

Culture Is the Only Strategy: Why Big Law's Obsession With Scale is a Mirage

By Richard A. Rosenbaum | July 17, 2026 | The American Lawyer

It's time we have an honest conversation about what is threatening Big Law.

If you look at the profession today, it feels like a frantic race to achieve scale overnight. Firms are chasing the same shiny objects: mergers and vereins, exploring outside equity investors, and driving up billing rates to fund ever-escalating overhead and associate salaries.

As a new generation of firm leaders step up across the profession, it would benefit many to remember the most important lesson of the past: you cannot buy, merge, or financially engineer your way into a sustainable institution.

These current trends are evidence of management making a dangerous bet: that maximizing current revenue and profits can replace the actual glue that holds a firm together. But history is a brutal teacher. Over the decades, the once-dominant firms that adopted that mercenary philosophy didn't achieve immortality; they found themselves in the graveyard.

The prevailing narrative today is that the legal universe centers entirely around New York and London. Let's be real: those are vital, key markets. New York is our largest market, and London maintains incredible strength and momentum. But the world doesn't stop at the edge of Manhattan or the Thames.

True strength comes from geographic diversification and respecting that every market is unique. Whether it's across the United States, Europe, the Middle East, Latin America, or Asia, every office needs autonomy to compete on the ground. Firms don't need rigid, centralized bureaucracy dictating terms from thousands of miles away; we need to be nimble, change-oriented, and value-driven, empowering our people locally while remaining one unified firm globally.

In our firm, we talk a lot about the Greenberg Traurig family. Some might dismiss that as warm-and-fuzzy sentimentality in a firm of 3,200 lawyers across 51 offices, financially disciplined and on track to exceed \$3 billion in revenue this year. It isn't. It is a highly deliberate, fiercely competitive business model, organically built over time without losing sight of its fundamental principles.

True glue isn't a payout; it is a culture strengthened day by day, not a desperate move to achieve scale overnight. It is rooted in mutual trust, avoiding internal politics, treating every single individual with dignity, and fostering a true meritocracy.

This model is precisely what allows our firm to navigate the technological shifts happening right now. We are in the middle of an AI revolution, and clients are searching for value more than ever. Instead of looking at AI as a threat to hours billed or an excuse to inflate costs, we see it as an accelerator. By using these tools to collaboratively build and deliver a massive, interconnected knowledge base across a highly diverse set of industries, we can supercharge the value we provide to clients. It allows a nimble team on the ground to punch way above its weight, backed by the collective intelligence of the entire global firm.

But technology is simply an amplifier. If you automate a toxic, bureaucratic culture, you just get faster bureaucracy. AI will accelerate efficiency, but it will never replace the human trust that clients place in us or the collaboration that keeps our partners connected.

Scale for the sake of scale is a trap. At the end of the day, clients don't hire a Verein structure or an equity investor's balance sheet; they hire trusted lawyers who are empowered to deliver value. It's time Big Law remembered that the only lasting glue is the human one.

Reprinted with permission from the July 17 edition of The American Lawyer © 2026 ALM Global Properties, LLC. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited, contact 877-256-2472 or asset-and-logo-licensing@alm.com.

About the Author:

Richard A. Rosenbaum is Executive Chairman of Am Law 100 firm Greenberg Traurig.