

Socially Aware Millennials Want Meaning & Skee Ball, As Partnership Paths Narrow

There was a time when a good salary and a door open to partnership were enough to keep associates at BigLaw firms. Then the millennials came.

The aspirations of that socially aware generation and the younger Generation Zs, paired with lessons from an economic downturn a decade ago, have forced big law firms to think of new ways to keep lawyers happy.

Younger lawyers and associates are demanding more from potential employers. For starters, things like wine tastings, bike rides and in-office Skee Ball to make those long hours at the office fun. But that's only part of the package, as they enter their professional years saddled with law school debt and the traditional pathway to partnership looks less likely.

The newcomers are craving a feeling that their professional lives aren't a string of grinding, soul-crushing hours, recruiters, professors and lawyers say. A sense of purpose in their careers, opportunities to bring meaning to their professional lives, are being sought. Firms are listening and offering to meet those wishes with pro bono opportunities, flexible scheduling and a focus on workplace culture.

"New associates want more work-life balance," said June Forrest, Assistant Dean of Career Services at Seton Hall University School of Law. "They want to reduce to some degree the required hours, to spend time with family, have more time."

"Today's young lawyers are socially conscious. They want opportunities to do pro bono work, and firms are carving out space for associates to do feel-good work," she said.

As law schools graduate fewer associates, big law firms are responding with programs to hang on to those they land. Law school graduation [totals fell](#) 5.9 percent to 34,992 in 2017 from the previous year, the American Bar Association says.

The number of U.S. lawyers has inched up, [adding](#) 1.6 percent to 1.34 million last year, ABA says. That number is expected to grow less than 1 percent annually through 2026, the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS) says.

At the same time, law school debt is soaring so that its not uncommon for graduates to be shouldering debt reaching into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Meanwhile, average lawyer salaries have crept up to \$119,250 in 2017 from \$118,160 in 2016, according to BLS, and most lawyers put in more than 40 hours a week.

"The pressure to find a high-paying position straight out of school is higher than ever before," Mark Weber, assistant Dean for Career Services at Harvard Law School [wrote](#) earlier this year.

So while many young associates find they need to begin work quickly, fewer partnerships are being offered. Since the 2008 recession, firms are trying to keep profits strong and undiluted among too many partners. As the pathway to partnership looks less likely, loyalty to firms may not be as strong as it once was.

“Millennials are less loyal to firms, they don’t have as much of a problem viewing the law firm as a temporary stop on their career railroad,” said Dan Binstock, a recruiter with Garrison & Sisson in Washington, D.C. “There’s more emphasis on profits per partner.”

Binstock says law students share their true feelings when he asks them where they want to be in five years, and instructs them to tell him what they really believe and what they would tell an interviewer. Their true feelings are they want to be working for a non-profit in a legal capacity that benefits the public interest. They tell interviewers, he said, that their goal is to make partner.

“It’s an unspoken understanding between firms and students that many students don’t plan to make partner,” he said. “Loyalty isn’t what it was. Young associates don’t expect to make partner, so they move around.”

John O’Neil is a Kirkland & Ellis partner and head of its Investment Funds Group, which has grown by 100 members to 400 over the past year. He said 80 percent of the group are millennials or Gen Z, and they aren’t always interested in the traditional perks of the law firm.

“They think differently than I did when I left school,” he said. “They are ready to make a move, a lateral move, and that mobility puts more pressure on the management to think more thoughtfully about how to attract and retain talent.”

For O’Neil, this has meant flexibility in the opportunities inside and outside of work for the younger generation. His firm has focused on creating platforms that emphasise a group’s specialties as opposed to star lawyers, and the platforms have a built-in flexibility to accommodate the individual lawyer’s life changes.

“Having the platform flexible and bendable so that it meets them where they are” is a goal, he said. “The old way is to follow a straight line, but life has zigs and zags.”

“To make sure that’s built into the culture is important in attraction and retention of associates. We’ve put a lot of focus into that and have seen tremendous payoff.”

While demand for good lawyers outstrips supply, more associates may be on the horizon. Law School Admission Testing [has surged](#) this year, according to the Law School Admission Council, with the number of people taking the LSAT in June this year jumping 20%.

Binstock sees competition for lawyers and the harsh realities of the need to boost profits as further erosion of firm loyalty. Bloated payrolls make firm survival harder in an era of cost control and global competition, he said.

“Loyalty usually goes both ways. There’s been a decrease in long-term loyalty on both sides. As a result of recessions and economic hardships, firms need to stay as profitable as possible and sometimes long-term loyalty can be the worse thing.”

“The expense of retaining people who aren’t enhancing the bottom line sufficiently can undermine the economic viability, the future of the law firm itself. Stay lean, stay competitive or proceed at your own risk.”