

# As Young Lawyers Churn Through Jobs, Firms Search for Ways to Fulfill Them

Young lawyers want more from work and they're changing employers to find it. Can firms respond before they lose out?

By Jessie Yount  
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Work-life balance has dominated the discourse since the onset of the pandemic.

While it tends to imply the worlds of work and life are separate, the two are often inseparable. Take for example the time saved on the commute to work, which was quickly converted to extended work hours around the legal industry.

The pandemic blurred already-thin boundaries between work and life, and brought about calls for greater transparency and flexibility, particularly among the youngest generation of attorneys. Coupled with a greater desire for meaningful work and an unusually favorable lateral market, the experience of the past two years has created a wave of young lawyers searching for new firms—and many are seeking a temporary residence, rather than a permanent home.

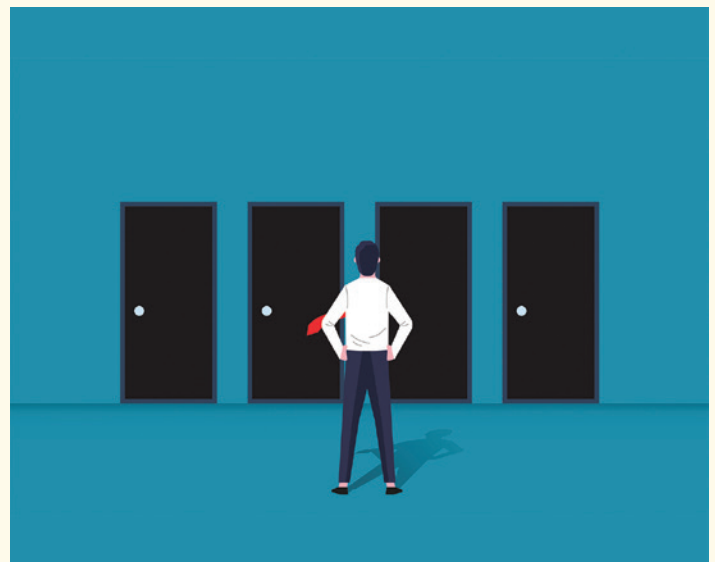
A recent survey of millennial lawyers conducted by Major, Lindsey & Africa showed that 30% of respondents—the largest proportion—would like to work at their current firm between three and five years. That finding reflects a significant shift from the same survey in 2019 survey, the largest cohort—31% of respondents—said they would like to make partner at their current firm.

Young attorneys are churning through jobs at a much faster pace compared with previous generations, in part because they are dissatisfied with the work-life balance at their firms, the survey said. They want more time off, fewer billable hours and more pro bono and training opportunities. The shift is driving firms to respond—or risk missing out on the talent that will define their future.

## Consequences of Churn

Firms that aren't fulfilling the desires of the youngest generation of attorneys are seeing lawyers leave "earlier and faster," says Jacob Canter, a litigation associate at Crowell & Moring. "They are more willing to go to a firm for a payday because whatever firm culture was keeping people around before simply isn't there anymore," he adds.

Canter has seen several Big Law associates at other firms leave within just a few months, and it's common to hear law students plan for "two or three years [at a firm] and out," followed by a career in-house or in another sector.



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With demand for legal services at a high, it is extremely disruptive when people leave their firm, Canter says. "You had this material role on a matter and we had all these plans worked out, and now we need to find someone else to take it on," he says.

One Big Law associate, who agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity, says he changed jobs three times in 2021 because he felt alienated from his team and wanted a more flexible work environment.

"When you're on these big teams, it's easy to fall through the cracks and not feel valued," he says. "Partners will call on you when they need you, but I'd have liked to feel integral and part of the team continuously. People want to feel built up at work, not down."

The associate notes that while he was reluctant to switch jobs several times within a one-year period, he ultimately felt there was no upside to sticking around. A change was the right thing for himself and his family.

Canter says he's stayed with Crowell & Moring because of the relationships he's been able to build inside the firm. But, he notes, firms continue to struggle to find effective ways to

demonstrate their culture and integrate young attorneys into their organizations.

“In the same way that I don’t think the mere fact that formal mentorships exist will cause lawyers to feel integrated to a firm, I don’t think the mere fact of being forced into an office will create culture,” Canter says.

Instead, he proposes a simple idea: “ongoing communication and candor” with senior partners that puts younger attorneys “closer to the action” and brings them right to the heart of a matter.

### **Searching for More**

As a result of increased associate churn, firms are starting to pour more resources into training and mentorship programs in the hope of providing greater value to their youngest lawyers.

High performers who are “pursuing any combination of clarity, intentionality and accountability around their professional goals or path, or ways to optimize their effectiveness as they pursue those goals or path,” are increasingly seeking additional career guidance, according to Anjali Desai, director of coaching at Foley & Lardner.

Within this context, younger attorneys are displaying unique, generational characteristics. They “seem to be very keen on defining success on their own terms and bringing their whole selves to the way they work,” she says.

For example, younger attorneys are figuring out how to be strategic earlier in their careers about where they want to focus their time and energy in order to create their own career path, Desai says. And often, that career path is tied to a greater purpose or ambition, rather than a firm.

“Linking intentionality about their careers with their values and strengths can be a powerful combination in creating more agency on the part of these attorneys, which allows them to pursue their goals in a way that feels more authentic and connected to the underlying ‘why,’” she says.

But, Desai notes, the platform implicitly signifies that what’s best for the attorney is what’s best for the firm, regardless of whether that attorney stays at the firm for two more years or two more decades.

A simple step that law firms can take to make their youngest attorneys feel heard is to incorporate communication and meaning within work assignments.

“It’s always nicer when someone explains why you’re being asked to do something. It provides direction and it doesn’t go into a vortex,” Canter says. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s a paying job and it’s not like we’re just going to do fun stuff. There needs to be a combination of sober realism and honest direction from senior lawyers.”

### **Bridging the Gaps**

The generational differences are vast between the baby boomers who represent the majority of law firm partners and their younger counterparts in Generation Z and even among millennials. Yet, creating connections and finding meaning in work serves both groups of attorneys.

One such difference is that while “younger generations desire to constantly evaluate their ‘why,’” according to Desai, “it sometimes can be a foreign concept for older generations to reflect on their ‘why’ or values.”

Foley & Lardner’s coaching program helps attorneys “replace their old assumptions with alternative perspectives, which leads them to taking different actions and getting better results and enhanced interactions,” Desai says.

That’s another important piece of the equation: seeing things from others’ perspectives. And it’s increasingly important in the lens of diversity and inclusion.

That’s why Morrison & Foerster recently revamped its mentorship and sponsorship programs, pulling all five programs under one umbrella, overseen by the diversity and inclusion team.

“Most associates are navigating a space that isn’t diverse, so mentoring and forging relationships across differences is hugely important for the mentee and the mentor,” says chief diversity and inclusion officer Natalie Kernisant.

These concerns are acute for diverse associates, who often struggle to navigate unwritten rules or the politics of an organization and fail to achieve a sense of belonging—both key reasons why diverse talent leaks from professional organizations.

As a result, Morrison & Foerster is focused on offering associates actionable feedback. After all, “there is a perception that if they’re not growing and developing, then they’re failing. Treading water isn’t an option. It’s not OK to fly under the radar,” Kernisant says.

Adding to that dynamic, associates have a hard time navigating the idea that a formal mentor—a partner—is both a trusted adviser and confidante as well as an evaluator of performance. For that reason, the firm tries to avoid pairing associates with direct supervising partners, she says, but she notes there is still an underlying reality that all partners are involved in making partnership decisions.

“We know associates carry anxiety about their future, and we’re trying to be more open and transparent about how we invest in supporting them,” she adds. “We’re looking at how we can support them on their path to partnership, but we also know that not everyone wants to make partner, and we want to ensure all of our talent is developing regardless of their end goal, individual or professional.”

Because so much of younger attorneys’ careers still rests in the hands of senior lawyers, some associates believe formalized programs will only be successful if partners are willing to be open, honest and communicative.

“Do I think these processes are keeping people from leaving a firm? I don’t know,” Canter says. “But I do know of cases where informal relationships keep people at a firm because they really trust a partner, or a counsel has been an ally, and they’ve been able to work closely with clients or handle important elements of a matter.”

*Email: [jyount@alm.com](mailto:jyount@alm.com)*