The Law Firm Merger Diaries: How To Build On Cultural Fit

By **Matthew Madsen** (December 1, 2025)

What goes on behind the scenes before and after a law firm merger announcement? As the pace of mergers picks up, this Law360 Expert Analysis series explores strategies for effectively navigating various aspects of the process, with insights from practitioners at firms that have recently merged.

In this installment, Harrison LLP managing partner Matthew Madsen discusses the importance of finding cultural fit — seeking a partner with shared values and views — following his firm's January merger with Birchstone Moore LLC.

Matthew Madsen

We've all seen mergers that looked great on paper but unraveled because the cultures didn't mesh. In our experience, the key to a successful merger isn't just about great resumes, great financials or being in a great market. The primary quest is finding people who share your values and vision.

That's why cultural screening should be at the pinnacle of the process.

In fact, when cultural fit is truly prioritized, the benefits show up quickly — and everywhere. Partners from both firms jump right in, collaborating on major client matters with ease.

Junior attorneys who feared losing mentorship find even more diverse learning opportunities in the combined firm.

Clients notice the difference too: Rather than disruption, they experience a unified approach to service and responsiveness that strengthens relationships.

Across the firm, staff build real connections, share best practices and work together without the old us-versus-them mindset.

Most importantly, the work of leaders, committees and task forces improves with the added perspectives and experience of new colleagues.

Often, a merger opportunity can appear ideal when the incoming lawyers bring impressive credentials, represent high-quality clients with sophisticated planning needs, operate in a geographic market that aligns with a firm's expansion strategy, and possess skill sets that complement and elevate existing capabilities.

When everything aligns, it can feel like the perfect addition, one that strengthens both a firm's service offerings and brand.

But credentials and capabilities don't tell the whole story. Despite rigorous vetting, cultural misalignment reveals itself in unexpected ways.

Sometimes, a key person simply isn't a good firm citizen.

You know the type. They're difficult to work with, resist collaboration or undermine team dynamics. They may be more focused on personal priorities than contributing to the firm's mission of serving multi-generational families.

They might push back against your client service standards, show little interest in integrating into your approach to building long-term family relationships or worse, attempt to undermine the firm's culture in service of their own ends.

When culture clashes go unresolved, mergers can unravel; lawyers depart, sometimes taking clients and teammates with them, and morale suffers as colleagues navigate the tension.

Worst of all, client service quality deteriorates when new lawyers don't share your values around responsiveness and trust. And the firm will have expended precious time, energy and resources on a failed integration.

Saying no is not always an easy call, but sometimes the best way forward is to step back. One of the hardest parts of being an attorney is to say no to certain clients and matters.

The same goes with additions to a firm and saying no to something that looked great on paper can feel unnatural.

One might approach a merger by starting with strategy: What markets do you cover? What's your book of business? How will you expand our capabilities?

Those are important questions, but we've learned they come second. Inspired by Jim Collins' "first who, then what," concept in his book "Good to Great," start with people. Then move to strategy.

Starting with people means thinking a lot about autonomy, and not whether the candidates value it. Instead, find out if they can be trusted with autonomy, and that means determining if the candidates are rigorous and experienced decision-makers.

Do they have the discipline to think things through? Do they admit and then study what they don't know? Do they apply what they have learned? And do they possess the rigor to execute?

A two-level screening process can help carry out this approach, with regular reviews to determine what is working and what needs to be fine-tuned. It's not a rigid, one-size-fits-all formula. It's a strategy for making better decisions.

Level 1: The Essentials

Before getting too excited about an opportunity and succumbing to deal-brain, ask three core questions.

Does the other firm fit your culture?

Look for genuine alignment with your values. In interviews and informal conversations, listen for specific stories about how they've handled partner conflicts, difficult client situations and ethical dilemmas. These reveal true values under pressure better than any interview answer.

Each firm should identify its own cultural nonnegotiables, whether that's collaborative decision-making, entrepreneurial spirit, commitment to mentorship, or approach to work-life integration, and test rigorously for alignment on those specific values during the screening process.

Does it fit your strategy?

It's not enough to admire what you've built and see where it would be beneficial to the other firm. Candidates need to believe in your unique vision. Probe for how they see themselves contributing, and whether they're willing to prioritize the collective vision over personal preference.

Whatever a firm's strategic direction, whether it's industry specialization, geographic expansion or practice innovation, candidates must demonstrate genuine commitment to that vision, not just see it as a platform for their own goals.

Do the economics work?

Cultural fit matters, but the numbers have to make sense. Everyone considers the numbers eventually, and this is a critical part of the evaluation.

It is particularly important to have rate alignment because all clients of the firm should benefit from your collective knowledge and wisdom. Look at the expense infrastructure of the inbound team, which has to make sense.

If a candidate doesn't meet all three Level 1 criteria, stop the process and refocus elsewhere.

Level 2: Raising the Bar

When an opportunity clears the Level 1 screen, go deeper. These questions sharpen the focus.

Will the firm elevate your brand?

Every addition should make the firm more attractive to the clients it serves. Firms should analyze whether a candidate's reputation and approach will strengthen the firm's specific market position, and consider the flip side, whether it will dilute the brand the firm has worked to build.

What "elevation" means depends on each firm's market positioning and client base.

Does it add intellectual capacity?

Look for people who make your entire team smarter and more effective for clients. This means bringing industry insight that helps anticipate client needs, leadership skills that elevate your service delivery, or creative judgment that solves complex client problems in new ways.

Assess whether the firm brings knowledge that complements your existing strengths and whether they can translate that expertise into tangible client value. The best candidates don't just know their area of law; they understand how their knowledge connects to clients' broader goals and can communicate complex concepts in ways clients find comfortable and actionable.

The specific intellectual needs vary by firm. Some may need deeper technical expertise in emerging areas, others may need stronger business development acumen or leadership capability, but the principle remains: Every addition should raise the intellectual bar for the team.

Do you add value to the other firm's client relationships?

Evaluate whether the other firm's client relationships are ones where you can add meaningful value. Ask: Can you improve the experience clients receive?

Can you deepen the advice, elevate the planning, and expand what's possible for them within your model? If you don't see a clear opportunity to enhance the client relationship, take that as a signal to pause. Growth not rooted in client needs brings no lasting value.

Will the other firm complement your practices?

Firms should seek to deepen their strengths, not scatter them. Ideal candidates strengthen what the firm already does well or bring something adjacent that fits the strategic plan. The key is ensuring new capabilities integrate with, rather than fragment, the firm's core identity.

Does the geography make sense?

When evaluating a candidate's geographic footprint, ask: Does this location help you better serve your existing clients?

Does it position you to serve the kind of clients you want to work with? Will it strengthen your ability to provide service to existing clients? New clients? Geography that enhances client service makes sense. Geography that's just about market presence usually doesn't.

Each firm's geographic logic will differ based on its client base and service model. Some may prioritize proximity to key industries, others to referral sources or talent markets, but the evaluation should always connect location to strategic purpose, not just expansion for its own sake.

Is further evaluation needed?

We also know the emotional pull of saying yes to an exciting opportunity. But we've learned that a disciplined pause is easier than fixing a mistake later.

It is critical to have someone play devil's advocate in each evaluation, asking what could go wrong to counter our natural optimism bias.

Beyond improving outcomes, this process helps manage risk. A bad combination can hurt client confidence, damage morale and create financial drag.

Screening protects what you've built and, most importantly, it protects the experience clients count on by ensuring that every professional who joins shares the same standards of service, responsiveness and trust.

And this is a competitive business. Firms that get cultural fit right have a real edge.

This isn't just about avoiding missteps. It's about building a team that's stronger, sharper and more aligned.

Conclusion

Sticking to these principles isn't always easy. It takes discipline, candor and the courage to say no when something doesn't feel right.

But when you get it right, the payoff is meaningful and enduring: a firm where talented professionals want to work together, share a vision and build something lasting.

It's easy to fall in love with the right market or the right profit and loss statement. But long-term success comes from falling in love with the right people.

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