 2000), and raised associate salaries before entering bankruptcy in January 2003.⁷⁴ When the tech bust hit the firm’s core practice, revenues dropped precipitously, sixty partners left in 2002, and the firm was left with significant debt and excess office space.⁷⁵ A post-mortem in mid-2003 viewed Brobeck as a firm with runaway growth, lack of culture, too much debt, and weak bonds with clients, and confidently predicted that there are not “more Brobecks waiting in the wings”⁷⁶

Altheimer & Gray. This venerable Chicago firm rapidly declined into bankruptcy in June 2003 in the face of a deteriorating corporate climate (the firm specialized in corporate and real estate) and, like Brobeck, over commitment to office space.⁷⁷

Arter & Hadden. This Cleveland firm rapidly expanded outside of its base, going from 70 to 465 lawyers in the 1980s and 1990s. The new lawyers proved to have weak ties with their new firm and quickly left “just like they left one place to come to Arter & Hadden.”⁷⁸ A partner observed that “[t]he notion of making even a short-term or a medium-term financial sacrifice for some greater good of the firm is just not how a lot of folks are wired.”⁷⁹ When the firm shut down in July 2003, sixty-eight lawyers in the Cleveland office moved as a group to a new firm. A partner noted that “[t]he partners here wanted to be partners with this group of people and continue to practice with one another and with this group of clients.”⁸⁰

Coudert Brothers. This global firm faced the problem of “operating in different economic environments with different risks.”⁸¹ When the firm voted to dissolve in August 2005, “most Coudert partners jumped in groups.”⁸²

74. See Susan Beck, *The Harder They Fall*, AM. LAW., Aug. 2002, at 65, 68.

75. See Susan Beck, *Brobeck’s Final Days*, AM. LAW., Mar. 2003, at 13, 13.

76. See Peter D. Zeughausen, *Your Future is at Stake*, AM. LAW., May 2003, at 49, 49–50.

77. See Eric Herman, *Altheimer Partners Agree to Pay \$16 Mil.; Bankruptcy Plan Outlines Who Pays, Who Will Be Paid*, CHI. SUN-TIMES, Dec. 29, 2004, at 57.

78. Adelle Waldman, *Colleague Lawyers Regroup on Firm Ground; Former Arter & Hadden Attorneys Scale Back Their Vision*, PLAIN DEALER (CLEVELAND), July 21, 2003, at E1.

79. *Id.*

80. Alison Grant, *Lawyers, Creditors Resolve Dispute \$10 Million to Be Paid in Firm’s Bankruptcy*, PLAIN DEALER (CLEVELAND), Apr. 7, 2007, at C1; Adelle Waldman, *Colleague Lawyers Regroup on Firm Ground; Former Arter & Hadden Attorneys Scale Back Their Vision*, PLAIN DEALER (CLEVELAND), July 21, 2003, at E1.

81. Ellen Rosen, *The Complicated End of an Ex-Law Firm*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 9, 2007, at C7 (quoting Ward Bower of Altman Weil).

82. Carlyn Kolker, *An Unquiet Death*, AM. LAW., Nov. 2006, at 78, 80.

Thelen, Reid and Heller Ehrman. The voluntary dissolutions of these firms in September and December 2008 were attributed to the lack of professional leadership, attempts to expand with negative effects on the firms' culture, and too much debt.⁸³ Thelen faced pressure to liquidate from a big lender.⁸⁴ Heller's management botched an expansion plan, the firm started losing partners, and the en masse departure of fourteen intellectual property litigators triggered notice provisions in the firm's lending agreement, forcing the firm to dissolve.⁸⁵

Thacher Proffitt & Wood. This old-line firm veered into structured finance after 1978, ultimately specializing in it. The work was attractive because "a few partners supervising a large number of associates could generate enormous revenues."⁸⁶ The firm expanded from 177 lawyers in 2003 to 350 in 2007, by which time structured finance was 40–55 percent of revenues (70 percent including real estate), and the associate-partner ratio was 6:1. The firm was then decimated by the bursting of the subprime bubble. Ultimately covenants in debt incurred to house the new personnel were triggered, forcing the firm to scramble for a merger and ultimately dissolve in December 2008, despite the fact that the firm's "core very much wanted to stay together."⁸⁷

Wolf, Block, Schorr & Solis-Cohen. The immediate causes of this venerable Philadelphia firm's voluntary dissolution in March 2009 were those familiar from the above stories—the departure of top partners and a credit crunch.⁸⁸ Digging a little deeper, the firm was undiversified, and therefore vulnerable to a decline of its core real estate business, and lacked strong connections among attorneys and practice groups.⁸⁹

2. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Here are some notable features that emerge from the above stories:

1. Although these cases cover the last six years, they share many of the same features. This supports the point of this Article that Big

83. Richard Gary, *Lessons Learned: Examining the Dissolution of Heller Ehrman and Thelen*, RECORDER, Nov. 5, 2008, at 4.

84. Carolyn Okomo, *Thelen Becomes Latest Law Firm Bankruptcy*, DAILY DEAL, Sept. 23, 2009.

85. Drew Combs, *Why Heller Died*, AM. LAW., Nov. 2008, at 81, 83.

86. David Bario, *A Really Bad Bet*, AM. LAW., Mar. 2009, at 84, 86.

87. *Id.* at 87.

88. Chris Mondics, *Partners Vote to End Wolf Block*, PHILA. INQUIRER, Mar. 24, 2009, at A01.

89. Susan Letterman White, *What Can We Learn from the Implosion of Wolf Block?*, 239 LEGAL INTELLIGENCER, Apr. 29, 2009, at 5.

Law suffers from an internal weakness and not just the effects of the most recent global economic meltdown.

2. Because these firms lacked an internal binding force, partners left when current revenues were too low to induce them to stay.

3. Several of the firms fractured into practice groups, which joined other firms. This suggests that the ties among law partners are personal networks rather than capital belonging to the firm as such.

4. Most of the firms had attempted to add revenues by rapidly adding lawyers. However, the firms' rapid post-expansion breakdowns suggest that, rather than reflecting success, the expansions were a last-ditch effort to shore up the inherent weakness of the firms' business model—the lack of reputational capital or other productive assets.

5. Many of these firms were vulnerable to an economic downturn in a given business sector because of their lack of diversification. The problem is not that the firms simply failed to recognize the potential risk-reduction benefits of diversification,⁹⁰ but that diversification requires the firm to have reputational capital that can bind lawyers in hot practice areas to the sharing deal.

6. Several firms financed expansion with bank debt and quickly failed when a business decline interacted with a credit crunch and triggering of loan covenants.⁹¹ The problem is not just the debt itself, but the facts that the debt financed unproductive expansion (see point 4 above), the firms were forced to over-leverage because they could not raise equity capital other than from their partners, and the partners lacked commitment to their firms (see point 2 above).

3. DEVOLUTION

The pressures on large law firms discussed above in this Part have caused their death and shrinkage and the emergence of smaller firms that seem to be little more than aggregates of individual lawyers. Law firms therefore seem to be devolving back to the pre-Big-Law model of law practice in which lawyers are bound by personal ties rather than working for large institutions.

The first devolution stage is increased lateral hiring. Henderson & Bierman spotlight this development by presenting evidence that mid-range firms have struggled to remain competitive with the top tier by hiring laterally.⁹² They show that lateral hiring is greatest at firms that

90. See *supra* text accompanying note 14.

91. See Erin J. Cox, *An Economic Crisis is a Terrible Thing to Waste: Reforming the Business of Law for a Sustainable and Competitive Future*, 57 UCLA L. REV. 511 (2009) (discussing the role of heavy leverage in recent law firm failures).

92. See Henderson & Bierman, *supra* note 19.

have only average profitability rather than at the most profitable firms, which could be expected to attract the best lawyers.

Henderson & Bierman also show that the average firms that increased lateral hiring also increased associate leverage and expanded geographically. This suggests that these firms in effect are buying business by expanding and hiring rainmakers and generating profits to pay the rainmakers by increasing their associate leverage.

These Big Law efforts to stay big are not, however, sustainable. Hiring more associates makes it harder for firms to provide the training and mentoring necessary to back their reputational bond. Lateral hiring and geographic dispersion complicate firms' ability to maintain a strong culture of trust and cooperation. Also, if firms try to increase billings they would need to increase associate wages or risk losing associates to smaller, less leveraged firms.

These problems likely will not be limited to specific practice areas. The Henderson-Bierman study suggests that the firms that are in the best position to survive have more lucrative specialties, which the authors identify as capital markets, private equity, white collar crime, and securities enforcement.⁹³ What they call "commodity" legal areas—including regulatory compliance, labor, trusts, and real estate—face the most stress. As law firms attempt to capitalize on these trends by moving toward more lucrative areas, Henderson & Bierman predict that Big Law's financial stability will be undermined by overcapacity.⁹⁴ Indeed, the meltdown that followed the end of the study period in 2007 struck at some of the formerly lucrative areas such as capital markets and private equity.

In short, increased leveraging could be expected to be only a short-term response to increased lateral hiring. This observation is supported by the meltdown that followed the period Henderson & Bierman studied. Instead of increasing the size of their pyramids, Big Law is likely to devolve into flatter and smaller firms.

Devolution might be reflected in a variety of business structures. One approach is Marc Dreier's "vertical" firm. Dreier described his firm as operating as a sole proprietorship in which the lawyers other than Dreier were nominally Dreier's employees and received incentive compensation but not equity shares.⁹⁵ Thus, instead of leveraging firm-

93. The phenomenon of chasing after hot practice areas is inconsistent with the argument that Big Law best insulates itself from risk by diversifying. *See supra* text accompanying note 14.

94. *See* Henderson & Bierman, *supra* note 19.

95. *See* Larry E. Ribstein, *Dreier: Economic and Legal Ramifications*, Ideoblog, <http://busmovie.typepad.com/ideoblog/2008/12/dreier-economic-and-legal-ramifications.html> (Dec. 10, 2008) (citing and quoting Dreier's Web site, which has since been removed).

level profits as in the standard Big Law model, Dreier's employees theoretically derived profits from Dreier's personal reputation. Such dependence on one lawyer to provide quality assurances obviously constrains firm size. It is not clear what premium clients would pay for a lawyer in a 200-plus lawyer firm with a single owner over what the client would pay for the lawyer as a sole practitioner. Skepticism about Dreier's business model seems to be justified by the firm's collapse in late 2008 amid a spectacular fraud.⁹⁶

A more reliable path to devolution is the "horizontal" all-partner firm with no clear leader. Such a firm could engage in monitoring and quality control consistent with the traditional equal-partner model of the law firm and dispense with the potential disintegrating effects of associate leverage.⁹⁷ Some firms even eliminate or significantly reduce brick-and-mortar offices.⁹⁸ Although these firms may have cost advantages for clients as compared with large law firms, the lower costs appear to be associated with lower, or no, profits at the firm level.

An example of the move toward the horizontal approach is Taylor English Duma in Atlanta. Since its founding in April 2005 by four Big Law lawyers (two partners and two associates), the firm has grown to seventy-five lawyers in several practice areas.⁹⁹ One of the founding partners, Marc Taylor, says that the firm accomplished this through cheaper office space, using technology to reduce staff, paying both partners and associates based on productivity as measured by hours worked and productivity, and reducing fees. The firm financed its growth from operating profits rather than through bank debt. The firm consists mostly of experienced lawyers with substantial reputations rather than the steep Big Law labor pyramid.¹⁰⁰

96. See Zach Lowe & Daniel Wise, *Dreier Arraigned on Two Charges; Receiver Named to Guard Firm Assets*, N.Y.L.J., Dec. 9, 2008, available at <http://www.law.com/jsp/article.jsp?id=1202426586702>.

97. Henderson & Bierman suggest that these firms could be boutiques with specialized practice areas. However, it is not clear why a diversified firm would not work as well or better as long as the lawyers are not relying on diversification for risk reduction, since firms without strong reputational capital cannot use seniority-based compensation. The Taylor English Duma example discussed immediately below is an example of a relatively small and "horizontal" but diversified firm.

98. See V. Dion Haynes, *Recession Sends Lawyers Home: Firms Trade Brick-and-Mortar Prestige for a Better Business Model*, WASH. POST, Mar. 9, 2009, at D1, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/08/AR2009030801549_pf.html.

99. See [taylor|english](http://www.taylorenglish.com), <http://www.taylorenglish.com> (last visited Mar. 4, 2010).

100. See E-mail from Marc Taylor to Larry Ribstein (Nov. 14, 2009, 2:10 p.m.) (on file with author).

The devolution of law firms recognizes that large law firms that do not conform to the traditional Cravath-type reputational capital business model cannot generate significant profits at the firm level and become aggregations of individual lawyers. Although only relatively few large firms have died, the signs of stress are more evident in the shrinkage of large firms, and in the rise of non-firm aggregations of lawyers.

G. Summary

The basic question confronting the large law firm is the extent to which these firms produce substantial profits at the firm level, or instead are just aggregations of lawyers or of relatively small networks of lawyers. The theory of the Big Law “firm” is based on the idea that the firm generates reputational capital. However, the conditions for maintaining this capital, particularly including seniority-based compensation and a rigid up-or-out promotion tournament, exist only in a relatively few top-line firms, such as Cravath. Many more have adopted the Big Law form without the internal structure necessary to maintain it. When big firms try to expand without the support structure they are prone to failure. Big Law recently has been subject to many market pressures that have exposed its structural weakness. The result, not surprisingly, is that large law firms are shrinking or dying and smaller firms that do not attempt to mimic the form of Big Law are rising in their place.

II. TOWARD A NEW BUSINESS MODEL

Part I shows that the Big Law business model—that is, one in which profits from legal advice are generated by large numbers of associates supporting a relatively small number of partners—is not sustainable except, perhaps, in the largest firms. Big Law’s reputational bonding model founders on the problem that compensation based on business generation does not motivate lawyers to devote time to firm-building, and equal or seniority-based compensation that rewards firm-building is difficult to sustain as long as lawyers can leave and take their clients with them. Law firms might close the exits and encourage more loyalty if they could make strong non-competition agreements that effectively bind lawyers to firms. However, as discussed below in Part IV, strong non-competition agreements are not enforceable under legal ethics rules. These rules, in effect, encourage lawyers’ loyalty to individual clients rather than to the firm. Moreover, even apart from ethical rules, reputational capital is unlikely to be a dominant business model for large firms because the current market environment makes it especially difficult to bind lawyers and clients to firms. Building a

viable business model for Big Law must start with giving the firm rights to productive property that can bind business and workers to the firm. These rights can, in turn, form the basis of financing law firms, rather than forcing them to rely exclusively on bank loans and the partners' contributions of human and financial capital. In general, this property would involve producing ideas that have value for general groups of customers or clients rather than only for a specific client that can walk out the door with the lawyer.

This Part discusses one kind of successor to the Big Law business model—specifically, lines of business that can be developed as byproducts of Big Law's current model of rendering customized advice to individual clients. Part III discusses more radical departures from the Big Law business model. This discussion does not attempt to predict the profession's future, but rather to illustrate the possible futures for legal services firms.

A. Legal Products

The traditional model of legal practice privileges representation of individual clients over other ways of delivering legal knowledge and law-related products that could provide better value to clients. Legal knowledge can be packaged and sold as standardized products. Law-trained people obviously would be involved in production, but they would be earning money in a radically different way from today's hourly billing lawyers. However, the following Subsections show that there are significant impediments to this model, including the lack of formal intellectual property protection for legal products.

1. PUBLICATIONS

Firms that provide legal advice and other legal services could leverage their expertise by publishing legal analyses, contracts, standard forms, software, codes, and other law-related materials. Some of these products can be copyrighted, which would give the firm clear property rights in the works. However, the works may not be protected if they are published as pleadings, laws, or public codes because of the public policy favoring dissemination of law.¹⁰¹ Nor are the underlying ideas (such as a takeover defense) subject to copyright protection, though as discussed below they may be protected by patent or

101. See Bruce H. Kobayashi & Larry E. Ribstein, *Class Action Lawyers as Lawmakers*, 46 ARIZ. L. REV. 733 (2004). With respect to the complications involved in copyrighting contracts, see Kenneth A. Adams, *Copyright and the Contract Drafter*, N.Y.L.J., Aug. 23, 2006, at 4.

trademark laws. Law firms therefore might not get much payoff apart from reputational or branding effects from the kinds of publications they could produce.

2. LEGAL IDEAS OR PROCESSES

Legal ideas may be embodied in products such as tax shelters, takeover defenses, or risk-management tools¹⁰² that are carefully designed and tweaked to accomplish particular business objectives within a complex legal framework. Successful legal product designers need to combine legal, technical, and business expertise.

The key question regarding these products is whether and how their producers can capture the value they create for the users, given that the benefits extend beyond specific clients who can be billed for time. The history of the poison pill, one of the most important legal inventions, illuminates the problems inherent in internalizing the benefits of such products.¹⁰³ The pill was developed by an entrepreneurial law firm—Wachtell, Lipton—working for a number of clients. Once litigation established the pill's effectiveness, the pill was used by hundreds of large corporations advised by many different law firms. Although Wachtell's becoming a dominant advisor on takeover defenses demonstrates that law firms can internalize the benefits of innovating legal products even without formal intellectual property rights protection, it is not clear when the necessary conditions exist. Martin Lipton could offer the pill to clients bundled with his own general high-level advice for corporate managers. Thus, even if clients could get any corporate law firm to draft a pill, many would prefer to buy the pill plus related advice from Wachtell. Lipton's ability to capture the pill's benefits gave him an incentive to serve as its public advocate and to produce a scholarly rationale for strong takeover defenses.

Apart from the special case of the pill, lawyers generally may be unwilling to develop legal products that have a higher risk of invalidity and lower potential payoff to the creator. Thus, the availability of formal intellectual property protection may determine the extent to which these products are developed.

102. For a discussion of the potential for marketing risk-management processes, see SUSSKIND, *supra* note 30, at 226–27.

103. See Michael J. Powell, *Professional Innovation: Corporate Lawyers and Private Lawmaking*, 18 LAW & SOC. INQUIRY 423 (1993) (providing a detailed history of the pill).

It is not clear whether and how much patent protection is available for “business methods” such as poison pills and tax shelters.¹⁰⁴ *State Street Bank & Trust Co. v. Signature Financial Group*¹⁰⁵ held that an investment algorithm that created a “useful, concrete and tangible result”¹⁰⁶ was patentable. This case opened the door to patents for such non-physical inventions as tax shelters and e-commerce innovations. However, the Supreme Court is currently reviewing the denial of a patent for a mechanism for hedging commodities trading risk.¹⁰⁷ The Court’s decision in this case could signal the extent to which legal devices such as poison pills can be patented.

Law firms also might get trademark protection for their products. Indeed, at least one legal product, the “Stock Option Grantor Retained Annuity Trust,” or SOGRAT, was both successfully patented¹⁰⁸ and trademarked.¹⁰⁹ However, if the product is not copyrighted or patented, a trademark would not prevent another firm from selling the same device as its own product.¹¹⁰

3. LEGAL SERVICE TECHNOLOGIES

Technology potentially could transform the delivery of legal services. Richard Susskind has written about the general move from customized advice to the sale of legal commodities as lawyers or others figure out how to unbundle and systemize legal advice and services.¹¹¹ In litigation, firms can leverage their expertise by selling kits for

104. See Dan L. Burk & Brett H. McDonnell, *Patents, Tax Shelters, and the Firm*, 26 VA. TAX. REV. 981 (2007); Richard S. Gruner, *When Worlds Collide: Tax Planning Method Patents Meet Tax Practice to Make Attorneys the Latest Patent Infringers*, 2008 J.L. TECH. & POL’Y 33.

105. 149 F.3d 1368 (Fed. Cir. 1998).

106. *Id.* at 1373 (quoting *In re Alappat*, 33 F.3d 1526, 1544 (Fed. Cir. 1994)).

107. *Bilski v. Doll*, 129 S. Ct. 2735 (2009) (cert granted).

108. See Tom Herman, *Tax Report: Patents on Tax-Related Ideas Stir Worry—Groups Fret Plans Could Be Viewed as Backed by IRS*, WALL ST. J., Mar. 14, 2007, at D3, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB117383751682136325.html>.

109. See U.S. Patent No. 2,507,943 (filed Nov. 8, 1999) (issued Nov. 13, 2001) (covering use on “computer software and instruction manuals sold as a unit for use in estate planning, tax planning, trust services, trust planning, wealth transfer planning, charitable gifting, charitable gift planning, and employee benefit planning”); U.S. Patent No. 2,486,079 (filed Nov. 8, 1999) (issued Sept. 4, 2001) (for “services to others in the fields of estate planning, wealth transfer planning, charitable gifting, and charitable gift planning; providing information in the field of estate planning by means of a global computer network”).

110. See *Dastar Corp. v. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp.*, 539 U.S. 23 (2003) (holding that a firm selling as its own product non-copyrighted work originally produced by another party did not violate the Lanham Act).

111. See SUSSKIND, *supra* note 30, at 29–32.

prosecuting or defending claims involving certain types of products.¹¹² Electronic documents and algorithms can help lawyers find documents with particular types of information produced in discovery.¹¹³ Complaints could be created for multiple plaintiffs with similar claims, which might then be consolidated into class actions. Lawyers can buy and sell expertise in designing templates for contracts,¹¹⁴ and then use these templates to automate contract production.¹¹⁵ They could even automate the process of hiring lawyers.¹¹⁶

Once again, it is not clear how law firms can capture the profits from creating and selling these products, and therefore what would motivate them to depart from their standard model of rendering tailored advice to individual clients. Law firms may sell forms and templates as part of their services to individual clients or make them available as a way of generating business,¹¹⁷ but they are not equipped to profit from the economies of scale of developing inventories of forms and other products for a mass market. I have previously written about the problems of giving firms intellectual property or other protection for class action complaints.¹¹⁸ Law firms theoretically could hire software

112. For articles referring to tort lawyers' creation and sale of litigation kits from discovered material, see Victor E. Schwartz & Leah Lorber, *Letter to the Trial Judges of America: Help the True Victims of Silica Injuries and Avoid Another Litigation Crisis*, 28 AM. J. TRIAL ADVOC. 295 (2004); Lawyers for Civil Justice Task Force on Protective Orders, *Court-Approved Confidentiality Orders: Why They Are Needed*, 57 DEF. COUNSEL J. 89 (1990).

113. See Lon A. Berk, *Some Logical Limits of E-Discovery*, 12 SMU SCI. & TECH. L. REV. 1 (2008).

114. A prominent expert in contract writing and design is Kenneth A. Adams, who has a book, see KENNETH A. ADAMS, *MANUAL OF STYLE FOR CONTRACT DRAFTING* (2d ed. 2008), a Web site, see AdamsDrafting, <http://www.adamsdrafting.com> (last visited Mar. 23, 2010), and a consulting business.

115. See SUSSKIND, *supra* note 30, at 100–03 (describing automated document assembly as an example of a “disruptive legal technology”). For example, ContractExpress DealBuilder enables firms to design templates to automate the contract production process. See ContractExpress DealBuilder, <http://www.business-integrity.com/products/contractexpressdealbuilder/default.html> (last visited Mar. 23, 2010). The “eXtensible Markup Language” also can be used to create contracts. See Lawrence A. Cunningham, *Language, Deals, and Standards: The Future of XML Contracts*, 84 WASH. U. L. REV. 313 (2006).

116. See SUSSKIND, *supra* note 30, at 108–13 (discussing the “electronic legal marketplace”).

117. This is apparently the strategy of Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati in giving away its “Term Sheet Generator.” See Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati, WSGR Term Sheet Generator, <http://www.wsgr.com/wsgr/Display.aspx?SectionName=practice/termsheet.htm> (last visited Mar. 23, 2010). See also SUSSKIND, *supra* note 30, at 102–03 (discussing similar products of UK law firms Allen & Overy and Linklaters).

118. See Kobayashi & Ribstein, *supra* note 101 (suggesting the desirability of enabling firms to internalize the benefits of skillful drafting through a share of the fees).

designers, but professional ethics rules currently bar law firms from adopting the structural elements necessary to retool as intellectual property firms, including non-lawyer equity capital and non-competition agreements. The prospect of standardization therefore may be more a threat than an opportunity to Big Law, since it could squeeze some of the profit from transactional work and litigation without letting law firms profit from the new tools.

B. Research and Development

Big Law might leverage its expertise by providing research and development on specific types of business transactions. This Section analyzes the current constraints on law firms performing this role, and the broader implications of these constraints.

George Triantis has argued that law firms could build on their comparative advantage over other types of professionals regarding litigation to bridge their transactional and litigation work by planning transactions in light of expected litigation.¹¹⁹ This insight points toward a potential new Big Law business model: developing information, background, drafting, and litigation strategies on issues that arise repeatedly in the firm's work. The firms then could use this information to render high-value legal advice in their areas of expertise at prices competitive with less expert firms. Although the firms would not have intellectual property rights in documents that are publicly filed or disclosed in litigation, other information could remain proprietary to the extent that it is used solely for advising clients or anticipating problems in drafting client-specific documents.

Law firms' ability to profit from this type of work assumes a basic change from the traditional Big Law business model of serving the diverse needs of their large corporate clients. Large law firms have developed multiple departments—such as corporate, litigation, and antitrust—to serve these needs as they arise. Under the proposed approach, large law firms would continue to do both transactional and litigation work, since as discussed above their comparative advantage lies in bridging this work. Some firms could, however, specialize in particular types of transactions or litigation. This would enable firms to capitalize on investments in issues that the firm expects to crop up repeatedly in its practice because it is both specialized and has a large share of the market for this type of advice.

119. See Harvard Law School, News: Triantis, Taking Goldston Chair, Looks at Emerging Threats to Transactional Legal Practice, <http://www.law.harvard.edu/news/spotlight/business-law/triantis-chair-lecture.html> (last visited Mar. 23, 2010).

Innovative and integrated transaction planning lets Big Law recapture some turf from its competitors. Smaller law firms may not have the resources to move beyond specific cases to broad transaction planning. Even the largest clients with the biggest in-house legal departments are unlikely to incur the costs of developing research whose benefits are shared by other firms unless the research concerns issues that are central to the client's business.

One way large law firms could contribute to transaction planning is by developing and maintaining operating agreements or contract provisions for specific types of businesses. The open-ended business association standard forms that legislatures have enacted do not deal at all with many issues, and deal with others in ways that are unsuitable for many firms. The number of different statutory standard forms that legislatures can provide, and therefore their suitability for specific situations and clients, is limited by the costs of developing the forms and the need for interpretive materials for each form.¹²⁰ Accordingly, there are only a few business association standard forms, most of which are designed for very small and simple firms that do little or no customized drafting. This forces more complex firms to incur the costs of crafting detailed agreements or being left to unsuitable default rules. Large law firms can use their expertise in both planning and litigating transactions to develop and refine customized form agreements that fill this gap. They also could build on this expertise by maintaining computerized databases of contracts, doing in-depth research on contracts and transactions, and engaging economists and other analysts to help anticipate future litigation and structure transactions to minimize litigation costs. In short, a restructured version of Big Law could significantly augment what both lawyers and legislatures currently can do in drafting statutes and form agreements.

The economic potential for law firm research and development raises the question of why law firms have not already moved in this direction. The answer may be that the current model of law firms, backed by professional ethics rules, is client-specific work and billing. This model does not readily lend itself to profiting from research and development that benefits classes of cases and clients.

Law firms may be able to protect their work as trade secrets if the information "derives independent economic value, actual or potential, from not being generally known to, and not being readily ascertainable by proper means by, other persons" and "is the subject of efforts that

120. For discussions of the constraints on developing standard forms, see Larry E. Ribstein, *Making Sense of Entity Rationalization*, 58 BUS. LAW. 1023 (2003); Larry E. Ribstein, *Statutory Forms for Closely Held Firms: Theories and Evidence from LLCs*, 73 WASH. U. L.Q. 369 (1995).

are reasonable under the circumstances to maintain its secrecy.”¹²¹ It is not clear how these tests would be met for legal research. In this case, the work product must be at least partially disclosed whenever the law firm uses it in a case. Moreover, lawyers working on the research cannot be bound to the firm by broad non-competition agreements,¹²² and the firm may not even be able to bind lawyers by confidentiality agreements to the extent that this would disable their representation of future clients.¹²³ These restrictions on contracting may affect not only whether the research is deemed to be a trade secret but also the firm’s ability to protect property that is not a trade secret.

Law firms’ inability to invest in research and development could help solve some persistent contracting puzzles. For example, commentators have wondered why some types of contract provisions such as boilerplate in bond agreements have been surprisingly “sticky” in response to events that might have been expected to produce contract changes.¹²⁴ An important study of choice of form by venture capital portfolio firms revealed that these firms incorporate despite apparent tax disadvantages of the corporate form.¹²⁵ The persistence of this phenomenon is even more puzzling today given new standard forms that seemingly provide a better combination of liability protection and flow-through tax treatment than does the corporate form. Litigation involving fiduciary waivers under the freedom-of-contract provisions in the Delaware unincorporated business entity statutes reveals drafting

121. See UNIF. TRADE SECRETS ACT § 1(4) 14 U.L.A. (2005). For an analysis of the prerequisites of trade secret protection, see Jeanne C. Fromer, *Trade Secrecy in Willy Wonka’s Chocolate Factory*, in *THE LAW AND THEORY OF TRADE SECRECY: A HANDBOOK OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH* (Rochelle C. Dreyfuss & Katherine J. Strandburg eds., forthcoming 2010), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1430463>.

122. See *infra* Part III.A.2.

123. See Ill. State Bar Ass’n Comm. on Prof’l Ethics, Op. 00-01 (9/00); Shop Talk, *Confidentiality Agreements for Tax-Savings Products—Are They Unethical?*, 94 J. TAX’N 61 (2001). The Illinois Ethics Committee focused on Illinois Rule of Professional Conduct 1.7(b) relating to limitation of representation of future clients. It also discussed Rule 5.6 relating to restricting a lawyer’s right to practice and Rule 5.5(b) as to whether the confidentiality agreement assisted an accounting firm engaged in the unauthorized practice of law.

124. See Marcel Kahan & Michael Klausner, *Standardization and Innovation in Corporate Contracting (or “The Economics of Boilerplate”)*, 83 VA. L. REV. 713 (1997).

125. See generally Joseph Bankman, *The Structure of Silicon Valley Start-Ups*, 41 UCLA L. REV. 1737 (1994). See also Victor Fleischer, *The Rational Exuberance of Structuring Venture Capital Start-Ups*, 57 TAX L. REV. 137 (2003) (explaining venture capitalists’ reluctance to use these forms in part based on the insecurity of using untested formats).

problems that have kept firms from taking full advantage of their freedom.¹²⁶

This literature suggesting that contracting parties cannot internalize the benefits of developing standard forms leaves open the question of why law firms could not perform this internalization function. In all of the above situations, law firms potentially could develop the necessary contractual devices if they could acquire intellectual property rights in their work.

Gulati and Scott's detailed analysis of a particular type of provision in sovereign bond contracts¹²⁷ illustrates how constraints on law firm organization may be inhibiting the creation of a Big Law research-and-development business model. They discuss the fallout from a case in which a hedge fund won a preliminary injunction by arguing that a so-called "*pari passu* clause" in the bond contract "barred Peru from making payments to the holders of the restructured bonds without making proportional payments" to the plaintiff.¹²⁸ The court applied an equal treatment rule previously believed to be applicable only during liquidation to a restructuring without a liquidation event. The authors found that this unprecedented case, despite its significant consequences for many bondholders, did not result in changes to the contracts containing the disputed clause. The authors interviewed lawyers seeking to understand this contractual "stickiness." The lawyers cited several explanations for the failure to change the clause, including concern about sending a negative signal regarding interpretation of the superseded language; a desire to preserve *pari passu* as a way out of the contract; client cost-consciousness and desire to get the deal done without extensive negotiations; anti-innovation norms; and uncertainty as to how to fix the clauses. The authors note problems with many of these explanations.

One explanation for the stickiness of *pari passu* that seems especially promising, as suggested by the subtitle of Gulati and Scott's article, is law firms' lack of incentive to invest in research and development. This explanation seems to lurk at the edges of some of the lawyers' explanations, including cost-consciousness and resistance to innovation. Although developing deeper knowledge concerning the origins of the *pari passu* problem and more analysis of how to solve the problem might have been worthwhile, neither individual clients nor

126. See Larry E. Ribstein, *The Uncorporation and Corporate Indeterminacy*, 2009 ILL. L. REV. 131 (discussing cases in which fiduciary duty waivers were held not to apply to conduct in question).

127. See Mitu Gulati & Robert Scott, *Sticky Contracts (or Why Don't Law Firms Have R&D Departments?)* (Feb. 16, 2009) (unpublished manuscript on file with author).

128. *Id.*

their lawyers had the incentive to bear the costs of this work without the ability to capitalize on its benefits.

Law firms are impeded from investing in this information in part because the information is not directly or indirectly protectable intellectual property. Gulati and Scott quote one lawyer as explaining that “[i]t would be easy for others to copy any new clause we came up with . . . the reputations that matter are for getting the deals done . . . not [for] knowing the historical origins of some obscure contract provision.”¹²⁹ Also, the information’s value is closely bound to expertise that lawyers can take with them when they leave the firm. Ethical rules discussed below prevent law firms from protecting this information in the traditional way through non-competition and confidentiality agreements.

If law firms could protect their property rights in research and development, they might be able to finance this work by offering investors a return based on the firm’s extra income from its in-depth expertise over and above the value of lawyers’ services to individual clients. The firms also might hire and give ownership interests to non-lawyer experts, such as psychologists, economists, and historians, or to lawyers and law consultants dedicated to building in-depth knowledge and analysis rather than just work for specific clients.

This explanation of law firms’ potential but constrained role in solving contracting problems through research and development could fill gaps in Gulati and Scott’s interviews and analysis. For example, the others note that Lee Buchheit of Cleary Gottlieb and Phillip Wood of Allen & Overy did valuable extra in-depth work on the *pari passu* problem. They describe Buchheit as “sui generis,” a “maverick [who] works outside the firm’s traditional structures, spending significant amounts [of] non billable time advising governments and teaching law school classes, often doing his own research in remote archives.”¹³⁰ Yet Cleary paid this “maverick” for his work, and this investment evidently paid off when Buchheit took the lead in the *pari passu* litigation crafting arguments and strategy. Gulati and Scott note that

[t]hese individuals do not fit the model of relentless accumulators of billable hours and rarely do they have stables of clients. But they are the closest we see to R&D departments in law firms. One junior associate described this as “the wise man model.”¹³¹

129. See Gulati & Scott, *supra* note 127, at 64 (internal citation omitted).

130. *Id.* at 68.

131. *Id.*

Gulati and Scott also note that litigators often do the extra work that transactional lawyers do not.¹³² Moreover, it was a vulture investor fund that was willing to do the costly and risky spadework that led to its substantial payoff on the *pari passu* issue. If there is a reward for making these arguments, it would seem there is comparable reward for responding to them by redrafting documents, and for anticipating them and preventing cases like the one Gulati & Scott discuss from threatening the security of bond agreements.

Understanding law firm structure could help tie these loose ends in explaining sticky sovereign bond provisions. One reason why some lawyers make the investments that transactional firms typically do not is that they can capture the benefits of their extra work through the reputations they have developed by specializing on a particular type of contract. Since the lawyer owns his reputation and its associated benefits, he does not have to worry about his colleagues defecting with the property as in the typical law firm situation. The lawyer knows he will get paid either from his current firm or from some future firm willing to invest in his book of business. Even if Buchheit could not expect a payoff from enhancing his own reputation and clientele, he likely brought prestige and therefore clients to Cleary. Under Big Law's traditional reputational capital model, the firm's lockstep seniority compensation system rewards lawyers for building the firm rather than just their specific clienteles. Cleary, in fact, has such a compensation system.¹³³ This suggests a possible bridge between traditional Big Law and the research and development capital model. The hedge fund that brought the sovereign bond case, for its part, was willing to make a speculative investment in gathering the relevant information and instigating the litigation because it would capture part of the recovery, and because its investors likely were better diversified and therefore had lower risk-bearing costs than typical law partners.

In short, there may be gains from extending law firms' ability to capitalize on in-depth investments in research and development by enabling them to establish property rights in the products of the research and to raise capital from non-lawyer investors. This indicates the potential for alternative law firm business models once ethical rules are relaxed.

132. *Id.* at 65.

133. See Cleary Gottlieb, Firm Culture, <http://www.cgsh.com/firmculture/> (last visited Mar. 8, 2010) ("Cleary Gottlieb operates on a seniority-based compensation system not only for associates, but also for partners, with the principle that each partner should contribute equally to the firm's success.").

C. Financing the New Law Firm

Law firms currently obtain equity financing solely from their lawyer-partners. Although a law firm may employ other professionals, and non-law firms may employ law-trained people, a firm that has equity owners who are not lawyers may not engage in the practice of law. As discussed further below,¹³⁴ this restriction is intended to ensure that those who control the firm share legal professional norms. Until recently, this restriction has not been much of a problem because, given Big Law's lack of a viable business model, it has not been clear why anybody other than lawyers would want to own a law firm. If, as discussed in Part I, law firms are becoming more like aggregates of lawyers and less like firms, they would seem to have little need for outside capital and little ability to attract such investments. This Part discusses potential business rationales for and some governance logistics of outside financing of law firms.

1. LAW FIRMS' DEMAND FOR OUTSIDE EQUITY CAPITAL

Outside capital has several apparent benefits even for law firms in their current form.¹³⁵ First, it can reduce risk-bearing costs compared to putting the entire financing burden on lawyer-owners who also invest their human capital in the firm. Outside equity financing would enable lawyers to diversify their risk by selling some of their investments in the firm to outside owners.

Second, law firms could use outside equity financing to pay the significant costs of running a law practice, including for office space, sophisticated technology, salaries for staff and associates, and partner draws for living expenses. Law firms suffer from a mismatch of revenues and expenses, since their bills come due regularly while work for clients may be billed and paid irregularly. Given its lack of an equity capital base, even a basically viable firm therefore may face a liquidity crunch when its bank loans come due and its only assets are accounts receivable and pending cases.¹³⁶ As discussed above, loan defaults triggered the demise of several large law firms.¹³⁷

134. See *infra* Part IV.A.1.

135. For recent reviews of the benefits of law firm outside capital, see Cox, *supra* note 91, at 520–22 (focusing on the use of outside capital to reduce excessive leverage); Heather A. Miller, Note, *Don't Just Check "Yes" or "No": The Need for Broader Consideration of Outside Investment in the Law*, 2010 U. ILL. L. REV. 311, 318–20.

136. See MORGAN, *supra* note 27, at 106–07 (discussing law firms' use of lines of credit and other leverage).

137. See *supra* Part I.E.1.

Third, outside equity financing theoretically could relieve the financial burdens associated with lawyer departures. Under current professional rules, lawyers can cash out of their firms only by a sale to their remaining partners or, under certain conditions, to other lawyers.¹³⁸ Lawyers presumably would insist on some cash-out right as a condition of joining a law firm to avoid freezing their capital in the firm exposed to potential majority oppression, and to take advantage of law partners' increasing lateral mobility. The demand for exit rights has increased with the mobility of law partners discussed in Part I. At the same time, the firm's need to come up with cash to pay off exiting partners imposes a significant financial strain on already heavily leveraged lawyer-financed firms. An equity cushion theoretically could relieve this stress.

Fourth, the constraint on raising outside equity capital affects how the firm compensates its lawyers. Although the Big Law promotion tournament provides a way to choose the associates who should be given a chance for a long-term career with the firm,¹³⁹ making the prize a partnership interest may not always be the best strategy for the firm or its associates. Relying on the tournament forces law firms to keep adding partners, which in turn forces them to hire more associates to generate the profits to pay the partners. This can be viewed as a kind of "Ponzi scheme" that makes money by attracting more investors.¹⁴⁰ As discussed in Part I, the tournament model has broken down with the rest of the traditional Big Law model. Outside financing would enable law firms to replace promotions to partner with cash or stock compensation comparable to those paid in conventional firms.¹⁴¹

2. SUPPLY OF OUTSIDE CAPITAL

The previous Subsection's discussion of potential advantages of outside capital for law firms raises the question of whether outsiders would want to provide the cash. Law firms might seem to be attractive business propositions because they typically generate significant income streams in good times and bad. Law firms, however, are essentially worker cooperatives whose income is generated by highly mobile employees. Unless law firms can overcome this problem, they can offer outside investors little to invest in other than faith that they will be able to hold onto their rainmakers.

138. See MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 1.17 (2009).

139. See *supra* note 17 and accompanying text.

140. See MORGAN, *supra* note 27, at 109.

141. See M.K. Berkowitz & Y. Kotowitz, *Promotions as Work Incentives*, 31 ECON. INQUIRY 342 (1993).

Outside financing of law firms therefore must be based not just on Big Law's need for more liquidity, but also on making firms that sell legal services attractive to outside investors. This may involve not only new business structures,¹⁴² but also a new business model that gives law firms stronger intellectual or other property rights than they currently have.

3. PUBLICLY TRADED FIRMS

If law firms could sell interests to outside investors, there is an additional question whether these interests could or should be publicly traded.¹⁴³ This previously unimaginable step has been taken with the successful public offering by Slater & Gordon in Australia,¹⁴⁴ which was enabled by the 2001 deregulation of non-lawyer ownership in Australia.¹⁴⁵ Similar developments are occurring in the UK.¹⁴⁶

Public sale of law firm shares has many of the same business justifications as any firm's sale of outside equity, including providing cash for investing in business opportunities, helping lawyers diversify their investment risk, and increasing the marketability and value of lawyers' shares by having them traded in efficient securities markets. Similar considerations helped motivate the public offering by the

142. See *infra* text accompanying notes 155–159 (discussing the potential use of unincorporate structures for outside-financed law firms). It is useful to look for analogies to professional service industries other than law where firms have attracted outside financing. One example is the advertising industry. See Andrew von Nordenflycht, *Firm Size and Industry Structure under Human Capital Intensity: Insights from the Evolution of the Global Advertising Industry* (Simon Fraser Univ., 2009), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1407334> (discussing the evolution of global advertising to large, concentrated, outside-financed firms through the use of a new holding company structure that enabled the firms to deal with conflicts, grow, diversify, attract more capital, provide liquidity for owners, and achieve some economies of scale).

143. For general discussions of law firm public offerings, see Cox, *supra* note 91, at 533–39; Miller, *supra* note 135, at 341–44.

144. See generally Bruce MacEwen et al., *Law Firms, Ethics, and Equity Capital: A Conversation*, 21 GEO. J. LEG. ETHICS 61 (2008) (discussing of this offering and some of the relevant issues); Larry E. Ribstein, *Want to Own a Law Firm?*, AMERICAN.COM, May 30, 2007, <http://www.american.com/archive/2007/may-0507/want-to-own-a-law-firm>.

145. For the current version of the law, see New South Wales Legal Profession Act 2004 No. 112, ch. 2, pt. 2.6, div. 2, available at <http://www.legislation.nsw.gov.au/fragview/inforce/act+112+2004+ch.2-pt.2.6-div.2+0+N> (permitting incorporated legal practices).

146. See UK Legal Services Act 2007 (Oct. 30, 2007), available at http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2007/ukpga_20070029_en_1 (permitting rules allowing alternative business structures, including publicly traded firms).

private equity firm Blackstone in 2007.¹⁴⁷ Like law firms, Blackstone was selling interests in the partners' expertise. As with sale of outside equity generally, public outside investors would insist on a reasonable prospect of earnings growth from firm-level assets rather than simply getting a slice of the firm's existing revenue stream. In Slater & Gordon's case, the business model was consolidation of a nationwide network of storefront offices and financing future litigation.¹⁴⁸

If the business case for public financing of law firms becomes compelling, policy-makers will have to confront the arguments for prohibiting it. As noted above and discussed more fully below, the concern is that lawyers will become beholden to outside owners, thereby threatening professional norms. Even if this concern is legitimate, it might be addressed by specific regulation rather than by wholly prohibiting outside capital investments.

4. GOVERNING THE OUTSIDE-OWNED LAW FIRM

Law firms with outside investors would present special governance issues. The investors need ways to control agency costs arising out of the exercise of control by the firm's lawyers and managers. At the same time, the lawyers who invest their human capital in the firm and will be subject to ethical obligations need to hold onto critical management power. Indeed, regulators are likely to limit control by outside financiers who do not share professional norms. Solving these problems is critical to the viability of outside-owned law firms.

It is not clear why lawyers' duties to clients should make managing law firms fundamentally different from managing other types of firms. Firms cannot survive in the long run unless they cater to their customers, including by building their reputations for long-term fair dealing.¹⁴⁹ However, lawyers have professional and social obligations other than to clients to exercise their independent judgment. Corporate clients raise a special concern with the lawyer's responsibility to the "entity" or the owners rather than to particular managers. These

147. See Larry E. Ribstein, *Going Privlic*, AMERICAN.COM, Mar. 27, 2007, <http://www.american.com/archive/2007/march-0307/going-privlic>.

148. See SLATER & GORDON LTD., PROSPECTUS (Apr. 13, 2007), available at <http://www.slatergordon.com.au/docs/prospectus/Prospectus.pdf>. Litigation could be an independent basis of financing, as discussed *infra* Part II.G.2.

149. See Edward S. Adams & John H. Matheson, *Law Firms on the Big Board?: A Proposal for Nonlawyer Investment in Law Firms*, 86 CAL. L. REV. 1 (1998) (discussing market and legal constraints that would cause non-lawyer-owned firms to act in clients' interests).

obligations have increased in the wake of corporate scandals and their regulatory aftermath.¹⁵⁰

Law firms' governance structure accordingly has to be designed to minimize agency costs while preserving the lawyers' basic control over the firm's governance and ensuring that law firms honor their social obligations.¹⁵¹ Control could be taken care of by incorporating the firm and giving the lawyers control shares analogous to the founders' shares of Google¹⁵² and media firms such as the companies that own *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. However, entrenching managers potentially increases agency costs. Corporate-type monitoring devices theoretically could be adapted to balance agency costs against law firms' social obligations. For example, the firm might have independent directors who represent the interests of the firm as a whole, including shareholders, clients and society, or managers' fiduciary duties might be qualified to expressly permit them to sacrifice owners' interests for those of clients or society.¹⁵³ However, it may not be clear how these modified duties would differ from the significant leeway allowed unselfish managers under the business judgment rule.¹⁵⁴

A more fundamental problem with the corporate structure is the loss of owner commitment to the firm's welfare that partnership-type equal management and financial sharing helps provide. Indeed, some commentators have blamed the 2008–2009 financial meltdown in part on the incorporation of investment banking partnerships in the 1990s.¹⁵⁵

150. See Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 § 307, 15 U.S.C. 7245 (2006) (imposing ethical obligations on lawyers to report client wrongdoing); Ribstein, *supra* note 40. At the same time, lawyers' gatekeeping role is increasingly hard to square with the competitive pressures on the profession described in this Article. See Geoffrey Miller, *From Club to Market: The Evolving Role of Business Lawyers*, 74 *FORDHAM L. REV.* 1105 (2005) (describing lawyers' changing social role in the light of increasing competition).

151. See generally Miller, *supra* note 135 (analyzing these problems and how they can be addressed by alternative governance structures).

152. Google Inc., 2008 Proxy Statement (Schedule 14A), at 4 (Mar. 25, 2008), available at http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1288776/000119312508064574/ddef14a.htm#rom98719_8 (providing for publicly held Class A shares with one vote per share, and privately held Class B shares with ten votes per share).

153. For example, Australia's Slater & Gordon clearly makes duties to owners subject to lawyers' duties to their clients. See *SLATER & GORDON LTD.*, *supra* note 148, § 1.1 (noting that “[t]he Constitution of the Company provides that the Directors, who must always include at least one lawyer, must give primacy to the duties a lawyer owes first to the Court and secondly to clients”).

154. See generally Larry E. Ribstein, *Accountability and Responsibility in Corporate Governance*, 81 *NOTRE DAME L. REV.* 1431 (2006).

155. See Steven M. Davidoff, *A Partnership Solution for Investment Banks*, N.Y. Times Dealbook Blog, <http://dealbook.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/20/a-partnership-solution-for-investment-banks/> (Aug. 20, 2008) (noting that firm that Goldman Sachs, which remained most partnership-like, best avoided problems with

Outside-owned law firms can avoid this pitfall of incorporation while departing from the traditional partnership form by adopting a modified version of law firms' current unincorporated business forms.¹⁵⁶ For example, law firms might organize as manager-managed limited liability companies (LLCs) or limited partnerships with the lawyers as the general partners or managing members and the outside capitalists as limited partners or non-managing members. A particular advantage of unincorporated business forms is that they substitute distributions and high-powered partner-type incentive compensation for corporate-type monitoring devices like fiduciary duties, shareholder voting, and independent directors.¹⁵⁷ This discipline could give outside owners some protection against agency costs while locking control in the professionals. This structure's specific advantage for law firms is that the governance documents need not prescribe managers' precise obligation to maximize the value of the outside owners' interests. Instead, the outside owners would resemble creditors in the sense that the firm decides on the extent to which profits will be distributed to investors and otherwise gives managers full discretion to run the business.

Unincorporated structures are helpful for the additional reason that they can facilitate contracting better than the more rigid corporate form.¹⁵⁸ This flexibility has encouraged the development of a variety of non-corporate standard business forms that could serve law firms' needs. For example, states have developed the "low-profit limited liability company," or L3C, which serves to restrict the extent to which law firms engage in for-profit activities.¹⁵⁹ Although this particular

subprime); James K. Glassman & William T. Nolan, *Bankers Need More Skin in the Game*, WALL ST. J., Feb. 25, 2009, at A15, available at <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123552702523065837.html>; Michael Lewis, *The End*, PORTFOLIO.COM, Nov. 11, 2009, <http://www.portfolio.com/news-markets/national-news/portfolio/2008/11/11/The-End-of-Wall-Streets-Boom?>; Caroline Salas & Pierre Paulden, *Eat-What-You-Kill Bond Traders Rise From Wreckage (Update 2)*, BLOOMBERG.COM, Mar. 24, 2009, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601109&sid=aTfBlzAvaBoM&refer=news>.

156. For discussions of the analogous application of the unincorporate form to investment banks, see RIBSTEIN, *supra* note 38, at 239; Larry E. Ribstein, *The Uncorporation's Domain*, VILL. L. REV. (forthcoming 2010).

157. See generally RIBSTEIN, *supra* note 38; Larry E. Ribstein, *Partnership Governance of Large Firms*, 76 U. CHI. L. REV. 289 (2009); Ribstein, *supra* note 156.

158. See RIBSTEIN, *supra* note 38, at 7-9 (comparing flexibility of corporations and unincorporations).

159. See LARRY E. RIBSTEIN & ROBERT R. KEATINGE, RIBSTEIN & KEATINGE ON LIMITED LIABILITY COMPANIES § 4:10 n.10 (2008) (citing L3C statutory provisions). For example, the Vermont statute requires the L3C, among other things, not to have a "significant purpose" of producing income or property appreciation. See VT. STAT. ANN. tit. 11, § 3001(27)(B) (2009); Vermont Secretary of State - Deborah L.

form may not be appropriate for law firms, which clearly are for-profit firms, and some commentators have criticized the L3C,¹⁶⁰ these statutes illustrate the standard forms that states could develop to delineate the duties of managers of outside-owned law firms. These standard forms, therefore, could combine some measure of predictability with the inherent contracting flexibility of non-corporate forms.

The problem with unincorporated governance is that, while it might suit the current model of the law firm, it might not be as well designed for the new business models discussed above in this Part. Although law firms now distribute all or most of their profits to their owners, law businesses of the future may more closely resemble typical entrepreneurial firms that need the flexibility to reinvest earnings in order to develop new lines of business. This may put some pressure on the unincorporated business form, which relies on forcing distributions to control agency costs. Thus, the governance dilemma of the outside-financed firm will be to find some way to meet these multiple demands by melding incorporated with unincorporated business structures.

A final governance issue concerns the managers of outside-owned law firms. These firms likely will turn to the same types of conventional managers as other firms, including people with experience across service and perhaps other industries.¹⁶¹ This would follow the analogous path of technology firms like Google that have hired non-technically trained top managers. It is not clear that law firm managers need to be lawyers more than technology firm managers need to be technicians. Indeed, law firms' survival may depend on their ability to find professional managers whose thinking is not bound by traditional professional norms. This Article has shown that Big Law's traditional business model has failed and that it has to find another one. Successful legal services firms must have creative professional management capable of looking outside the traditional law firm model.

Markowitz, Vermont Secretary of State: Corporations Division, Low-Profit Limited Liability Company, http://www.sec.state.vt.us/corps/dobiz/llc/llc_l3c.htm (last visited Mar. 5, 2010).

160. See Carter G. Bishop, *The Low-Profit LLC (L3C): Program Related Investment by Proxy or Perversion?*, ARK. L. REV. (forthcoming) (Suffolk Univ. Law Sch. Research Paper No. 10-09), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1552056>; Daniel S. Kleinberger, *A Myth Deconstructed: The "Emperor's New Clothes" on the Low Profit Limited Liability Company* (William Mitchell Coll. of Law, 2010), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1554045>.

161. See Elizabeth Chambliss, *New Sources of Managerial Authority in Large Law Firms*, 22 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 63 (2009) (discussing increasing professionalism of law firm management).

D. Partial Integration

The above Sections discussed structures in which a single entity owns the business. This Section discusses alternatives that involve financing the firm by subdividing the entity into separately owned offices through franchising, holding companies, and joint ventures.

1. FRANCHISING

Under a franchising approach, a firm leverages its name by authorizing its use by multiple firms, perhaps in different cities or with different specialties. Instead of the firm's raising money from outside investors to finance the expansion, each branch stands on a separate financial footing and licenses the name brand. The franchise contract specifies the franchisee's duties to maintain the value of the brand and the franchisor's duties to promote the brand. The franchisor's reputation bonds the branches' performance in the sense that any shirking by the outlet can diminish the franchisor's overall brand. The franchisor would develop incentives and provide monitoring to protect against shirking in branch offices that could hurt the franchisor's reputation. Franchising also offers economies of scale by selling products and using procedures developed by the central organization, and can use the organization's customer base to gather information to develop additional products and procedures.

Franchising may be appropriate for the commodity or storefront end of law practice doing tax, real estate, or similar routine work for individual clients. In this situation it is easier for the franchisor to monitor performance than it is for the high-end professional services performed by Big Law. The franchise contract could replace open-ended joint maximization and relatively weak incentives with narrower duties backed by strong enforcement, including the threat of termination of the franchise. Also, franchising of commodity law practice potentially can address information asymmetry between lawyers and consumers who have less ability to evaluate legal services than corporate clients with in-house counsel and repeat dealings with lawyers. However, franchising of legal services has not worked even at the commodity end of legal practice. Jacoby & Myers and Hyatt Legal Services pioneered this approach in the 1970s. The former dissolved and the latter morphed into Hyatt Legal Plans, now owned by MetLife, an employer-sponsored legal services plan. These firms evidently could not find a sufficient niche in the area of standardized, easily monitored,

commodity legal services that was left by legal software, the Internet, and increased crowding in the legal profession.¹⁶²

Franchising is probably not appropriate, however, for the Big Law type of practice doing sophisticated litigation, transactional, or regulatory work. The problem is that franchisees arguably have even weaker incentives to maintain the firm's reputational capital than the partners in a law firm. The franchise contract addresses this problem by providing for specific rules, standards, and penalties. This approach is unlikely to work for sophisticated legal work that is not amenable to standardization. Big Firms must rely on close-knit networks of lawyers led by high-end rainmaking partners.¹⁶³ Indeed, we have seen that franchise-type expansion of large corporate law firms by acquiring and applying their names to firms outside their home base has led to many recent firm failures.¹⁶⁴

2. HOLDING COMPANIES

A holding company structure provides a second form of partial integration. Under this approach, a non-operating firm exists mainly to own and provide information technology, management support, and employee incentives for smaller law firms that operate separately under their own names.¹⁶⁵ The most prominent example is the Australian firm Integrated Legal Holdings Limited, which was the second law firm to go public after Slater & Gordon.¹⁶⁶ Since the model does not rely on the brand name of the umbrella firm, its success does not rely on the rigid standardization and monitoring involved in franchising. The main advantage of this structure is that the holding company is able to get financing to develop processes and offer incentives that the subsidiaries could not obtain on their own. The holding company structure has been

162. See Gillian K. Hadfield, *The Price of Law: How the Market for Lawyers Distorts the Justice System*, 98 MICH. L. REV. 953, 989 n.80 (2000) (noting that "scale has been achieved in the form of chains of small offices which share the benefits of experience concretely in standardized documents and procedures," but that "[s]tandardization . . . appears to have effectively put these lawyers out of business"); Carl M. Selinger, *The Retention of Limitations on the Out-of-Court Practice of Law by Independent Paralegals*, 9 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 879, 891-92 (1996) (noting that "there were limits to how little time could be spent with clients. . . . With increased crowding and competition in the legal profession, and increased use of computers by independent lawyers, the interstate legal clinics found that their fees were often higher than those charged by Main Street practitioners").

163. See *supra* text accompanying note 22.

164. See *supra* Part I.F.

165. See Miller, *supra* note 135, at 345-52 (describing holding company approach).

166. See *supra* text accompanying note 144.

successfully used to obtain financing for advertising agencies which, like law firms, rely primarily on mobile human capital.¹⁶⁷

3. JOINT VENTURES

A third partial integration approach to financing law firms is for firms to form joint ventures or other types of cooperative organizations. The firms would operate under their own names and reputations, but contract to assist each other in providing joint services to clients. As with franchising, a common set of residual claimants who have incentives to maximize the earnings of the overall firm is replaced by contracts specifying the nature of the cooperation. The joint venture or cooperative model would not rely as heavily as the franchising model on monitoring and incentives because each office would be backed by its own reputation. The danger lies in agency costs between the client and the firm with which the client directly contracts. The firm that maintains the client relationship may have an obligation of independence in recommending the firms that will assist it and a duty to disclose who is doing the work and any connections between the firms. Ethical rules restricting referral fees outside of law firms¹⁶⁸ may inhibit the usefulness of these networks.

III. BEYOND LAW FIRMS

So far we have focused on tinkering with the Big Law's traditional business of one-to-one advice to clients. This Part considers bigger departures from the standard Big Law model. In general, the stand-alone law firm ignores potential synergies between legal advice and other activities which might not be fully realized by arm's-length contracts among clients, lawyers, and other service-providers. Thus, it may be more efficient for firms to combine legal services with other activities under common ownership, where control may or may not be exercised by lawyers. The relevant firm may be the company seeking the legal advice (i.e., in-house lawyers), consulting or other firms combining multiple disciplines, and retailers who sell law as a commodity along with other products and services. More radically, the industry may move beyond customized legal advice to other ways to profit from legal expertise.

167. See sources cited *supra* note 142.

168. See MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 5.4 (2009).

A. In-House Lawyers

As discussed above,¹⁶⁹ legal work is increasingly becoming a job description within another business rather than a distinct business or line of business. This could leave outside lawyers to focus on narrow specialties while corporate employees make more of the increasing number of strategic business judgments that intersect with law. Although corporations are unlikely to move all of their legal work in-house, firms' option to "make" rather than "buy" legal advice likely will put continuing pressure on the Big Law model.

B. Multidisciplinary Firms

There are significant synergies between law practice and other specialties.¹⁷⁰ Many types of experts other than lawyers can contribute to litigation and transactional work, including economists, accountants, financial analysts, business consultants, psychologists, medical doctors, and actuaries. This creates a demand for creation and dissemination of legal knowledge within multidisciplinary firms. Information asymmetry between experts and clients creates a need for reputational bonding for these experts just as for lawyers. Also, the facts that multiple types of expertise can be required for the same transactions and litigation and that clients' needs for the services can arise unpredictably and for short time periods may make hiring a multidisciplinary firm less costly than hiring the experts separately. Moreover, because the client needs the whole bundle of services and the firm's assurance of quality, the client of a multidisciplinary firm may have a stronger bond to the firm than a Big Law client. Accordingly, multidisciplinary services may provide firm-based property rights that are missing from Big Law, whose clients are subject to walking out the door with individual lawyers.

Multidisciplinary firms do not, however, have to be "law" firms in the sense that only lawyers own them. Legal advice might be added to such large and publicly traded firms as LECG and Accenture, which are already engaged in such law-related services as expert testimony, risk analysis, and electronic discovery.¹⁷¹ Also, investment firms might add legal advice and thereby position themselves to offer one-stop deal-making service, which could offer clients advantages in terms of

169. See *supra* Part I.E.1.

170. See Gillian K. Hadfield, *Legal Barriers to Innovation: The Growing Economic Cost of Professional Control Over Corporate Legal Markets*, 60 STAN. L. REV. 1689 (2008).

171. See LECG, About LECG, <http://www.lecg.com/about> (last visited Mar. 11, 2010); Accenture, <http://www.accenture.com> (discussing some of the products that company offered) (last visited Mar. 11, 2010).

coordination and information-sharing.¹⁷² Lawyers in these firms might share profits with other experts instead of being the sole profit sharers and hiring the experts for a fixed wage or fee. Legal representation need not be these firms' most important line of business.¹⁷³ Even if the firm works on litigation or regulatory compliance, the important expertise may be accounting or business strategy rather than an ability to interpret rules or court decisions.

The problem with this concept of the multidisciplinary firm is that, as discussed below,¹⁷⁴ professional rules forbid firms from practicing law in firms with non-lawyer owners. This can be a significant limitation. The firm's value depends on the members being willing to generate expertise that fits the firm's particular combination of disciplines. For example, economists who testify or advise on antitrust cases must be willing to devote themselves to this particular line of work rather than ranging across economics as academic economists might do. Experts who specialize may forgo job opportunities and, therefore, wages, and be vulnerable to opportunism by the firm, for which they would want to be compensated by a share of the firm's profits.¹⁷⁵ Also, non-lawyers as well as lawyers may need to be motivated by ownership interests to increase the firm's value. Prohibitions on non-lawyer ownership of multidisciplinary firms engaged in law practice, therefore, reduce the potential benefits of combining legal and non-legal services.

C. Retailing Law

Law may be just one of several lines of products or services sold directly to consumers. For example, chains like Wal-Mart or Tesco can sell wills and other legal advice along with tax services and eyeglasses.¹⁷⁶ An established retailer can leverage its brand by

172. See Larry E. Ribstein, *On My Mind: Lawyers Don't Make Enough*, FORBES, Oct. 29, 2007, at 40, available at <http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2007/1029/040.html> (discussing this business model).

173. In other words, lawyers are not necessarily the key transaction cost engineers, as argued in Ronald J. Gilson, *Value Creation by Business Lawyers: Legal Skills and Asset Pricing*, 94 YALE L.J. 239 (1984). Their historical importance as the "passkeys" of large transactions may be an artifact of licensing and ethical rules discussed rather than of the inherent importance of lawyers' legal expertise and other unique skills.

174. See *infra* Part III.A.1.

175. See David D. Haddock et al., *Property Rights in Assets and Resistance to Tender Offers*, 73 VA. L. REV. 701 (1987) (showing how giving corporate managers job protection encourages them to make firm-specific investments of human capital in their firms).

176. See SUSSKIND, *supra* note 30, at 254.

extending the firm's scope to embrace a different type of service. Unlike the franchise model discussed above, mass retailers can compete with small independent law offices because they have more established reputations and can cross-sell legal and other types of services.

As with multi-disciplinary firms, the problem again is the ethical proscription on non-lawyer-owned firms practicing law. This concern might seem to be more intense in this situation since the owners would be non-professionals who theoretically are more attuned to the employer's bottom line than to the client's interests. However, as discussed above,¹⁷⁷ firms have a strong profit motive to preserve their reputations for fair and honest dealings with clients and others. Indeed, as noted immediately above, moving law practice to firms that are more economically viable than traditional law firms could strengthen the reputational bonds the firms can offer clients. Instead of having to trust a worker cooperative with a tenuous future or a sole practitioner recommended by a relative or a subway advertisement, clients could rely on a large retailer's reputation for service that supports all of its profit-making activities, including law practice.

D. Beyond Clients

The new business structures discussed above resemble law firms in the sense of delivering legal expertise in the context of advice to specific clients. However, the following discussion shows that there are potentially many ways firms and individuals may gain from selling legal expertise other than by advising specific clients in specific transactions or litigation. The following are a few examples.

1. FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

Much of the information that determines securities prices is based on the market's understanding of provisions in contracts such as those relating to the circumstances and consequences of loan default. Financial analysts and investors can hire lawyers to provide this analysis, but may not want to have on board all of the specialists necessary to analyze myriad different deals. Thus there is arguably a demand for a firm like Covenant Review, which "creatively analyzes the indentures, credit agreements, and other contracts that determine creditor rights."¹⁷⁸

177. See *supra* Part I.E.4.

178. See Covenant Review, Why Covenant Review?, <http://www.covenantreview.com> (last visited Mar. 11, 2010).

2. LITIGATION FINANCING

Hedge funds investing in litigation are changing the traditional lawyer-client model of litigation.¹⁷⁹ Litigation financing is constrained by a patchwork of laws in some states against a variety of outside funding practices, including maintenance (where a person agrees to support another in bringing or defending a legal action), champerty (maintenance where an investor receives a share of the proceeds of the lawsuit), and barratry (maintenance that promotes groundless judicial proceedings).¹⁸⁰ However, no states prohibit outside litigation finance and only two states regulate it, primarily by mandating disclosures.¹⁸¹

Outside litigation funding is controversial. It has been attacked on the ground that it could increase frivolous litigation.¹⁸² However, outside financing of litigation can encourage socially valuable suits as well as frivolous claims.¹⁸³ Moreover, prohibitions may leave

179. These include Allianz ProzessFinanz, Harbour Litigation Funding, IM Litigation Funding, and Juridica Capital Management, which has raised over £100 million in two public offerings in 2007 and 2009. Litigation financiers even have a trade association, the American Legal Finance Association (ALFA), <http://www.americanlegalfin.com> (last visited Mar. 11, 2010). For general discussions of litigation financing, see Susan Lorde Martin, *The Litigation Financing Industry: The Wild West of Finance Should Be Tamed Not Outlawed*, 10 FORDHAM J. CORP. & FIN. L. 55, 55–56 (2004); Miller, *supra* note 135, at 358–60. For a general policy discussion of selling legal claims, see Michael Abramowicz, *On the Alienability of Legal Claims*, 114 YALE L.J. 697 (2005).

180. See Paul Bond, *Making Champerty Work: An Invitation to State Action*, 150 U. PA. L. REV. 1297 (2002) (including an appendix of state laws); Susan Lorde Martin, *Syndicated Lawsuits: Illegal Champerty or New Business Opportunity?*, 30 AM. BUS. L.J. 485 (1992).

181. See ME. REV. STAT. ANN. tit. 9-A, §§ 12-104, 12-106 (2009); OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 1349.55 (LexisNexis Supp. 2009). General regulation of litigation also may be applied to outside funders. See *Abu-Ghazaleh v. Chaul*, 34 Fla. L. Weekly D 2496, at *7–8 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. Dec. 2, 2009) (enforcing civil theft statute regulating meritless litigation against outside funder who paid litigation costs, received a share of the proceeds, and had veto over whether litigation was filed, who would file it, how it was pursued and settled).

182. See JOHN BEISNER ET AL., U.S. CHAMBER INSTITUTE FOR LEGAL REFORM, *SELLING LAWSUITS, BUYING TROUBLE: THIRD-PARTY LITIGATION FUNDING IN THE UNITED STATES* (2009), available at <http://www.instituteforlegalreform.com/images/stories/documents/pdf/research/thirdparty litigation financing.pdf>. For a more favorable view of the sale of claims see Anthony J. Sebok, *The Inauthentic Claim* (Benjamin N. Cardozo Sch. of Law), available at <http://www.law.georgetown.edu/LegalProfession/documents/SebokTheInauthenticClaim.pdf> (last visited Apr. 7, 2010) (arguing for expanding third parties' ability to invest in litigation).

183. See Jonathan T. Molot, *A Market Approach to Litigation Accuracy* (Georgetown Univ. Law Ctr., 2009) (unpublished manuscript on file with author). A public choice argument for regulating litigation financing is that it is politically easier to prevent a new device than to change the current politically entrenched structure for regulating litigation. See Paul H. Rubin, *Third Party Financing of Litigation* (Working

anomalous gaps by permitting funding by insurance companies,¹⁸⁴ or by lawyers through contingent fees. Accordingly, the best approach may be regulation rather than prohibition, including by ensuring that litigation financing does not systematically favor plaintiffs over defendants.

Calls to regulate litigation financing are significant for present purposes mainly because they provide hints about the public reaction to the new approaches to law practice discussed in this Part. The objections may reflect general unease with moving control over litigation away from lawyers who are subject to professional rules and norms. That would help explain the willingness to tolerate litigation that stays under lawyers' control, such as contingent fees. Similar reasoning applies to many of the other alternatives to Big Law discussed in this Part, including moving law practice in-house, or into Wal-Marts or consulting firms. This connects with the discussion of regulatory impediments to law's new business model discussed in the next Part.

3. LEGAL PRODUCT DESIGN

As discussed above, there are existing and potential products that could commoditize various types of transactional and litigation work.¹⁸⁵ However, this discussion indicated problems that law firms would have moving beyond representing individual clients and profiting from the design and sale of these products. This presents a potential opportunity for non-law-firm companies, such as software firms, which could use legal expertise in the design of the products.¹⁸⁶ The problem for those firms is that lawyer licensing laws¹⁸⁷ create problems bridging what might be termed the "last mile" from general software design to advising clients.

Paper), available at <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/searlecenter/uploads/Rubin-ThirdPartyFinancingLitigation.pdf> (last visited Mar. 23, 2010).

184. See David Dana & Max Schanzenbach, *How Would Third Party Financing Change the Face of American Tort Litigation? The Role of Agency Costs in the Attorney-Client Relationship* (Nw. Univ. Sch. of Law, 2009), available at http://www.law.northwestern.edu/searlecenter/uploads/Dana_Schanzenbach_Agency%20Costs.pdf.

185. See *supra* Part II.B.

186. One example is Dealbuilder, a Web-based program for automating contract formation. See sources cited *supra* note 115.

187. See *infra* Part IV.A.3.

IV. THE ROAD TO THE LAW'S NEW BUSINESS MODEL

This Article has shown that the traditional reputational bonding model of Big Law always has been precarious, and that recent developments have made it increasingly untenable. It follows that the structure of the legal services industry has to change. Whether and how it changes depends importantly on regulation of the legal profession. This regulation is to a significant extent responsible for the success of Big Law by maintaining lawyers' privileged status against erosion by market forces. However, the regulation is now hurting the legal services industry by impeding its move to a more sustainable business model. This Part discusses the regulatory roadblocks that are preventing alternative models of delivering legal services from taking center stage and the forces that might help penetrate these barriers.

A. Regulatory Impediments to the New Model

Three important general regulatory principles constrain dissemination of legal knowledge. First, regulation of the legal profession long has centered on the relationship between individual lawyers and clients and on ensuring that lawyers will exercise their independent judgment on clients' behalf. This regulatory focus on the lawyer-client relationship can subvert lawyers' loyalty to firms that is necessary to maintain the viability of large firms. Second, lawyer licensing laws restrict those who are not licensed lawyers from giving legal advice. This impedes development of alternative methods of delivering legal information. Third, the law applicable to regulating lawyers is that of the jurisdiction where lawyers practice or render legal advice. This effectively requires the law relating to multistate firms to be uniform across jurisdictions and constrains the evolution of business structures. The following Subsections review the rules that reflect these principles and their impact on the development of alternatives to Big Law.

1. NON-LAWYER OWNERSHIP

Ethical rules restrict ownership of law firms by non-lawyers.¹⁸⁸ This significantly restricts use or conveyance of legal knowledge in any firm lawyers do not own and control, and therefore the development of multidisciplinary and outside-financed firms. This rule helps ensure that the use of legal expertise is constrained by the norms of the legal profession. However, the increased competition discussed in Part I has

188. See MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 5.4 (2009).

already threatened these norms. Moreover, the rule is unnecessary, since profit-maximizing owners who are subject to competition from a variety of mechanisms for delivering legal services have a long-term incentive to maintain their firm's reputation.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, clients might fare better from capitalist-owned than from lawyer-owned firms, since capitalists would be focused on serving client needs rather than in maximizing lawyers' role in providing these services.

Preserving socially valuable professional norms can be accomplished by less drastic means. The law could directly regulate lawyers' conduct instead of trying to alter their incentives by constraining their firms' capital structure. Alternatively, the law could move toward deregulating law firm financing by permitting non-lawyer professionals, who are at least committed to some professional norms, to co-own law firms.¹⁹⁰

2. NON-COMPETITION AGREEMENTS

A key challenge facing law firms is giving their members incentives to build the firm's assets rather than just their own clienteles. These incentives exist only if lawyers can count on profiting from their ownership of the firm, which depends significantly on the firm's ability to retain its key business-getters. Non-competition agreements can address this problem by penalizing partners who leave and take with them valuable information and client contacts the firm has developed. This helps protect the firm's investments in reputation, proprietary information, training employees, culture, norms, trade secrets, forms, and practices that intellectual property law does not reach, thereby encouraging firms to invest in creating this property.¹⁹¹

Law firms, unlike other types of firms,¹⁹² face ethical restrictions on entering into binding non-competes.¹⁹³ The prohibition is intended

189. See *supra* text accompanying note 149.

190. For policy arguments on multi-disciplinary law firms, see John S. Dzienkowski, *Multidisciplinary Practice and the American Legal Profession: A Market Approach to Regulating the Delivery of Legal Services in the Twenty-First Century*, 69 *FORDHAM L. REV.* 83 (2000); Daniel R. Fischel, *Multidisciplinary Practice*, 55 *BUS. LAW.* 951 (2000); John Quinn, *Multidisciplinary Legal Services and Preventive Regulation*, in *LAWYERS AND THE CONSUMER INTEREST: REGULATING THE MARKET FOR LEGAL SERVICES* 329 (Robert G. Evans & Michael J. Trebilcock eds., 1982).

191. See Paul H. Rubin & Peter Shedd, *Human Capital and Covenants Not to Compete*, 10 *J. LEGAL STUD.* 93 (1981); Stewart E. Sterk, *Restraints on Alienation of Human Capital*, 79 *VA. L. REV.* 383 (1993).

192. For discussions of enforcement of non-competition agreements, see *RESTATEMENT (SECOND) OF CONTRACTS* § 188 (1981); Phillip J. Closius & Henry M. Schaffer, *Involuntary Nonservitude: The Current Judicial Enforcement of Employee Covenants Not to Compete—A Proposal for Reform*, 57 *S. CAL. L. REV.* 531 (1984).

mostly to ensure the lawyer's loyalty to individual client interests and protect against an unseemly "barter in clients."¹⁹⁴ The rule embraces not only direct prohibitions on competition, but contractual penalties designed to deter competition by leaving partners, including reductions of post-withdrawal compensation of partners who stay in practice.¹⁹⁵ Although the rule authorizes some kinds of agreements protecting against actual damage from lawyers' departure,¹⁹⁶ uncertain enforcement inhibits firms from making large investments in property that may walk away.

Restrictions on law firm non-competes have several potentially perverse effects on law firm structure. First, the agreements inhibit training of young lawyers who might leave with the training and valuable client contacts. This forces firms to rely more heavily on lateral hires. Growth through hiring and retaining entry-level associates can enhance firm stability because the firm can more easily instill a common culture in entry-levels than in lawyers hired from other firms.

Second, the restriction on non-competes tends to help larger, more sophisticated clients who have significant leverage in dealing with individual lawyers, while hurting the smaller clients who need to rely on firms' reputational bonds. Lawyers can leave and build an independent practice around their larger clients whenever this suits these clients' needs. This leaves the smaller clients stuck in the weakened firm and encourages lawyers to cater to their bigger clients.

Third, the prohibition on non-competition agreements inhibits firms from developing new types of legal products that standardize legal services and forces them to rely on individualized client advice. Standardized legal advice and law firm research and development may not be protected by trade secret or copyright law and therefore might walk out the door with departing lawyers.¹⁹⁷ Non-competition

193. See MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 5.6 (2009).

194. The history and rationales of the rule are discussed in Ribstein, *supra* note 6.

195. See *Weiss v. Carpenter, Bennett & Morrissey*, 672 A.2d 1132 (N.J. 1996) (leaving partner would forfeit part of payout if he were to withdraw from the firm before the age of sixty-five for any reason other than death, disability, or judicial appointment); *Denburg v. Parker Chapin Flattau & Klimpl*, 624 N.E.2d 995 (N.Y. 1993) (requirement that withdrawing partner pay monetary penalty); *Cohen v. Lord, Day & Lord*, 550 N.E.2d 410 (N.Y. 1989) (agreement denying withdrawing law partner distributions from post-dissolution receipts).

196. See *Howard v. Babcock*, 863 P.2d 150 (Cal. 1993) (agreement may adjust withdrawal compensation to reasonably reflect actual damage to the firm from the withdrawal); *Rutkowski v. Hill, Betts & Nash*, 613 N.Y.S.2d 874 (N.Y. App. Div. 1994) (retirement plan may prohibit retirees from impairing the firm's relationships with its existing clients).

197. See *supra* Part II.B.

agreements fill this legal gap by preventing employees from working in specialties or geographic areas where they could capitalize on information learned from the firm.

Fourth, the prohibition on non-competes makes it harder for law firms to encourage partners to build the firm's reputation through monitoring and supervision of other lawyers. This monitoring does not pay off in terms of building lawyers' individual books of business. Lawyers' incentive to work for the firm's collective good depends on whether they can expect their colleagues also to do so, which in turn depends in part on whether enforceable agreements bind lawyers to the firm.

To be sure, the effect of the restriction on enforcing law firm non-competes is not clear. The restriction might even have positive effects by encouraging innovation through movement of knowledge from firm to firm. California's non-enforcement of non-competes has enabled its high-tech industry to be more successful than the equivalent industry in Massachusetts, which enforces non-competition agreements.¹⁹⁸ However, it is not clear that the legal services industry is comparable in this respect to the California-Massachusetts high-tech industry. Among other things, innovation in legal services might involve a slower pace of development in which protecting property rights is more important than enabling ideas to circulate among firms.

3. LAWYER LICENSING

Laws penalizing the unauthorized practice of law¹⁹⁹ make the other restrictions discussed in this Section binding by forbidding firms that are not subject to the rules from practicing law.

These laws are questionable policy. They assume a need to screen unqualified lawyers in order to prevent the development of a "lemons" market in which consumers do not know whom to trust and therefore distrust lawyers generally.²⁰⁰ However, licensing laws cannot ensure

198. Ronald J. Gilson, *The Legal Infrastructure of High Technology Industrial Districts: Silicon Valley, Route 128, and Covenants Not to Compete*, 74 N.Y.U. L. REV. 575 (1999).

199. For materials on the definition of unauthorized practice, see Center for Professional Responsibility, American Bar Association, Task Force on the Model Definition of the Practice of Law, <http://www.abanet.org/cpr/model-def> (last visited Mar. 11, 2009). For a general policy analysis of unauthorized practice laws, see Deborah L. Rhode, *Policing the Professional Monopoly: A Constitutional and Empirical Analysis of Unauthorized Practice Prohibitions*, 34 STAN. L. REV. 1 (1981).

200. See generally Hayne E. Leland, *Quacks, Lemons, and Licensing: A Theory of Minimum Quality Standards*, 87 J. POL. ECON. 1328 (1979); Thomas G. Moore, *The Purpose of Licensing*, 4 J.L. & ECON. 93 (1961); Carl Shapiro,

lawyer competence beyond the minimal level tested once by the bar exam.²⁰¹ The extra costs of legal representation resulting from forcing lawyers to attend law school and pass a bar exam therefore may not be worth the benefits in terms of protecting clients from shoddy or dishonest work. These policy arguments could fuel constitutional challenges to lawyer licensing by raising questions as to the public interest served by the regulation. The Supreme Court already has applied the First Amendment and the antitrust laws to prevent courts and bar groups from fixing fees or barring solicitation or advertising.²⁰² Courts also might apply the privileges and immunities and dormant commerce clauses to restrict the effect of state licensing laws on multistate law practice.²⁰³

Forcing consumers of legal advice to hire only those with costly broad-based legal training is particularly questionable where the advice is simple and routine. Unauthorized practice laws have been applied in these cases without regard to whether non-lawyers can give the same quality service as lawyers, whether clients need legal protection, or whether they could be protected other than by licensing laws.²⁰⁴ Moreover, consumers of this advice are likely to have the most need for low-cost services, and to avoid any advice at all if the only alternative is to hire a high-priced lawyer. Unsophisticated consumers may be protected more efficiently by regulating specific activities or practices rather than by requiring everybody who is performing broadly defined legal services to obtain the same costly license.

Licensing laws also constrain the development of legal information products. Courts generally distinguish self-help books or drafting do-it-yourself legal kits that do not involve individualized advice from legal computer software and Internet services that give advice to individual users.²⁰⁵ For example, a firm can sell will-making software that provides general guidance, but may not make a program that is sophisticated enough to give individualized advice on particular issues.²⁰⁶ Firms can develop deal-making software, but licensing laws may constrain them from developing products that automate formation of specific contracts without the assistance of a lawyer. Licensing laws

Investment, Moral Hazard, and Occupational Licensing, 53 REV. ECON. STUD. 843 (1986).

201. These arguments are reviewed in Ribstein, *supra* note 63.

202. *See generally* Rhode, *supra* note 199.

203. *See* Andrew W. Perlman, *A Bar Against Competition: The Unconstitutionality of Admission Rules for Out-of-State Lawyers*, 18 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 135 (2004).

204. *See* Rhode, *supra* note 199, at 85–86.

205. *See* Ribstein, *supra* note 63, at 357–62.

206. *See* Hadfield, *supra* note 162.

therefore protect the current model of legal advice from competition with other models of legal advice or provision of legal information. Without this regulation, firms would have incentives to invest in, for example, software and data that could automate contract drafting or aspects of litigation, or guide businesses on likely legal outcomes of particular decisions or contract provisions.²⁰⁷

More fundamentally, licensing laws impede the development of a legal infrastructure that suits our modern information-based economy.²⁰⁸ In the absence of these laws, the development of legal rules and the provision of law-related services could not only move away from conventional law firms, but also could be substantially privatized and freed from the control of a cadre of law-trained specialists.²⁰⁹

4. CHOICE OF LAW

The current regulatory system subjects individual lawyers to ethical rules of the states where they are based, and so subjects the structure of national law firms to the laws of all the states in which they have offices.²¹⁰ If multistate law firms cannot choose their regulating state, as standard business corporations generally do by deciding where to incorporate, they need uniform rules, which decrease regulatory flexibility and experimentation²¹¹ and are susceptible to interest group

207. *Id.*

208. *See generally* Gillian K. Hadfield, *Law for a Flat World: Legal Infrastructure and the New Economy* (Univ. of S. Cal. Sch. of Law & Dep't of Econ., 2010) (unpublished manuscript on file with author) (discussing licensing laws as part of the "secondary legal infrastructure" that determines the structure of law).

209. *Id.*

210. *See* MODEL RULES OF PROF'L CONDUCT R. 8.5 (2009) (providing for application of rules of the jurisdiction in which the court sits for conduct in a judicial proceeding, local rules if the lawyer is licensed locally, or the rule where the lawyer principally practices unless the lawyer's conduct has its predominant effect in another jurisdiction where the lawyer is licensed). These constraints on law firm structure do not apply to conventional business firms as long as they are not deemed to be engaged in law practice. As law distinctions between law and non-law firms blur along the lines discussed in Part II, questions may arise as to which types of firms are subject to these restrictions. This might, in turn, add to the competitive pressure on existing regulation discussed below.

211. *See* Committee on Counsel Responsibility, *Risks of Violation of Rules of Professional Responsibility by Reason of the Increased Disparity Among the States*, 45 BUS. LAW. 1229, 1235-37 (1990); *Developments in the Law—Lawyers' Responsibilities and Lawyers' Responses*, 107 HARV. L. REV. 1547, 1583-86 (1994); Duncan T. O'Brien, *Multistate Practice and Conflicting Ethical Obligations*, 16 SETON HALL L. REV. 678, 720-21 (1986); Jeffrey L. Rensberger, *Jurisdiction, Choice of Law, and the Multistate Attorney*, 36 S. TEX. L. REV. 799, 813-14 (1995).

manipulation.²¹² The cumbersome multistate coordination process of regulating the legal profession may at least partly explain why the U.S. lags behind the UK's unitary regulator in the global competition for professional regulation.²¹³

It follows that regulation of law firm structure needs to be subject to the same choice-of-law rule as other business association governance—that is, the internal affairs doctrine.²¹⁴ Applying the internal affairs doctrine to regulation of law firm structure could create regulatory competition that would loosen the bar's political control over lawyer regulation and create an opportunity to develop rules that better serve the interests of clients and other third parties. Firms' ability to choose the state law that governs their structure also would encourage experimentation and the development of alternative models for regulating dissemination of legal knowledge.

The application of the internal affairs doctrine is important in facilitating the development of new business structures suited for the new type of law firm discussed in this Article. Crafting these forms is challenging because of the need for coherent statutes that suit different types of firms.²¹⁵ Because no single group of legislators or private parties has all of the necessary information, these statutes need to evolve over time.²¹⁶ This is particularly true for legal services firms, which need a more viable business model and organizational structure to support outside financing.²¹⁷ Multiple types of statutes may have to develop for different types and sizes of law firms. States may specialize in legislating for different types of firms, just as Delaware has tailored its business association statutes to cater to the corporate law needs of large corporations. The recent experience with the evolution of limited

212. See Larry E. Ribstein & Bruce H. Kobayashi, *Economic Analysis of Uniform State Laws*, 25 J. LEG. STUD. 131, 140–43 (1996).

213. See *infra* notes 221–225 (discussing regulatory developments in the UK and Australia).

214. See Larry E. Ribstein, *Ethical Rules, Law Firm Structure and Choice of Law*, 69 U. CIN. L. REV. 1161 (2001). See also J. Mark Little, Note, *The Choice of Rules Clause: A Solution to the Choice of Law Problem in Ethics Proceedings*, 88 TEX. L. REV. 855 (2010) (advocating contractual choice of law rule for attorney ethics rules). For a more general analysis of the internal affairs doctrine, see Larry E. Ribstein & Erin A. O'Hara, *Corporations and the Market for Law*, 2008 U. ILL. L. REV. 661.

215. For discussions of the coherent design of business association statutes, see RIBSTEIN, *supra* note 38, at 21–32; sources cited *supra* note 120.

216. See Bruce H. Kobayashi & Larry E. Ribstein, *Evolution and Spontaneous Uniformity: Evidence from the Evolution of the Limited Liability Company*, 34 ECON. INQUIRY 464 (1996).

217. See *supra* note 142 and accompanying text (noting the role of new structures in enabling development of large advertising firms); *supra* notes 155–159 (discussing the potential use of new “unincorporate” structures for outside-financed law firms).

liability company statutes demonstrates states' ingenuity in crafting new business forms.²¹⁸ This development has been led by lawyers,²¹⁹ who are even more likely to lead the development of statutes for law firms, in which they have particular interest and expertise.

Some may argue that applying the internal affairs doctrine to law firm structure will lead to a "race to the bottom" in which lawyers draft the statutes and seek the states with the lightest regulation. This would seem particularly to be a problem because of lawyers' information advantages over clients and the need to protect against lawyer-client agency costs. Moreover, these statutes may affect broader social interests that are not represented either in statutory drafting or in bargaining with lawyers or law firms. However, it is important to keep in mind that the statutes would be mainly designed for governing the relationship among lawyers in the firm. Specific regulations could still protect clients and society from lawyers' misconduct.

B. Overcoming the Impediments

The regulation that is impeding a shift to a new business model is not an implacable barrier. Potential profits from eliminating the restrictions give competitors and consumers a strong incentive to surmount the barriers. This Section discusses some possible scenarios for change.

1. COMPETITION

Ethical rules are unstable to the extent that they pit the legal profession's collective interest against individual lawyers' self-interest. Those who incur the highest costs from these rules will take the lead in changing them. Change is particularly likely to come from smaller firms operating on the edges of conventional professional norms that seek to offer lower-cost services without costly large-firm baggage.²²⁰

Legal ethical rules also face pressure from outside the profession. If freed from ethical and licensing rules, non-lawyers could perform legal-type services. They have a strong interest in competing for the substantial potential profits from rendering legal services, particularly as law's domain expands through regulation. Non-lawyers could erode

218. See Bruce H. Kobayashi & Larry E. Ribstein, *Jurisdictional Competition for Limited Liability Companies* (Univ. Ill. Law & Econ. Research Paper No. LE09-017, 2009), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1431989>.

219. See Ribstein, *supra* note 63.

220. See Henderson & Bierman, *supra* note 19; Eli Wald, *The Rise and Fall of the WASP and Jewish Law Firms*, 60 STAN. L. REV. 1803 (2008) (discussing the rise of the elite Jewish law firms through takeover work shunned by Wall Street firms).

licensing restrictions through creative contracting and litigation. Professionals such as accountants also have an incentive to erode lawyers' privileged access to advising on lucrative transactions.

There is also growing international regulatory competition, particularly between the U.S. and UK.²²¹ Before 1986, the UK did not let U.S. law firms give advice on U.S. law in London. This regulation was relaxed as part of the UK's 1986 "Big Bang" financial regulation, which exposed UK firms to more performance-based U.S.-style compensation structures and encouraged mergers of U.S. and UK firms, including Clifford Chance and Rogers & Wells. The UK then took deregulation further than the U.S. in passing the Legal Services Act (2007), which permitted firms to attract non-lawyer investors.²²² Meanwhile, similar deregulation in the Australian state of New South Wales led to the first law firm public offering.²²³ Liberated Australian and UK firms ultimately may compete directly with U.S. firms that are subject to more stringent ethical constraints. If U.S. regulators try to block this competition, they may face pushback not only from clients interested in cheaper and more efficient legal services, but also from trade regulators.²²⁴ Concern about global competition caused the American Bar Association to establish a commission to study allowing multidisciplinary practice.²²⁵

2. CONTRACTS

Clients seeking lower-cost legal services may want to waive ethical constraints on competition among law firms. Courts may enforce these waivers, at least by large and sophisticated corporate clients. For example, lawyers might avoid a particular jurisdiction's ethical rules by contracting with their clients concerning which state's ethical regime applies. Clients may consent to law firms' limited liability through the firm's disclosure of its limited liability form,²²⁶ and to the firm's

221. See James Faulconbridge & Daniel Muzio, *The Financialization of Large Law Firms: Situated Discourses and Practices of Reorganization*, 9 J. ECON. GEOGRAPHY 641 (2009) (summarizing this history).

222. See *supra* note 146 and accompanying text.

223. See *supra* text accompanying notes 144–145.

224. See Laurel S. Terry, *GATS' Applicability to Transnational Lawyering and its Potential Impact on U.S. State Regulation of Lawyers*, 34 VAND. J. TRANSNAT'L L. 989 (2001).

225. See James Podgers, *Off the Mat: After a Beat-Down Nine Years Ago, Multidisciplinary Practice May Get Another Look From the ABA*, A.B.A. J., Aug. 2009, at 65 (noting the need to enable U.S. law firms "to compete with legal providers in other countries").

226. See ABA Comm. on Ethics and Prof'l Responsibility, Formal Op. 96-401 (1996) (stating that use of the statutorily required abbreviation in public

jurisdictional choice regarding conflicts of interest.²²⁷ Lawyers also may negotiate for arbitration clauses in their law firm partnership agreements, which might get them a more sympathetic hearing on enforcement of non-competition clauses than they would get in court.²²⁸ Firms and clients can avoid jurisdictions that do not enforce these contracts, thereby pressuring those jurisdictions to enforce such contracts.²²⁹

3. FINANCIAL ARBITRAGE

Law firms might escape restrictions on non-lawyer ownership through financial instruments and contracts that exploit the nearly infinite potential variations on the concept of ownership. It is arguably only a small step from litigation financing arrangements to outside financing of entire litigation firms. Also, several recent cases have considered whether management services contracts between management companies and medical partnerships involving extensive administrative and support services and profit sharing were illegal partnerships.²³⁰ Given sufficient demand for these arrangements, firms could keep tweaking the terms until they find a reliable loophole.

Perhaps most importantly, law firms might skirt the prohibition on outside financing through financial derivatives that pay off depending on the firm's earnings.²³¹ As long as the holders of these instruments are not characterized as owners of the law firm, they would no more violate Model Rule 5.4(a) than would the banks loaning money to law firms. Whether they are considered owners might depend on state

communications is sufficient to make such communications not misleading or deceptive under Model Rules 7.1 and 7.5(a), and that an LLP referring to itself as a "partnership" is not an actual or implied misrepresentation).

227. See Task Force on Conflicts of Interest, ABA Section of Business Law, *Conflicts of Interest Issues*, 50 BUS. LAW. 1381, 1426 (1995) (suggesting that firms include choice-of-law clauses in engagement letters to deal with client conflict issues).

228. With respect to the relationship of arbitration clauses and choice-of-law, see ERIN A. O'HARA & LARRY E. RIBSTEIN, *THE LAW MARKET* 85-106 (2009).

229. See *id.* 65-84 (discussing role of party mobility in securing enforcement of choice-of-law clauses).

230. For cases holding that the relationships were partnerships, see *In re OCA, Inc.*, 552 F.3d 413 (5th Cir. 2008); *OCA, Inc. v. Hodges*, 615 F. Supp. 2d 477 (E.D. La. 2009) (involving Pennsylvania law); *Apollon v. OCA, Inc.*, 592 F. Supp. 2d 906 (E.D. La. 2008) (involving Pennsylvania law). For a case contra, see *In re OCA, Inc.*, 378 B.R. 493 (Bankr. E.D. La. 2007).

231. For discussions of law firms' potential use of derivative securities to skirt rules against outside capital, see MacEwen et al., *supra* note 144; Miller, *supra* note 135, at 356-57; Tonio D. DeSorrento & Geoffrey R. Thompson, *Something Short of Selling Out: Derivatives-Based Innovation in the Legal Profession and Capital Markets*, 21 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 577, 588 (2008).

partnership law, as with the management service contracts noted above. Under this law, even if the derivative owners are deemed to be profit-sharers, they may nevertheless not be partners if they lack control over the business and are clearly characterized as non-partners in the relevant agreements.²³² Conversely, some partnership statutes allow firms to admit partners without economic interests.²³³ If the economic nature of the interest is not controlling, characterization might turn on such ephemeral elements as the degree of control or how the parties characterize the arrangement in their agreement. The flexible nature of ownership provides ample opportunities for envelope-pushing given an underlying demand for outside financing combined with pressure from clients and international competition discussed in the preceding Sections.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This Article has shown that the problems of Big Law are not just a reflection of the current economic environment, but an indication of structural flaws in the large law firm as a mechanism for delivering legal services. In a nutshell, these firms need outside capital to survive, but lack a business model for the development of firm-specific property that would enable the firms to attract this capital. These basic problems have left Big Law vulnerable to client demands for cheaper and more sophisticated legal products, competition among various providers of legal services, and national and international regulatory competition. The result is likely to be the end of the major role large law firms have played in the delivery of legal services.

The death of Big Law has significant implications for legal education, the creation of law and the role of lawyers. First, a major shift in market demand for law graduates ultimately will affect the demand for and price of legal education. Big Law's inverted pyramid, by which law firms can bill out even entry-level associate time at high hourly rates, has created a high demand and escalating pay for top law students. The pressures on Big Law discussed throughout this Article are ending this era with layoffs, deferrals, pay reductions, and merit-based pay. Although law school applications appear to be holding up through the end of 2009, as the recession still affects overall employment, this may not continue if the general economy improves but the demand for Big Law does not. Law schools will have to find

232. See BROMBERG & RIBSTEIN, *supra* note 42, § 2.07(b)(3).

233. See DEL. CODE ANN. tit. 6, § 15-205 (2005) (general partnership); *id.* § 17-301(d) (limited partnership); *id.* § 18-301(d) (limited liability company); RIBSTEIN, *supra* note 38, at 157.

education models that are more cost-effective and that address employer demands in the new market for law graduates discussed in this Part.

Second, law schools will have to undertake much of the training that they traditionally have delegated to Big Law and other employers. Because client pressure is likely to push fees to better reflect associates' level of training and experience, law firms will have to do more of the training. The increasing instability of large law firms and their lack of any device, such as non-competition agreements, for binding trained lawyers to the firm make it unlikely this investment will pay off. Moreover, the decline of the tournament model of Big Law hiring means that law graduates no longer can expect to benefit from the multi-year training and screening period the tournament used to offer.

Third, Big Law's death poses difficult questions for law schools as to what they should train their students to do. The use of law in finance, the increasing importance of in-house counsel, lawyers' increasing roles within businesses, and the combination of law with other types of expertise, among other developments, create a demand for lawyers who can function within business rather than just delivering technical legal advice from the outside. Law school therefore may need to offer more business background in both advanced seminars and basic courses like business associations, securities regulation, antitrust, and bankruptcy.²³⁴ Also, the development of legal products and the increasing use of technology in law practice require technical training that enables lawyers to do more than just litigate and give individualized advice.²³⁵ Richard Susskind imagines a world in which much of what is now regarded as law practice has been taken over by information technologists and other specialists.²³⁶ Thus, Susskind suggests that law students will need to be able to engineer legal knowledge.²³⁷

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the end of Big Law's dominance in creating and disseminating legal information could have

234. Northwestern Dean David Van Zandt has suggested that law schools develop business competencies in addition to legal analysis, including teamwork, communication, quantitative skills, strategic business skills, project management, and ability to work in a global environment, and Northwestern does offer such training. See David E. Van Zandt, *Foundational Competencies: Innovation in Legal Education*, 61 RUTGERS L. REV. 1127 (2009). Law schools are starting to offer advanced programs in entrepreneurial law. See Ashby Jones, *Want to Become an Entrepreneur? Get a Degree in it, at Law School!*, Wall St. J. L. Blog, <http://blogs.wsj.com/law/2010/01/22/want-to-become-an-entrepreneur-get-a-degree-in-it-at-law-school> (Jan. 22, 2010) (discussing programs planned by Duke and Colorado).

235. See Cunningham, *supra* note 115, at 363–64 (discussing new training required to prepare lawyers to use XML in contract creation).

236. See generally SUSSKIND, *supra* note 30.

237. See *id.* at 272.

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profound implications for how society is regulated and the nature of that regulation.²³⁸ Lawyers are currently a powerful interest group, well organized through bar associations, and motivated to enact and maintain laws whose administration enriches the legal profession. Broadening the class of those who can give legal advice accordingly might reduce, or at least reconfigure, the demand for regulation.

238. See Hadfield, *supra* note 162 (discussing the social costs of non-competitive markets for legal services).