



# BEYOND TRADITION:

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# Gen-Z's Approach to Big Law



# Table of Contents

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INTRODUCTION

**03**

DEMOGRAPHICS

**03**

KEY FINDINGS

**04**

THE LEAP FROM LAW STUDENT TO LAWYER

**06**

FIRM SATISFACTION & CULTURE

**08**

WHAT'S NEXT FOR GEN-Z LAWYERS?

**14**

CONCLUSION

**16**

# Introduction

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Generation Z has come of age amidst global unrest and multiple financial crises, a deteriorating climate, and a worldwide rise in political tribalism. They received interrupted educations as part of a widespread remote learning experiment, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. They are the first generation of digital natives, turning to the internet first for news and guidance before making decisions. Despite what they have seen of the state of the world, or perhaps because of it, they are idealists; they are inclusive and equitable, believing deeply in transparency and accountability.

Now, they have begun their professional careers, and Gen-Z lawyers are getting their first taste of Big Law life. What impressions have these first few years as associates left on them, and how have those experiences impacted their future?

## Demographics

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Major, Lindsey & Africa, in collaboration with Leopard Solutions, received 546 responses to a web-based survey distributed to junior law firm associates in January and February 2024, though not all respondents answered every question. Ninety-two percent identified as working at an AmLaw 200 firm. The survey was predominantly completed by those identifying as white (55%), followed by Asian (11%), Black (9%), and Hispanic (8%). Respondents were 56% female and 40% male, which aligns with the rapidly growing number of female associates in Big Law. Sixty-three percent had been practicing for one year or less at the time of the survey. Almost all respondents were from the United States.

# Key Findings

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## Legal education is coming up short in preparing students for the workforce.

- Nearly a third of participants (31%) said their experience working at the firm did not match expectations coming out of law school.
- Almost half (45%) said law school did not sufficiently prepare them for their current role.

## No buyer's remorse

- Eighty-three percent would make the same firm selection again if given a chance to do it all over again, and 79% reported satisfaction with the work they were assigned. This may be attributable to junior associates prioritizing "Culture" (74%) and "Reputation" (67%) over "Compensation" (66%) in their firm selection process.
- Two out of three (67%) of respondents plan to stick it out at their jobs for the long haul (3+ years), not surprisingly given the optimism expressed. However, almost a quarter (24%) viewed their role as having a two-year expiration date.
- Male associates were more likely to remain at their firms for 3+ years than their female counterparts by 15 percentage points, 76.55% compared to 61.46%.

## Driven by upward mobility

- Over a third (36%) cited partnership as their top career aspiration. It was followed by pivoting to an in-house (24%) or a government/NGO role (12%). When aggregated, almost three-quarters (71%) wanted to leverage their entry-level Big Law position to ascend the firm ladder or segue to perhaps cushier or more meaningful pastures. Only a combined 10% wished to leave legal practice entirely entirely (9%) or desired to go into business for themselves (1%).
- There was no substitute for experience, as 36% of survey-takers expressed a shift in ambitions on the journey from law school to law firm.
- Male participants were more likely than female participants to want to follow the traditional path to the partnership model, 55.17% versus 36.69% (an 18-percentage-point difference). On the other hand, female participants were 23 percentage points more likely to want to pivot in-house (37.87% compared to 14.66%).
- Forty-one percent of female respondents stated their career goals changed on the road from law school to law firm, compared to only 29% of males.

### **Job benefits of choice trend toward more flexibility.**

- Billable hour quotas are a point of contention for Gen-Z associates: 52% would trade a portion of their salary to reduce them if they could. Female associates wanted them reduced by 16 more percentage points than males. That was 16 percentage points higher than the second-most-chosen selection. Reduced workload was a theme, as “More time off” (36%) and “Flexible work schedule” (27%), combined, received a 63% share.

### **Firm culture gaps exist, particularly concerning racial diversity and ESGs.**

- Seventy-one percent disagreed or strongly disagreed sexism was prevalent at their firm. This is noteworthy, considering 56% of survey participants identified as women.
- Thirty-nine percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that associates at their firm were racially diverse.
- More than one out of four junior associates disagreed or strongly disagreed that their firms prioritized pro bono work (27%) or valued social justice and responsibility (27%).

### **Mentorship programs are widely available and somewhat effective.**

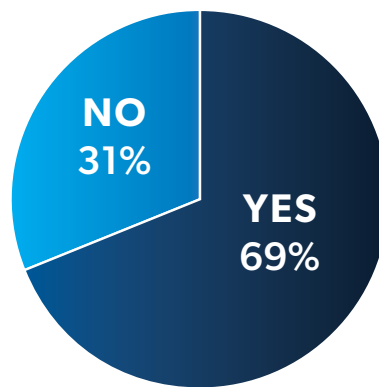
- Mentorship programs were available at 84% of firms.
- Over half (51%) agreed or fully agreed that such programs have had a positive bearing on their career.
- Over a fifth (22%) reported being personally selected by a partner for mentorship, though most pairings were random (65%).

# The Leap from Law Student to Lawyer

The transition from the classroom to the office can be a jarring one. Summer associate roles likely helped give some law students a taste of lawyering life prior to graduation, leading to 69% of respondents stating that their experience working at their firm matches their expectations from law school. However, this leaves a significant 31% of respondents stating that it did not match their expectations as a student.

**TABLE 1:**

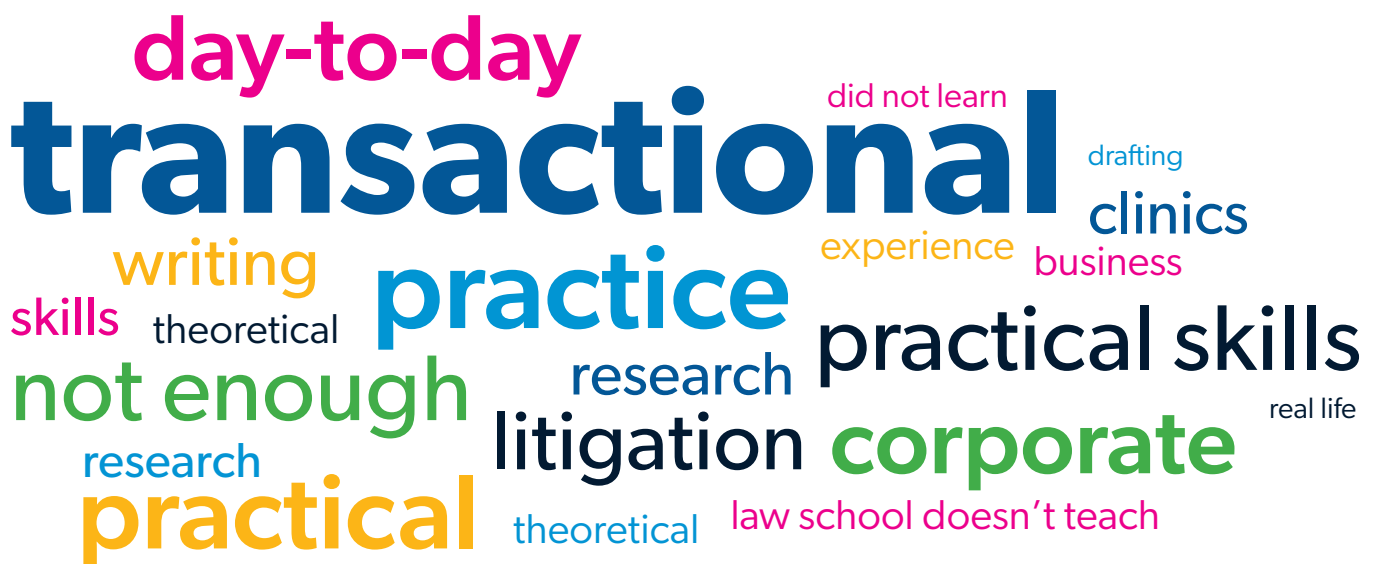
**Has your experience working at your current firm matched the expectations you had in law school?**



Of those responding no, law school's focus on litigation was a repeated theme, with many young lawyers in other practice areas stating they had received no substantive training during school in the work they are currently doing. Respondents also lamented a lack of "practical skills" and limited or no focus on transactional lawyering.

**TABLE 2:**

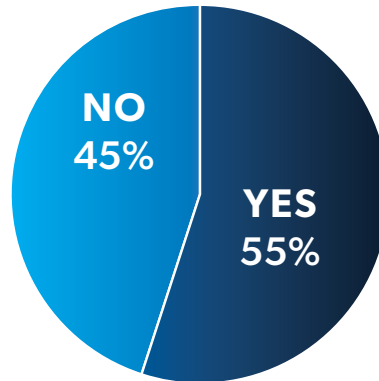
**If no, why [didn't your experience match the expectations you had in law school]?**



This aligns with how young lawyers feel about how prepared they were for their current role. Forty-five percent of respondents stated that their legal education did not prepare them for their current role. Some respondents may have been hard pressed to manage law school classes via remote learning as a result of the pandemic, which certainly may have impacted their impressions around the effectiveness of their schooling. However, it is difficult to ignore a result of nearly half of respondents feeling unprepared as they enter their new roles as lawyers.

**TABLE 3:**

**Do you feel your legal education prepared you sufficiently for your current role?**



When asked what they would change about legal education given the chance, far and away the most common responses involved more practical skills training and additional focus on more transactional practice types, such as corporate, real estate, tax, and M&A. Still others suggested that 3Ls take on some form of hands-on, experiential learning, such as apprenticeships, internships, and clinics, instead of the usual classroom instruction.

**TABLE 4:**

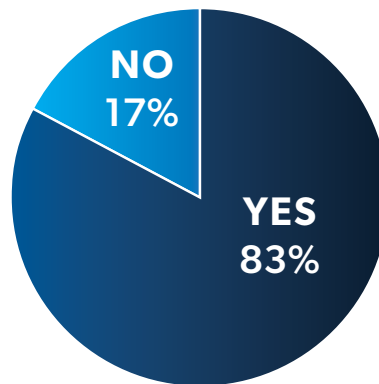
**If you could change legal education with a wave of the hand, how would you better prepare law students for their future careers?**



# Firm Satisfaction & Culture

**TABLE 5:**

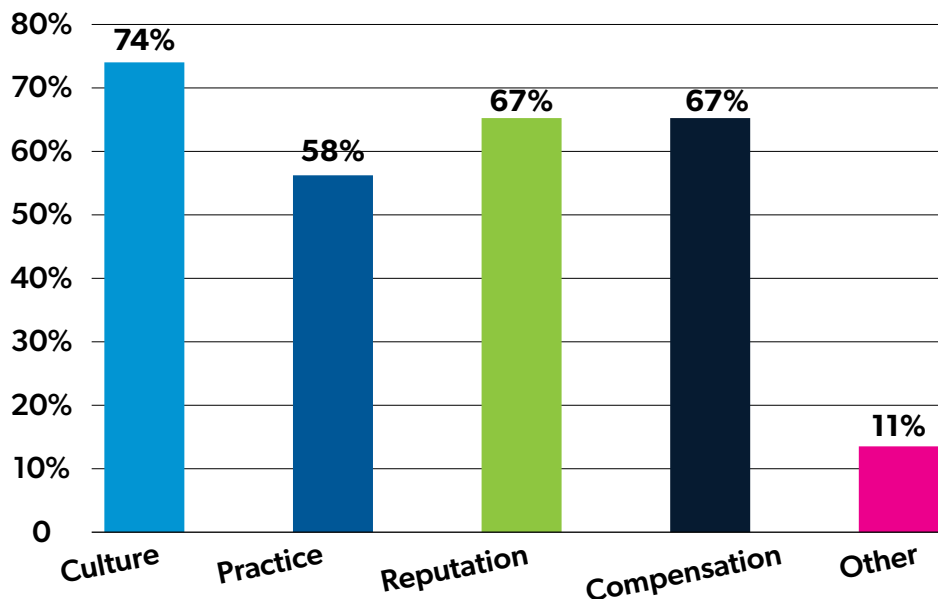
**Would you make the same choice [of firm to work for] again?**



Overall, Gen-Z lawyers are content with their current lot, even if their futures are less certain. Eighty-three percent of respondents stated they would choose their firm again if they had the opportunity. In identifying why they chose those firms in the first place, the young lawyers named culture as the number one reason (74.15%), followed by firm reputation (67.15%) and then compensation (66.67%).

**TABLE 6:**

**What made you choose your current firm?**

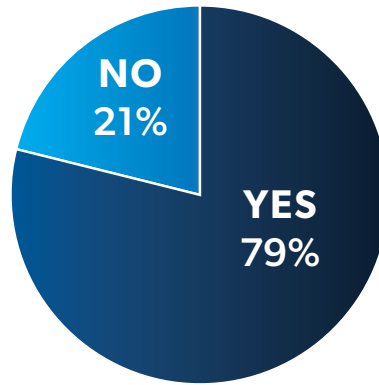


For those who said they would not choose their firm again, the phrase “false advertising” came up several times. Many more cited a poor culture, with some going further and saying there was a significant cultural change since they began working there. One young lawyer quipped, “I should have been a doctor.”



**TABLE 7:**

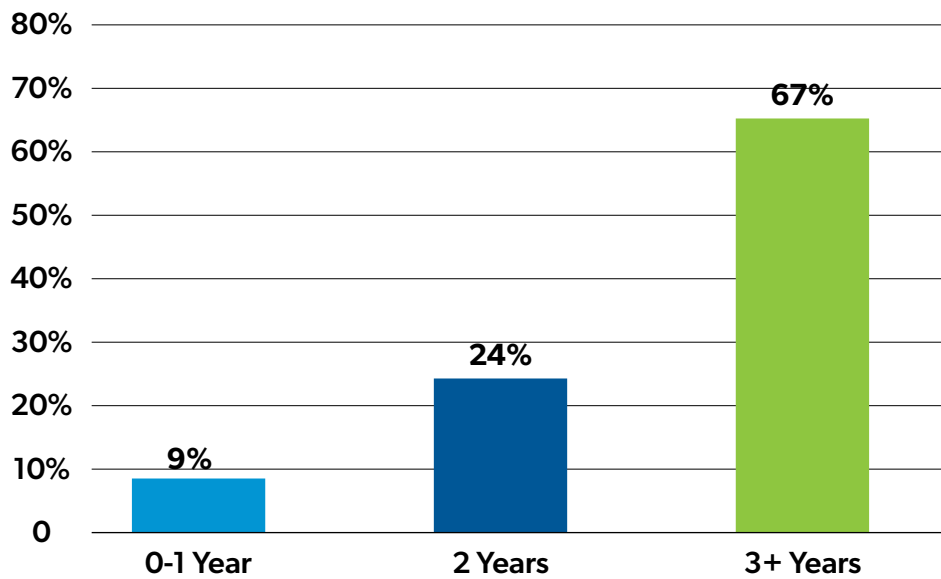
**Are you satisfied with the work you have been assigned?**



When it comes to the work they are doing, Gen-Z lawyers seem similarly satisfied overall, with 79% reporting that they find the work they have been assigned satisfying. This almost certainly plays a role in the number of respondents who were content with their initial firm choice, and likely why 67% responded that they plan to stay with their firm for three or more years. Only 9% stated that they planned to leave the firm within the next year or so.

**TABLE 8:**

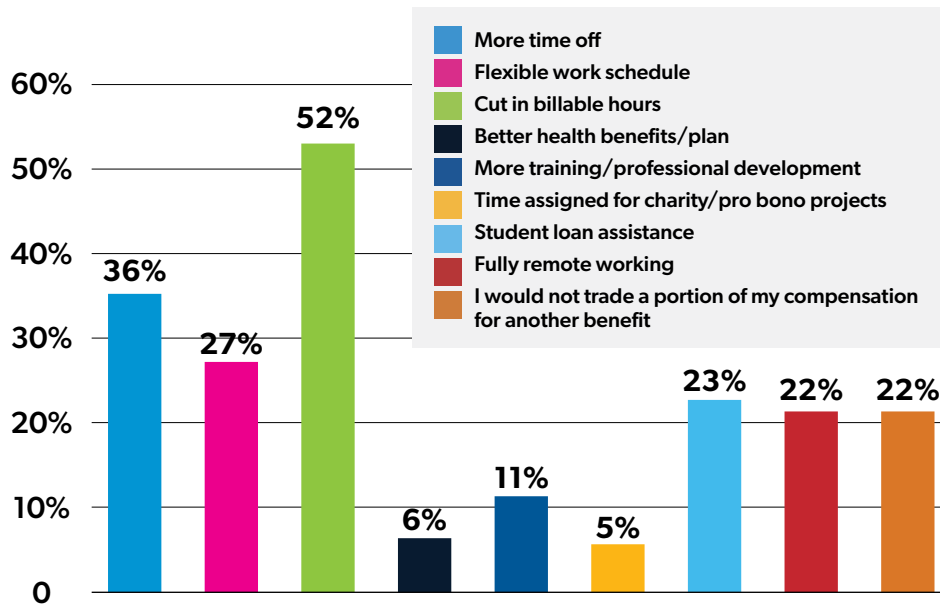
**How long do you plan to stay with your firm?**



Compensation and benefits also play a key role in satisfaction. However, it may not be as much of a core consideration for Gen-Z lawyers as it is for the generations who have come before them. Over half (52%) stated that they would trade a portion of their compensation for fewer billable hours, which reflects a rising dissatisfaction with the traditional demands placed on associates' time and a desire for a more flexible workplace. Other items respondents would trade cash in hand for included more time off (36%) and a flexible work schedule (27%). Only one out of five respondents (22%) would not trade their compensation for another benefit.

**TABLE 9:**

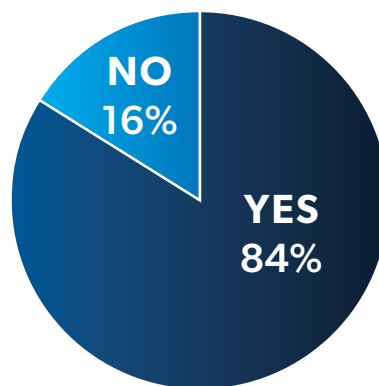
**Which of the following, if any, would you trade a portion of your compensation for?**



Mentorship often plays a key role in the development of associates, and having a guide for navigating the intricacies of firm life can ultimately make the experience more satisfying and successful. Eighty-four percent of respondents report that their firm has formal mentorship program in place, though how those mentors are selected has an impact on how successful the initiative has been.

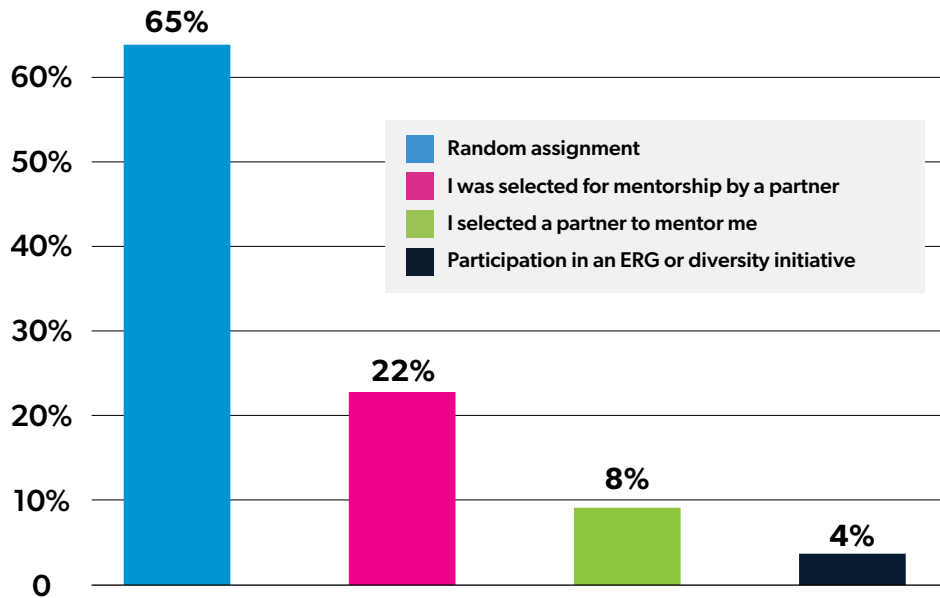
**TABLE 10:**

**Does your firm offer a formal mentorship program?**



**TABLE 11:**

**How was your mentor selected?**

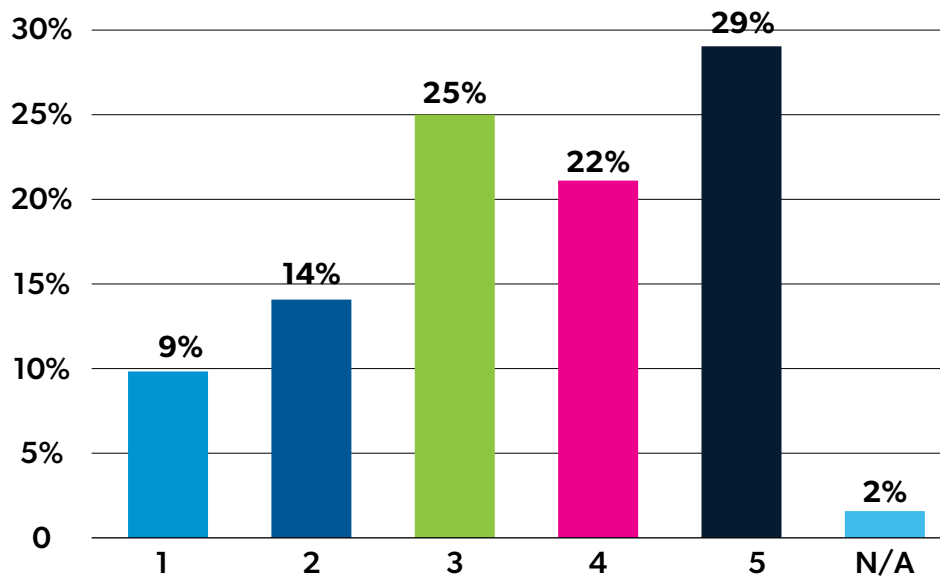


In approximately two-thirds of cases (65%), an associate’s mentor was randomly assigned. Others were selected by a partner for mentorship (22%), selected their own partner mentor (8%), or received mentorship via participation in an ERG or diversity initiative (4%).

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, while half (51%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that mentorship had a positive impact on their development, the system by which mentors were selected had a decided impact on the efficacy of the mentorship.

**TABLE 12:**

**On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being “Fully Agree” and 1 being “Fully Disagree,” the formal mentorship program at my firm has had a positive impact on my development.**



Random assignment had the most variance in how respondents felt about their mentors. Only a quarter (26%) of random mentor assignees strongly agreed that their mentorship had a positive impact on their development, compared to 39% of those who were selected by a partner and 33% of those who selected a partner themselves. Those stating they were either specifically selected or did their own selection reported the least amount of disagreement with whether the mentorship was impactful, with 8% and 15%, respectively.

**TABLE 13:**  
**Breakdown of mentorship impact by selection type:**

*5 = Fully Agree [the formal mentorship program at my firm has had a positive impact on my development],  
 1 = Fully Disagree*

	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Random assignment	11%	17%	28%	18%	26%	1%
I was selected for mentorship by a partner	4%	4%	20%	31%	39%	1%
I selected a partner to mentor me	7%	7%	15%	30%	33%	7%
Participation in an ERG or diversity initiative	0%	21%	29%	36%	7%	7%

Interestingly, those who found mentorships through participation in an ERG or diversity initiative were the most neutral about their mentor’s impact. No respondents from that category strongly disagreed their mentor had positively impacted their development, but only 7% strongly agreed. This does not speak to the efficacy of those initiatives on its own, but it is notable alongside how respondents’ feelings around how diversity is treated at their firms , as detailed below.

With culture coming up so often as an element of dissatisfaction among respondents, it is important to measure how the firm stacks up against Gen-Z’s values of inclusiveness, outreach, and accountability. The results show that firms have made progress, but still have some work to do in meeting their newest associates’ standards:

- 29% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their firm’s values align closely with their own.
- 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their firm’s partners value associates.
- 24% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their firm meaningfully followed through on diversity goals.
- 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their firm makes pro bono work a priority.
- 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed that their firm values social responsibility and justice.

**TABLE 14:**

**On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being “Strongly Agree” and 1 being “Strongly Disagree,” how much do you agree with the following statements?**

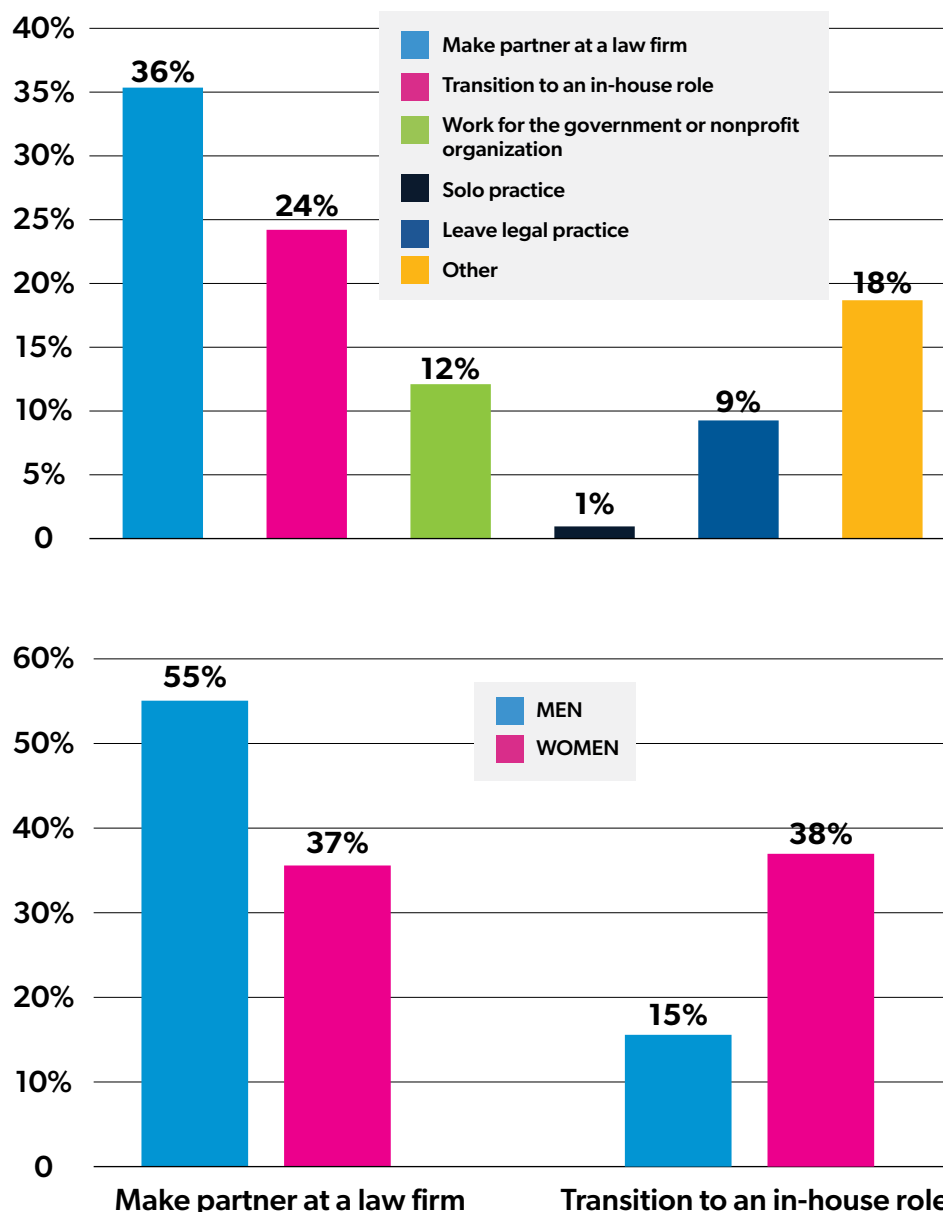
	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
My firm and partners care about associates.	6%	10%	21%	35%	28%
My firm makes pro bono work a priority.	10%	17%	29%	23%	21%
My firm values social responsibility and justice.	9%	19%	29%	28%	16%
There is a sexist culture at my firm.	43%	28%	16%	7%	5%
The associates at my firm are diverse with respect to race.	15%	24%	27%	20%	14%
The associates at my firm are diverse with respect to ethnicity,	13%	22%	29%	22%	14%
The associates at my firm are diverse with respect to gender identity.	10%	15%	26%	29%	20%
My firm follows through on their stated diversity goals in a meaningful way.	9%	15%	33%	26%	17%
The values of the firm align closely with my personal values.	8%	20%	34%	23%	15%

However, only 12% agreed or strongly agreed that there is a sexist culture at their firm, notable as 55% of respondents were women. As Gen-Z continues to expand their larger footprint within the legal industry, it will be interesting to see what changes firms make to attract and retain the top talent from this generation.

# What's Next for Gen-Z Lawyers?

Attrition is part of every new class of associates. Whether they leave for other firms or in-house roles, or depart practice altogether, it is expected that not every junior associate will make it to partner at their initial firm. Of our Gen-Z respondents, only 36% state their ultimate career goal as making partner at their firm or another. Almost a quarter (24%) expect to transition to an in-house role, and another 12% wish to seek out a government or nonprofit role in the future. Nearly one out of ten junior associates surveyed (9%) expect to leave legal practice entirely.

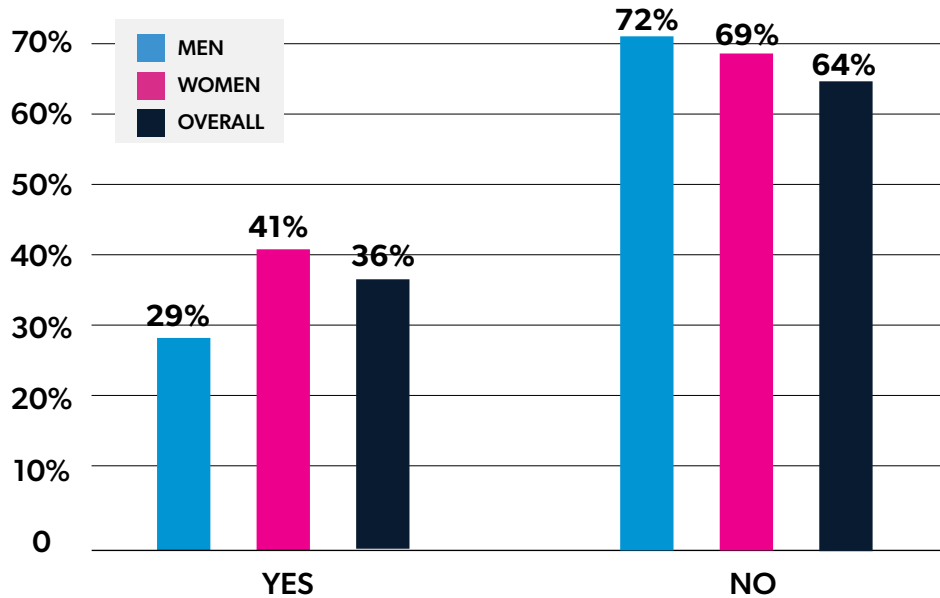
**TABLE 15:**  
**What is your ultimate career goal?**



Notably, there is a stark difference between the ultimate career goals of men and women responding to the survey. Fifty-five percent of men state their career goal as making partner down the line, compared to 37% of women. On the other hand, 38% of women expect to ultimately transition to an in-house role, compared to only 15% of men. This contrasts with the growing proportion of women becoming associates at firms, and is possibly also reflective of the sexist firm culture so many respondents identified.

**TABLE 16:**

**Have your career goals changed since you started at your current firm?**



When asked whether their goals had changed since starting at their firm, over a third (35%) stated that their goals had shifted. Again, we see a significant gender gap with respect to career goals, with women reporting a change in their ultimate career goal between law school and law firm practice over men by a difference of 12 points (41% vs. 29%).

# Conclusion

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We gave the opportunity for respondents to share what changes their firm could make that would be the most meaningful to them. Their responses were varied but ultimately matched what we have seen throughout the rest of the survey.

- **Gen-Z wants fewer billable hours.** Whether for the purpose of better work-life balance, being able to devote more time to training and development, or simply less stress, new associates are fed up with what they see as unreasonable billable hour requirements.
- **Gen-Z wants more diversity.** Associates are more diverse than ever, but Gen-Z is not satisfied. They want that same diversity at the top, with more women and people of color in leadership positions. They also want to see meaningful action taken toward improving diversity, not just lip service and buzzwords.
- **Gen-Z wants more and better training.** They feel they are not able to put time toward training and mentorship due to the constraints of billable hours, which are stunting their growth as attorneys. They also want a broader look at the legal field, with more cross-training with other practice groups. Additionally, they are looking for more structured training, not just the trial by fire most associates are expected to go through.
- **Gen-Z wants a better lifestyle.** They want the flexibility their peers in other industries have. Remote work is not going anywhere, and Gen-Z knows it. They are particularly irked by differing remote work standards between partners and associates. They also want more and better mental health resources made available to them.
- **Gen-Z wants to improve business practices.** Gen-Z wants more structure in their workplace, which they expect to lead to clearer expectations, more accountability at all levels, and increased investment in the firm. They want a culture of respect between partners and associates, and more opportunity to make an impact on their world through pro bono work.

Gen-Z lawyers are just as hardworking, insightful, and caring about the quality of their work and the success of their clients as any generation before them. But they also perhaps know their own value better than those associates of previous generations or at least are more willing to explicitly assert that value. They are ambitious and committed to extracting the maximum impact from their careers, for both their own benefit and that of those around them.

This is an incredible energy source for firms to harvest, but it will take a difficult culture shift to engage with the lawyers of this next generation fully. Traditional values do not need to disappear; they need to evolve and become more expansive if firms want to continue bringing in and keeping the best legal talent of Generation Z.



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