

# EARLY CAREER ATTORNEY REPORT



Presented by the Los Angeles County Bar Association and Equinox Strategy Partners

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## UNDERSTANDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS IN LAW

With associate turnover rates at record high levels in 2021, the 2022 Early Career Attorney Survey sought to better understand the priorities and desires of the current generation of early career attorneys. Our purpose was to provide law firm and bar association leadership with data so that they may implement changes that will meaningfully attract, retain, and develop the next generation of leaders in law.

This report is based on the anonymous survey conducted in July 2022 and is comprised of input from attorneys in practice for 10 years or less at firms of all sizes. The survey asked for their experiences with and thoughts on a range of topics, including partnership and long-term career goals, connection and support at work, professional development, communication, billable hour requirements, and compensation.



## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

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### **The traditional partnership model is not attractive to associates.**

Only 38% of respondents said they were interested in partnership at their current firm.

### **Partners lack diversity when it comes to how they prioritize work in their lives.**

84.1% of respondents said those in firm leadership prioritize their careers the same way.

### **Associates do not feel they can meet (or see the benefit in meeting) the billable hour requirements along with other professional time commitments required to achieve partnership.**

61% of respondents said they think the billable hours requirement should be adjusted to make partnership more personally desirable.

### **The path to partnership is ambiguous.**

Almost 40% of respondents reported that the path to partnership was not clear at their firm.

### **Associates struggle to have a voice in law firms.**

49% of associates said they have not seen internal leadership opportunities for associates that result in change at the firm level.



## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

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### **Associates are not connecting personally with partners and leadership.**

40% of respondents report that they never or rarely discuss non-client related topics with partners and firm leadership.

### **Associates with friendships at work are more likely to be interested in partnership.**

Associates with three or more friends at the firm were three times as likely to be interested in partnership than those with two or less friends.

### **Firms are not facilitating interaction internally.**

73% of respondents said their firms have not added any additional meetings to facilitate discussion and collaboration since March of 2020.

### **Associates are not getting the feedback and training that they want.**

47.7% of respondents rate the quality of supervision and teaching from partners and senior associates as less than helpful.

### **Compensation is important to job satisfaction only to a point.**

27% of those who reported that they were happy with compensation rated their job satisfaction as miserable or close to miserable, while 35% of those who were unhappy with compensation said they were happy or couldn't be happier at work.



### Partnership is not the goal for many early career attorneys

The path to partnership is ambiguous to associates. Almost 40% of respondents reported that the path to partnership was not clear at their firm and 25% of associates reported that they did not see an upward career path at their current firm. 11.1% of respondents reported that partners at their firm say they want everyone to become partner, but their actions do not support that sentiment.

The traditional partnership model is not universally appealing to early career attorneys with *only 38% of respondents reporting that they were interested in partnership* and 39% saying they were unsure if they would pursue partnership at their current firms.

60% of respondents said they were considering moving to an in-house role in the future

40% of respondents said they currently have plans to leave their firm

Our results suggest that associates would be interested in partnership if the requirements were adjusted, with the billable hour requirements being the leading deterrent from their current partnership model.

61% of respondents said they think the billable hours requirement should be adjusted to make partnership more personally desirable.

Indicated requirements that should be adjusted were origination at 28%, timeline to transition at 27% and administrative commitment at 27%.

***“The billable hours requirement is arcane and stifles innovation and creativity.”***

# ATTORNEY RESPONSES

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## Early career attorneys are now reconsidering the legal profession

Only 58% of respondents reported that they believe the legal profession is compatible with their values and personal goals. 40% of respondents said they believe they will not practice law for their entire career.

It is significant and troubling that more than two out of five of the early career attorneys surveyed believe that the entire profession of law is not congruent with what they want in their careers and in their lives.

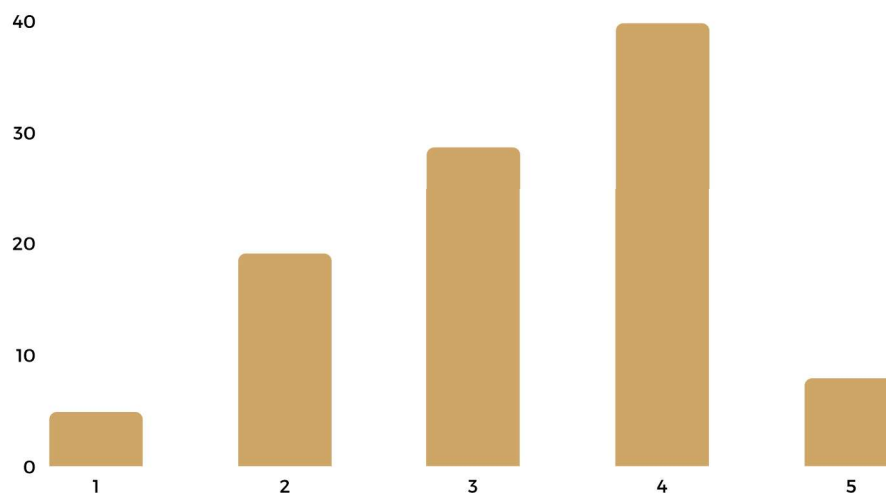
***“The amount of time this job takes is soul sucking.”***



## Associates are not feeling connected to or finding meaning in their work

Only 14.3% of respondents reported that they are “fully invested in my work and clearly see how my work fits into the bigger picture and is impactful.”

More than half of those surveyed reported that they were not happy at work.



**1 (“I am miserable at work”) to 5 (“I couldn’t be happier at work”)**

# ATTORNEY RESPONSES

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## Friendships at work are powerful

With hybrid and remote work arrangements that allow us to work physically apart, today it is more challenging to organically build friendships with the people that you work with. **22% of survey respondents reported that they had zero friends at work.**

Associates that are friends with their colleagues were more likely to be interested in partnership. **Only 17% of those associates with two or less friends in the office were interested in partnership.** Associates with three or more friends in the office were three times as likely to be interested in partnership than those with less friends.

Firms are not proactively facilitating attorney interaction internally. **73% of respondents said that their firms did not add any additional meetings to facilitate discussion and collaboration since March of 2020.** Isolation and limited interaction is not unusual with 19% of associates surveyed reporting that they are interacting with three or less colleagues in a week.

And unfortunately, many associates are not proactively seeking engagement with others in their profession outside of their own organizations with **47% of those surveyed reporting that they are not active members of any professional organization or bar association.**



## Associates are not connecting personally with partners and leadership

Human connection is difficult to attain when conversations are kept purely professional. **40% of those surveyed report that they “never” or “rarely” discuss non-client related topics with partners and firm leadership.**



***“Partners do not engage in communication outside of non-work-related matters”***



### Firms are not facilitating interaction internally

While 55.6% of respondents said their firms adopted additional discussion/chat platform technology post March 2020, 25.4% said they are not interacting with colleagues and staff as much as they'd like.

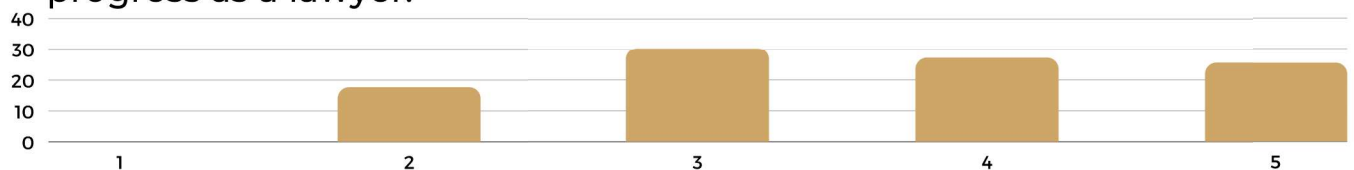
As most law firms are operating on a remote or hybrid schedule, 87.3% reported they are working in the office with flexible schedules or will eventually go back to the office with flexible schedules, it is significant to note that **38% of respondents reported that they have no standing meetings scheduled and only 6.3% have standing meetings with their mentors.** Associates are also struggling to connect with their contemporaries, with **20.3% of respondents reporting that they rarely discuss non-client related topics with their peers.**

***“Communication is always about work, and mostly through email.”***

### Associates are not getting the feedback and training that they want

Regarding formal professional feedback, 49% of the associates surveyed said they have their work product evaluated no more than annually and 14% said their work product is evaluated only when something goes wrong. Only 42.9% of participants reported that they have standing meetings with senior attorneys to discuss client matters and only 7.9% have standing meetings for training and development from senior attorneys.

When asked about the quality of supervision and teaching from partners and senior associates 47.7% reported it was less than helpful. 19% of associates surveyed said they are not learning what they need to progress as a lawyer.



**How would you rate the quality of supervision and teaching from partners and senior associates at your firm? 1 (Not helpful) to 5 (Very helpful)**



***“There is a lack of respect/professionalism in the way that certain partners communicate with me when providing feedback (almost always purely negative) on my performance.”***

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Law firms are not providing adequate opportunities for professional development with only 52.4% of those surveyed reporting that their firms offer in-house training programs. Only 17.5% reported that their firms offer in-house coaching and 6.3% said their firm provides paid external coaching. 69.8% of respondents said their firms offer CLE.

Even when training is available at the firm, many associates are unable to make time to participate, or do not find the training worth participating in. Only 49% of those surveyed said they participate in the available training at their firms and 28.6% said that they participate in training and development at their firms but not as much they'd like.

Survey results indicated that training and development around building legal skills (practice group training, trial advocacy training) were most desired by associates followed by business development training and training on the business of law.

Associates participate in formal mentorship programs when they are provided; only 1.6% of participants reported that they were not involved in an available mentorship program. But existing programs have room for improvement as only 27.3% rated their internal mentorship program as very valuable. 23.8% of those surveyed reported that their firms do not have a formal mentorship program.

Improved understanding of firm expectations and career paths was the number one reason respondents sought to participate in mentorship programs.

22.2% of respondents said they would like to participate in a formal mentorship program outside of their firm.

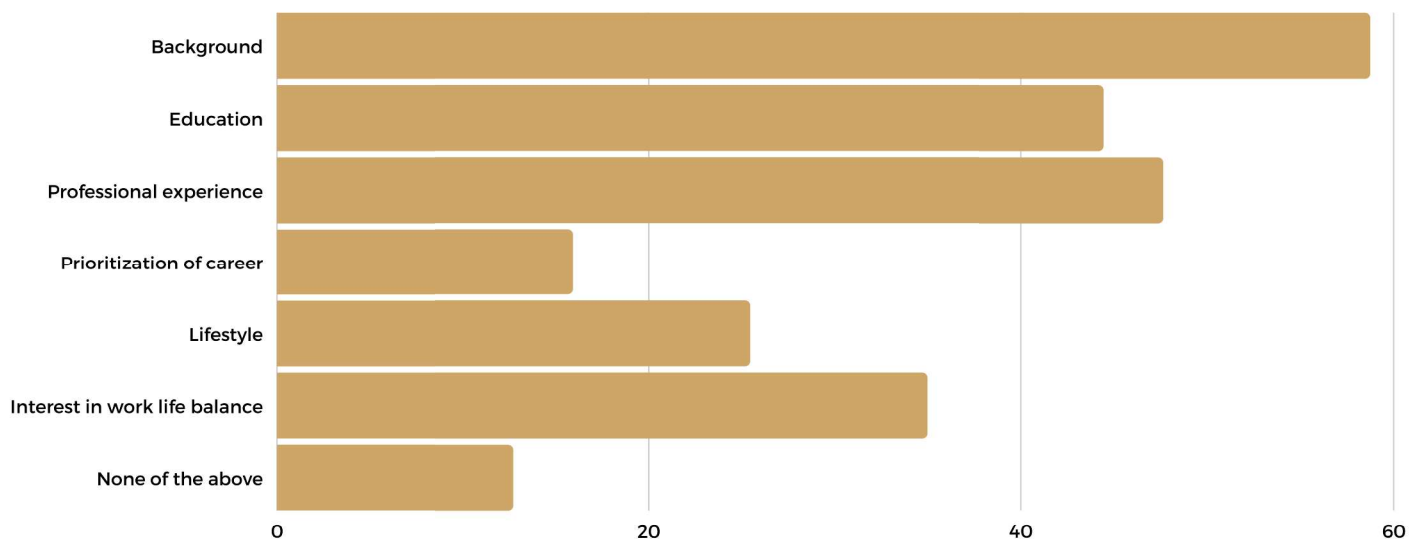
# ATTORNEY RESPONSES

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## Associates do not feel represented at their firms


Associates struggle to be heard in law firms. When asked if there are internal leadership opportunities for associates that lead to the implementation of change at the firm level 14.3% said “no,” while 35% said “yes, in theory, but I have not seen it.”

Diversity at the leadership level continues to be lacking. 35% of respondents said there were zero individuals in leadership at their firm that can relate to their life circumstances (upbringing, education, professional experience, prioritization of career, lifestyle, interest in work life balance). There is very little diversity around the role work plays in a partner’s life as 84.1% reported that everyone in leadership at their firm prioritized their careers similarly.



**In what ways is the leadership at your firm diverse?**

***“Social/non-client related communication could greatly improve. I only communicate based on client work which makes work very impersonal.”***



***“I like the flexibility but feel that that billing requirements and work-life balance discussions are a façade.”***

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Associates want access to an office and flexibility around where they are working from. Only 4.8% of respondents reported that they were working in the office full time. The top response to the question of ideal work situation was flexible remote and in-office schedules at 50.8%, while 39.7% said they prefer mostly remote with the option to work from an office. Only 3.2% said they prefer full time office schedules and 6.3% prefer full time remote schedules.

**The quantity of time required to fulfill billable hour requirements on top of other time-consuming professional expectations is the main reason associates are looking for alternative opportunities to traditional law firm partnership.**

48% of respondents are required to bill between 1751 to 1900 hours a year, 37% of respondents are required to bill between 1901 to 2150 hours a year. Attorneys are required to work well beyond the time it takes to complete their billable hours and 44.4% of respondent's firms are not giving credit for hours spent on administration or firm responsibilities towards the billable hour requirement.

***“The hour requirements are too demanding, and I feel like I will burn-out. There are way too many non-billable meetings and business development expectations that make it very difficult to meet my billable hour requirements. All I do is work and have practically no social life, and I never take vacations or breaks during the day. I work late nights and weekends, there is no relief in sight.”***



***“I wish we got billable credit for business and professional development, and mentorship/recruiting efforts.”***

Associates are interested in contributing to their community and participating in pro bono work. 27% of respondents are currently involved in pro bono work and 44.4% of respondents reported they are not currently involved in pro bono work but would like to be. 12.5% reported that they didn't know if billable hour credit is given for pro bono work and 23.8% reported it wasn't.

Business development is a requirement for partnership and 36.5% of those surveyed reported that they do not get credit for hours spent on marketing and client development towards their billable hour requirement.

## **Firms are not being clear about available career paths**

14.3% of respondents said a reduced schedule is not allowed at their firm and 25% did not know if it was or wasn't. 33.3% said a partner at their firm can work on a part time schedule and 34.3% said they don't know.

38.1% said an associate could not be promoted to partner while working on a reduced schedule and 42.8% said they didn't know.

***“I feel exhausted by my hours requirement. I wish there were alternative options, such as reduced schedules. I would be willing to accept a lower salary for a more flexible billable requirement. I feel as though this job leaves me with very little time and energy for myself.”***

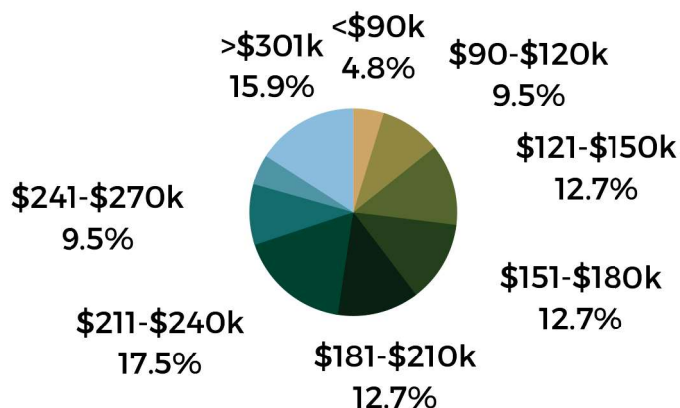




## Being paid commensurately with their peers is a common point of contention

72% of those surveyed with a salary at \$180,000 or less said they were not satisfied with their compensation; 33% of those with a salary above \$181,000 reported that they were unhappy with compensation. 62% reported that they were satisfied with their benefits package.

### Salary of respondents



Compensation is important to job satisfaction up to a point, but it's not definitive. 27% of those who said they were happy with compensation rated their job satisfaction as a 1 or 2 out of 5. 35% of those who were unhappy with compensation rated their job satisfaction at a 4 or 5 out of 5.

Associates are not formally encouraged to participate in activities that establish professional visibility and increased business relationships. 64% of those surveyed said they did not have a formal marketing budget and only 16% said they have an annual marketing budget and use it. 60% of those that do have an annual marketing budget report that it is under \$1000.

***"I'd like more recognition for what I bring to the table translated into more pay, more business development opportunities, and more bonus opportunity."***



# RECOMMENDATIONS

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The world has changed significantly in the last 70 years and the law firm model has been slow to adapt. The next generation of lawyers have different expectations around work, communication, relationships, and purpose than their predecessors, and their requirements are changing the way the legal profession operates. **This shift is going to be most successful among firms that recognize the immediate need to reimagine and adjust the systems and structures that have existed in law firms up to this point.**

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Younger professionals expect to build careers where their work is meaningful; it is imperative that law firm leaders help early career professionals recognize how their efforts impact the bigger picture. Improving relationships and communication in a way that facilitates deeper connection is essential to the cultural shifts that are needed inside of law firms. **Both senior and junior professionals require skill development in this area to be successful and law firms need to provide training along with facilitated opportunities for bonding and connection among their professionals if they expect to see a shift in the culture.**

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People want to feel empowered and autonomous, and younger professionals expect that as soon as they start working. Encouraging and expecting young attorneys to “keep their heads down, do what is asked of them without question, produce good work, and wait for their time to come” is archaic and ultimately false. **Law firms need to be engaging and investing in their associates through the proactive development of not only legal skills but also business skills and professional relationship development skills.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Transparency is an important area that needs to change if we expect associates to commit to a career inside of a law firm. Professionals need to know exactly what is available to them and what is expected of them. They need to be explicitly told what paths are offered and what is required for each of those paths. They need to fully understand how the firm operates from a financial and business standpoint. **Training and facilitated discussions around these topics are required to ensure understanding.**

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If law firms truly want to improve diversity in their leadership and positions of power, they need to ensure diverse attorneys (women, LGBTQ+, POC) that they hire stay at the firm and succeed. **Firms must recognize the internal structural elements that continue to suit only those who have traditionally held (and continue to hold) power and change them.**

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It is unrealistic to expect a law firm to provide everything a young lawyer needs to succeed and thrive in the legal profession. To continue to provide clients with the best service and solutions, firms need to engage whatever resources they can to best serve and develop their associates. That often includes creating internal roles for professionals (often non-lawyers) with unique expertise, hiring outside consultants, and aligning with and encouraging engagement in professional organizations and bar associations.



# METHODOLOGY & DEMOGRAPHICS

- 67 attorneys responded to the online survey, including 63 law firm attorneys and 4 in house attorneys
- Responses were dispersed evenly across all sized firms (firms with 11 attorneys up to firms with more than 2000)
- 73% of law firm respondents consider themselves in a minority category from those that traditionally hold power in the legal profession; 100% of the in-house responses considered themselves in the minority (not white cis hetero men)

## AUTHOR

Lana J. Manganiello is Managing Director of Equinox Strategy Partners. She has devoted over 15 years to coaching and training new and experienced lawyers and other service professionals on topics related to annual business planning, business development, and marketing. Trained and certified through Cornell University in Diversity and Inclusion, Lana is dedicated to working with law firms to create cultures of belonging where women and diverse professionals thrive, and she is committed to working to improve diversity at the top of the legal profession.

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