

# Founder of New York firm built its presence with the right hiring ‘fit’

By Brian Cox

**Roger E. Barton**, managing partner of Barton LLP in New York, often describes himself as the “concierge at the Ritz Carlton” for the lawyers in the business law firm he founded.

“My job is to make sure they have the resources that they need to be able to execute on the work that they’re bringing in,” he says.

In addition to making the necessary resources available, Barton ensures the firm provides an environment that allows its lawyers to be as nimble and flexible with clients as possible.



Resources, agility, and a degree of autonomy are among the key ingredients in Barton LLP’s success over the years in attracting veterans of “BigLaw” who may have become frustrated with the bureaucracy of large firms and are looking for a smaller platform with billing rate flexibility while retaining a high-quality brand and work product.

As a veteran of BigLaw himself, Barton is familiar with the journey that can draw an accomplished attorney to a midsize firm. Coming out of law school, Barton joined the largest real estate law firm in the country, which is where he wanted to be, except that after billing some 3,000 hours his first year in the litigation department he found his efforts to transfer to the business side of real estate frustrated.

In response, he accepted an offer from Sidley Austin to join its business transactions group, where he worked for several years before changes in the firm prompted him to wonder if he wanted to be one of hundreds of partners at Sidley or, perhaps, he could try to branch out on his own.

“I was fortunate when I was at Sidley, I actually generated a lot of business early on,” recalls Barton, “and so I felt confident I could at least make a go of it.” He adds with a laugh, “I was young and naïve so the confidence was fueled by that.”

His business plan for the new firm, he admits, was nothing more refined than “I’m a good lawyer, hire me.” But he attended countless networking events, handed out an untold number of business cards, and he ballparks revenue that first year at \$400,000. It quickly grew to seven figures. Eventually, though, revenue plateaued, Barton says, because the firm didn’t have a deep enough bench or client base.

“I knew we could do good work, but we weren’t big enough,” says Barton. “I felt I was majoring in the minors.”

Around 2011, Barton says a light went off in his head. If he could attract lateral partners who had a level of business, it



**Roger Barton played a prominent role in the recent International Summit in Washington, D.C.**

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would not only generate more revenue, but more importantly, it would bring a skillset the firm didn't have along with an expanded client base.

Barton devised a two-fold approach to growth: To continue growing organically as the firm had been doing, but also to create a parallel track to recruit the “best of breed out of large firms.”

“I do believe in many respects that large firms are the graduate school of law school,” says Barton.

Enticing BigLaw alumni to join Barton LLP became the linchpin in Barton's successful expansion efforts. The firm, which started out with seven lawyers, now has 35 and actively markets the fact that its members have experience in BigLaw.

“There is a tremendous amount of space in the market for a firm that can provide high-quality, sophisticated legal services in an efficient user-friendly environment,” he says.

Barton has given considerable thought and analysis to identifying the characteristics of a BigLaw attorney who might be a “fit” for Barton LLP. In a 2019 article for Thomson Reuters, Barton describes lateral hiring as a game of chess that is too often being played as though it were checkers. Barton stresses that “firms need to have clear ideas about what a successful ‘fit’ means to them when evaluating lateral hires.” He then goes on to delineate the criteria encompassed by the term “fit.”

Barton looks for excellent attorneys who are ill-suited to the restrictive nature of large law firms and whose clients are a misfit for BigLaw.

“In my view,” Barton says, “there is a mismatch with a lot of work that is being done by large firms and the way in which it is serviced at those firms. That work really shouldn't be at those firms.”

In addition to many other benefits, the firm's membership in Primerus is often an essential recruiting tool when it comes to lateral hiring, according to Barton.

“Primerus solves a lot of the platform concerns lawyers may have in terms of geography as well as practice area,” Barton says.

If a lawyer from a 26-office firm questions Barton LLP's ability to handle an issue locally elsewhere in the country, Barton is able to answer that the firm has Primerus lawyers in most locations and that they are not just a directory on his desk.

“It's lawyers we actually know,” Barton tells them. “We meet them a few times a year. We share work. We share clients. We know who their families are. It's a tightknit relationship. So, you can feel confident if we rely on somebody else to handle your work, that it's going to be well handled by somebody we know.”

In addition, Barton says Primerus gives the firm the ability to scale up quickly if it needs a niche practice area the firm doesn't possess.

“We can be innovative by collaborating within Primerus,” says Barton, citing the theme to the 2022 International Summit the Primerus Business Law Institute held in Washington, D.C. in early April. Barton was chair of the committee that organized the premier client event, which had been cancelled the previous two years because of COVID-19.

More than 100 attendees gathered to experience high-level relevant programming and to meet with Primerus lawyers in a relaxed, casual environment.

“I think it was a really successful event,” says Barton. “We had a terrific turnout given we're coming off of COVID.”

People were excited to see each other, says Barton, and the quality of the programming was outstanding. An evening program – featuring counsels to former U.S. presidents including Ty Cobb, Robert Bennett, and Stefan Passantino – drew a standing ovation.

“I think we put ourselves back on the map in a strong way,” says Barton. “There's a lot of energy behind the next summit.”

With the exception of four years spent in Ann Arbor earning his undergraduate degree in history at the University of Michigan, the environs of New York City have been Barton's stomping grounds most of his life. His father was a lawyer in the city and his mother worked in real estate. Barton says career choices in his house were either doctor or lawyer.

“Law seemed the logical choice,” he says.

Barton and his wife, Kathryn, who met while they were in law school at Fordham University and have been married for 34 years, have two sons, Gregory and Matthew. Gregory is an associate dean of students at Long Island University, and Matthew is a Clio Award-winning art director at an ad agency.

“We have smart, creative, great kids who are not lawyers,” says Barton.

While Barton is quick to note with a laugh that there is no Roger Barton outside of the lawyer, he finds time to travel and enjoys activities connected with the water such as sailing.

In describing his relationship with water, Barton cites the John F. Kennedy quote, “... all of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea – whether it is to sail or to watch it – we are going back from whence we came.”

“I believe that,” says Barton.