

ABOVE THE LAW

Associate Perspectives on the New Normal

Last year and into this, the world at large was abuzz over the “Great Resignation,” one of the many unexpected developments coming out of responses to the global pandemic. More specifically, in our bailiwick, Law Land, firms agonized over obstacles to effectively service a rocketing surge in demand due, in part, to an inability to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of associates. The legal press spilt gallons of ink and pixels describing, in nearly apocalyptic terms, what some referred to as a “mass exodus of associates.” Many firms resorted to dishing out staggeringly large and frequent bonuses (frankly, we lost count after a while) – and other perks (Pelotons for all!) in the hopes of retaining the associates they did have.

Law firm associates are, by and large, a highly advantaged group. And, in most cases, this is well-earned; they’ve invested a great deal of time and money preparing for their careers. Law school is a fiercely competitive three-year slog, leaving many (most?) with an extravagant level of student debt. Their job search is another high-stress gantlet. And, by almost any comparative measure, associates are well remunerated.

With all that, why consider giving it up?

The pandemic and all that it entailed, especially, in practical terms, work from home, scrambled much of what we thought we “knew” to be true, leading many to rethink just how they want to live, the meaning of work, etc., etc.

Clearly, there was something afoot with associates and we were curious to get a peek “under the hood,” and gain a better understanding of what was driving this heightened degree of apparent associate disaffection. This time felt different and, if so, what had changed?

Not surprisingly, our good friends at Above The Law were thinking along the same lines and took this somewhat inchoate notion, and, as they say, ran with it. The result is the probing, insightful report that follows. Developed under the aegis of Brian Dalton, SVP, Editorial Director and led by Vera Djordjevich, Director of Research, this study lucidly dissects associates’ issues as they, like most of us, were figuring it all out on a day-by-day basis.

Within the comprehensive breadth of this report, a few things especially caught our eye...

Corporate versus litigation

On eight of the nine measures (the ninth is virtually a tie), corporate associates are more satisfied than their counterparts in litigation. (Yet litigation draws one-third more associates than corporate; go figure.)

The divide is also in sharp reveal in that nearly half of all corporate associates plan to stay at their firms versus less than a third of litigators. At a more granular level, corporate associates give their firms higher marks on every subjective measure of satisfaction (fulfilling work, culture, quality of management, connection to colleagues, plus compensation) than those in litigation. Only on work/life balance and childcare flexibility are litigators happier.

How does size matter?

In terms of what type of firms associates surveyed work at, satisfaction across the board (caliber of work, compensation, communication, even work/life balance) are consistently highest at Am Law 50 firms, the largest, and boutiques, presumably among the smallest. These two segments likely provide the most distinctive career experiences for associates.

The gender gap persists

Stark differences are on display between men (53% of the sample) and women (45%) where, somewhat amazingly, men report higher satisfaction/lower dissatisfaction than women on all nine of the areas probed.

The same male/female divide holds on one of the single most revealing questions: Career plans. 50% more men than women plan to stay with the expectation of partnership (36% vs. 23%). Half of all women plan to leave within one or two years, but only one-third of men feel the same.

Race & ethnicity; the dispiriting saga continues

Perhaps the single most sobering set of data in the entire survey is delivered by the numbers on career plans by (self-reported) race/ethnicity. Consider: While about 30% (rough average) of Asian, Hispanic, and White associates plan to stay in the expectation of partnership, zero percent—0%—of Black or multiracial respondents report the same. 11% of Black associates reported that they'd like to stay even without partnership, but again 0% of the multiracial cohort say the same.

Solidly more than half of Black associates plan to leave within the next year (two-thirds if you extend it to two years), and three-quarters of multiracial respondents also expect to be gone within 24 months (the rest are “undecided”—hardly a ringing vote of confidence).

We cannot overemphasize how shocking and embarrassing the audience should find these numbers. Whatever we've been doing on this front is manifestly not working, and we all know the definition of insanity.

We suspect that trends reported in this report are not new, but that the pandemic may have exacerbated simmering issues. It is, however trenchant analysis such as this that will provide firms with guidance to help them delve into these issues and develop more effective remedies going forward.

Cheers & best regards,



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September 20, 2022

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Earlier this year, we surveyed associates about their experiences since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Two-plus years of living and working under pandemic conditions have prompted many lawyers to reassess their priorities, their jobs, and even their choice of career. This phenomenon, which fueled talk of “The Great Resignation,” also led to an exceptionally hot lateral market, along with a flurry of market-setting raises as firms competed for associate talent.

For associates joining the mass migration, we wanted to know why—what makes for greener pastures in their eyes? And for those who intend to remain where they are, we wanted to know what keeps them motivated. We asked associates how well—or poorly—their firms managed the transition to work from home and the ensuing changes in the workplace. What effects have these changes had on their workloads, the firm culture, and their feelings about their jobs?

We heard from more than 500 associates at firms of all sizes—from some of the largest and most profitable law firms to small boutique practices with just a handful of lawyers—with Biglaw representing the largest segment of respondents.

What we found is that, although many associates give their firms solid marks for their handling of the unprecedented issues posed by the pandemic, they also criticize them for bungled messaging, understaffing, and an unwillingness to acknowledge that the world and the expectations of its workforce have changed.

Associates overwhelmingly want to keep working remotely—or at least to have the option to do so—and many complain about their firms’ return-to-office policies and the evolving explanations that underpin them. Not allowing associates to work from home now, after two years in which they proved that they needn’t be seated in the office to do their jobs effectively, raises issues of trust and respect that color associates’ attitudes toward their firms.

And yet the survey results also suggest some downsides to the WFH system. Remote work erases the already porous line between associates’ work and home lives. It can breed feelings of isolation and disconnection. Respondents who go into the office report better work-life balance and are less likely to complain of isolation, lack of structure, and erosion

of the work/home boundary. They are more likely to say they want to make partner than those who work remotely.

Asked about various aspects of their jobs, the subject that drew the lowest satisfaction score among almost every demographic segment is work-life balance. Achieving that balance has long been a challenge for attorneys, but the struggle has reached a new pitch in recent years. More than 40 percent of associates surveyed plan to leave their firms either within the year or within the next two years, and most say that a desire for better work-life balance is a primary factor. Many seem to envision finding that elusive balance on the client side, as in-house positions are where the largest group of respondents say they are most likely to go.

Less than 30 percent of respondents plan to stay at their firms to become partners. Perhaps even more concerning is that of those who do plan to remain, only a third say that what keeps them there is a sense of fulfillment in their work. Money and appreciation for their colleagues are much stronger motivations.

Just over half of associates surveyed lateralled to their current firm, and their responses indicate higher levels of satisfaction and optimism than that shown by associates who have spent their entire careers at the same firm. Lateral hires are more likely to stay with the expectation of becoming partners and less likely to be looking for an exit.

Some of these lateral associates left larger firms, and there is a distinct sense of disillusionment among many Biglaw and former Biglaw respondents. By contrast, even if boutique lawyers are less happy with their compensation, they report higher levels of satisfaction with most other aspects of their jobs than their counterparts at larger firms.

The data reveals other troubling disparities. Although men and women are equally unhappy with work-life balance, there is a clear gender gap with respect to virtually every other survey topic. Female respondents rated every satisfaction category lower than male respondents. Women are also much more likely to have one foot out the door than men and less likely to have partnership in their sights. In addition, while the sample size from people of color was relatively small, the results suggest lower levels of satisfaction among some racial/ethnic minority groups, particularly Black respondents, not one of whom said they intend to stay at their firm with the expectation of making partner.

Distinctions also appear among responses from associates in different practice groups. Corporate attorneys are notably happier than litigators with just about every aspect of their jobs—with the exception of work-life balance—and they are more likely to foresee partnership in their future.

Dissatisfaction with work-life balance as well as with firm management is perhaps sharpest among midlevels. Associates in their 4th, 5th, and 6th years of practice complained more than their junior and senior peers about increased workloads, low morale, and a conviction that management does not care about their well-being. They were particularly vocal about burnout, describing a shared unhappiness and the mass departures of colleagues.

The news is not all bad, of course. Associates are generally satisfied with the caliber of their assignments, and they appreciate their colleagues and the partners they work with; indeed, it is that camaraderie that motivates many to remain at their current firms. However, the flip side is that as they see their friends leave, associates lose some of the most important threads that bind them to their firm. Some associates praised their firms for avoiding layoffs during a challenging time and making genuine efforts to maintain connections and promote their health and well-being.

Most of the associates surveyed—especially those at large firms—currently have hybrid schedules, in which they work at least part of the time outside the office, and most welcome this new opportunity as one of the few bright spots of the last two and half years. And while many Biglaw associates say they would willingly give up some of their compensation for more free time, they are not unappreciative of the recent pay bumps (even if they believe they are well earned).

METHODOLOGY

Survey Timeframe
Mid-March to June 2022

Total Respondents
518

KEY FINDINGS

- Associates' **highest** satisfaction ratings are for **caliber of work, interaction with partners, and compensation.**
- The **lowest**-rated category is **work-life balance.**
- A majority of associates (59%) believe their firm **handled the issues imposed by the pandemic “pretty well” or “excellently.”**
- More than half of respondents (56%) say their **workload has increased** since the pandemic.
- In addition to heavier workloads, other issues associates experience at least “a moderate amount” include a **loss of boundary between home life and work life** and a **sense that their colleagues are unhappy.**
- **Few** respondents (11%) **foresee things improving soon.**
- Associates enjoy a **moderate amount of flexibility** with respect to where and when they work.
- More than two-thirds of respondents have **hybrid work schedules**, in which they work some days in the office and other days at home; hybrid arrangements are **most common among large law firms.**
- Associates working either **fully or partially remote schedules** reported higher levels of flexibility than those who work full-time in the office, but also **greater loss of boundary between work and home lives, stronger feelings of isolation, and a firmer conviction that management doesn't care about their well-being.**
- **Half** of respondents **who work full-time in the office plan to become partners at their firms**—more than double the percentage of those who have hybrid (25%) or fully remote (20%) schedules.
- Overall, **less than a third** (28%) of associates surveyed **plan to stay at their current firm with the expectation of joining the partnership.**
- **23% plan to leave** their firms **within the year** and another 19% say they will stay another year or two before leaving.
- Among those who plan to leave, the most common reason (cited by 69% of associates) is a **desire for better work-life balance.**
- The largest group of respondents (40%) sees an **in-house position as the most likely next step.**
- **Women rated every area of job satisfaction lower than men.**
- **Half of female associates** surveyed **plan to leave their firms** within the next couple of years, compared to one-third of male associates.
- **36% of male respondents intend to stay** at their current firm **to make partner**; 23% of female respondents do.

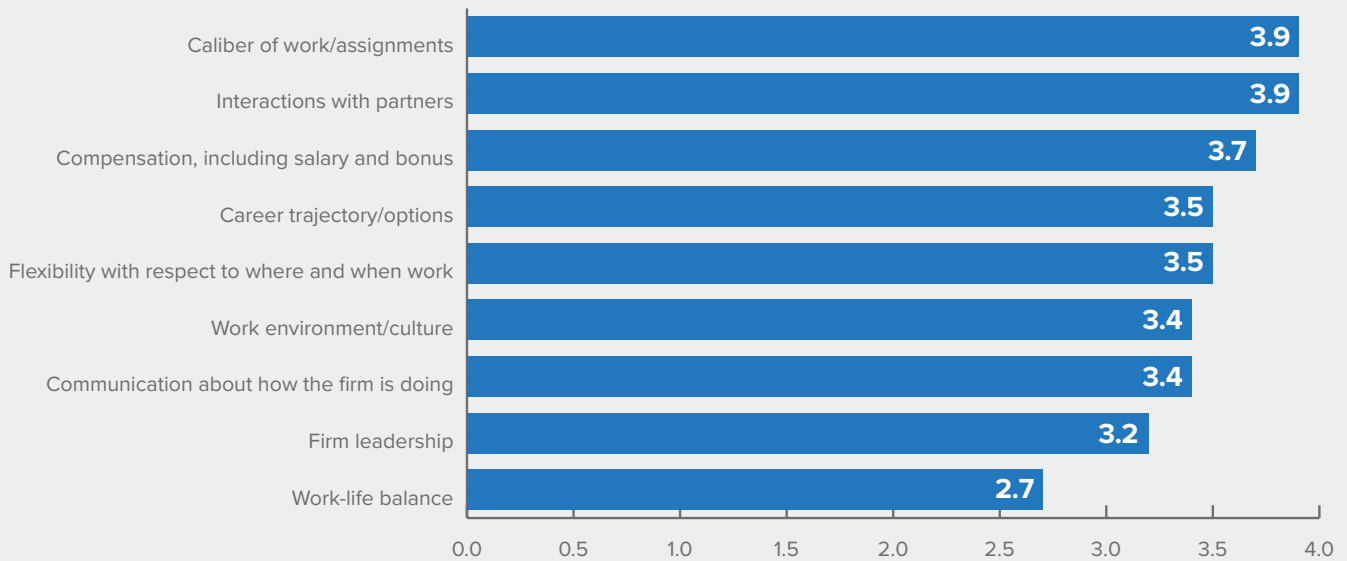
KEY FINDINGS

- **Not one Black or multiracial respondent** intends to **stay at their firm to become a partner**.
- Associates at **Am Law 50** firms are the **happiest with their compensation** and among the most satisfied with the caliber of work and career options, but they are the **least satisfied with work-life balance** and the most convinced that **management doesn't care about their well-being**.
- Associates at **boutique firms** have the strongest belief that **management is actively trying to address their concerns**, and they are twice as likely as associates at Biglaw firms to **identify fulfilling work as a reason to remain at their firm**.
- **Midlevel associates** are more **satisfied** than their junior and senior counterparts **with their compensation** but **less satisfied with work-life balance** and **firm leadership**.
- For midlevels who plan to remain at their firm, 21% said that fulfilling work was a reason to stay; among **midlevels who intend to leave**, 44% said it's because the **work is not fulfilling**.
- **Corporate associates are happier than litigation associates** with virtually every aspect of their jobs except work-life balance.
- One in three **corporate** respondents sees **partnership in their future**, compared to one in five litigators. **Litigation associates** are more likely (29%) to have an **eye on the door**.
- **Associates who lateraled** to their current firms are, on the whole, more **satisfied with their jobs and their firms' leadership** than those who have spent their whole careers at the same firm.
- 46% of laterals say they plan to **stay at their current firms whether they become a partner or not**; 30% of homegrown associates do.

IF IT MAKES YOU HAPPY..

We asked associates to rate their level of satisfaction with various aspects of their jobs, from the caliber of their work assignments to their opinions of firm leadership, on a 5-point scale, where 1 means “extremely dissatisfied,” 3 means “neutral,” and 5 means “extremely satisfied.”

Please rate your level of satisfaction with respect to the following, with 1 being extremely dissatisfied and 5 being extremely satisfied.



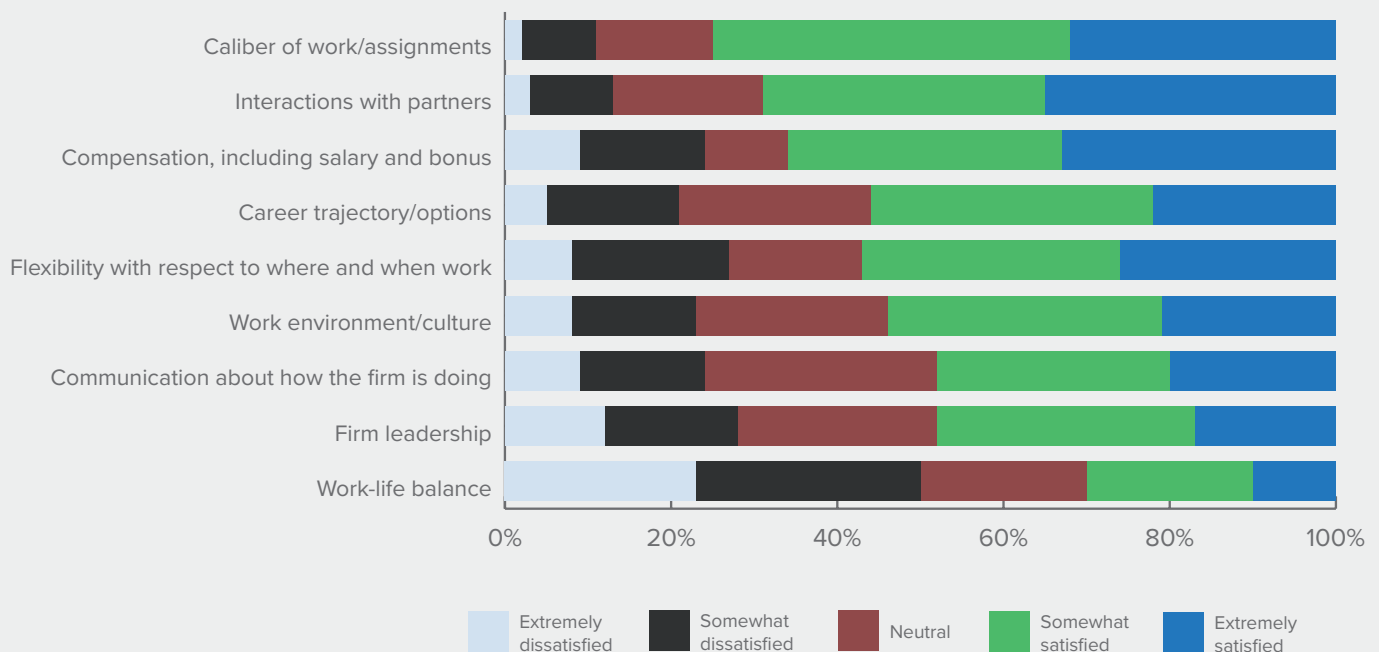
IF IT MAKES YOU HAPPY...

Nice work if you can get it

By and large, associates are satisfied with the caliber of their work, their interactions with partners, and (with certain caveats discussed below) their compensation. At least two-thirds of associates said they are at least “somewhat satisfied” with these aspects of their jobs, and more than 30 percent said they are “extremely satisfied” with them.

Feelings are somewhat more mixed when it comes to career trajectory, flexibility, work culture, firm communication, and firm leadership—areas about which the largest groups of associates said they were either “neutral” or “somewhat satisfied.”

Associate satisfaction: rating distribution



“No work-life separation, let alone balance”

The lowest-rated category, by far, is work-life balance. Half of associates surveyed said they were either “somewhat dissatisfied” or “extremely dissatisfied” with their work-life balance. Very few—just 10 percent—said they were “extremely satisfied.”

The increasingly blurred lines between work and home life is, in fact, one of the primary themes underlying associate responses to this survey.

PANDEMIC IMPACT

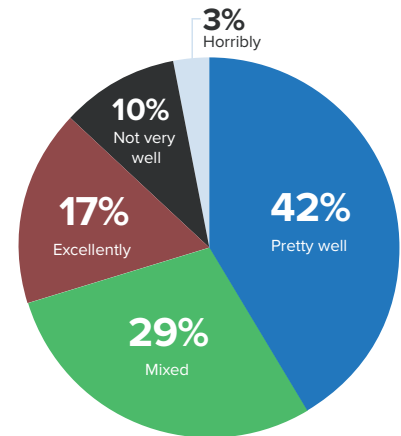
Despite complaints about workload, overall, most associates give their firms solid marks for how they have handled the unprecedented issues imposed by the pandemic.

Almost 60 percent of respondents believe their firm has handled pandemic issues either “pretty well” or “excellently.” And while many consider the results mixed, only a minority say their firm handled things “horribly” or “not very well.”

Rising to the challenge

A number of associates offered praise for their firm’s leadership during difficult circumstances. According to one respondent at an Am Law 200 firm, “My firm has been very good about getting ahead of issues and communicating their plans to the rest of the firm. The back-to-the-office plan has been excellent; the firm has set up lots of opportunities for associates and partners and counsels to all intermingle with each other, including in-office events multiple times a week, group lunches, group dinners, and more. The firm has also been very flexible with where attorneys work, and with training junior attorneys.”

How do you feel your firm has handled the issues imposed by the pandemic?



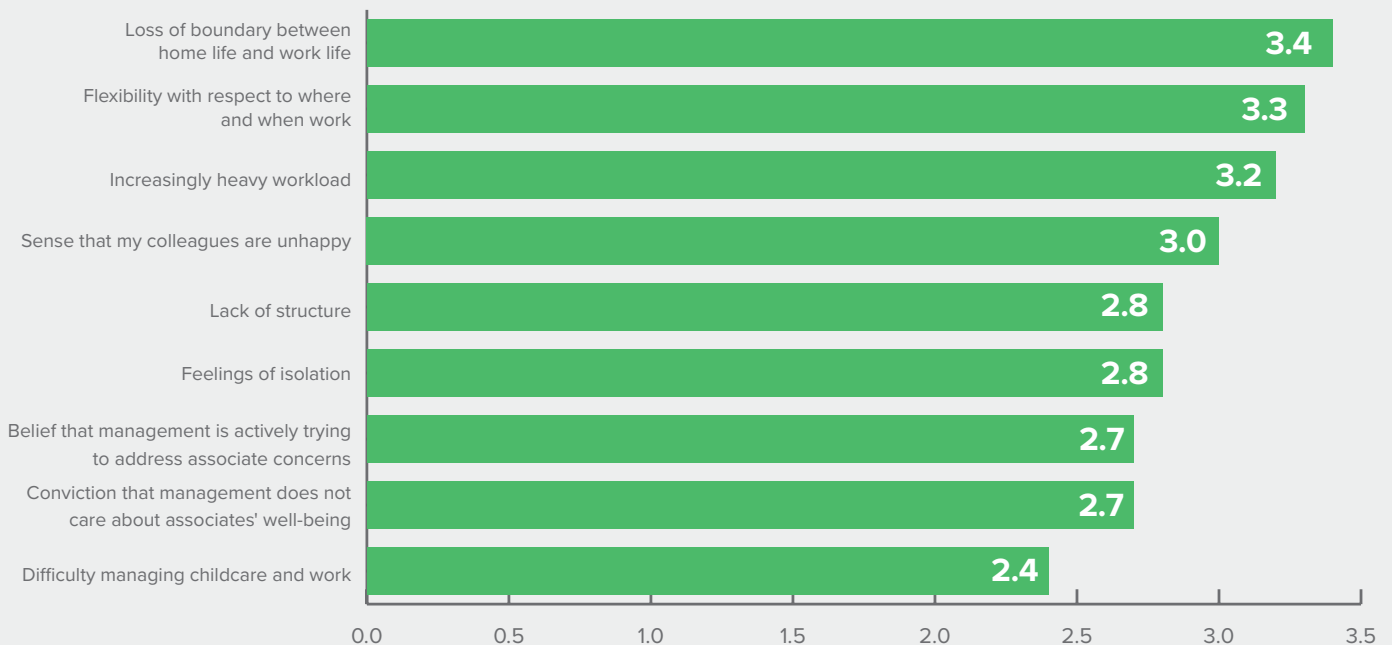
“It’s like reading tea leaves—no one knows what to do. You just have to make what you think is the best choice with the information you do have.”

PANDEMIC IMPACT

Another associate appreciates the actions their firm took to address associate well-being: “My firm put in place wellness programs, integration programs, and other things that allowed us to all stay connected during the pandemic. We have continued that now that we are more working hybrid. Our firm also put into place additional benefits in order to accommodate needs during the pandemic for health and wellness. The firm has also implemented programs based around workplace fun in order to help boost morale.”

Nevertheless, the degree to which associates experience many negative workplace issues has increased since the onset of the pandemic.

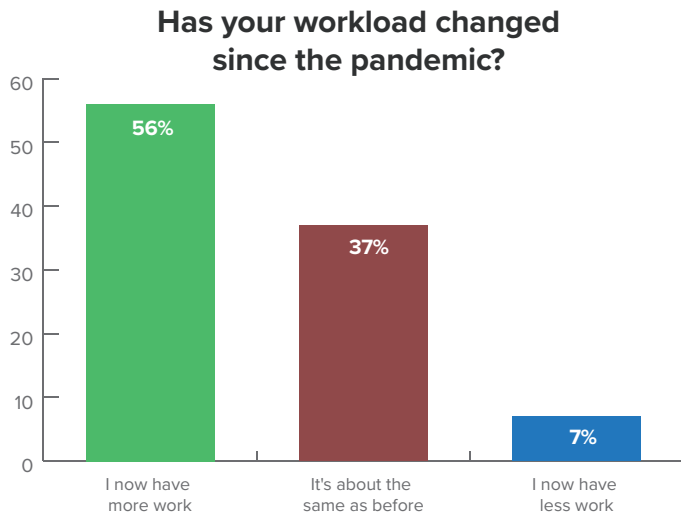
Please indicate how much you experience any of the following with respect to your job, with 1 being not at all and 5 being a great deal.



PANDEMIC IMPACT

All lines have been erased

The foremost issues experienced by associates include a loss of boundaries distinguishing their work life from their home life, along with an increasingly heavy workload. More than half of associates say they have more work now than they did prior to the pandemic.



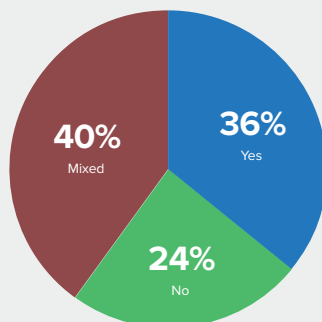
“Nothing distinguishes a Saturday or Sunday from any other day of the workweek.”

At the same time, the introduction of work-from-home options means that many associates enjoy a new degree of flexibility with respect to where and when they work. As a few respondents noted, “The silver lining in the pandemic has been that it ushered in remote work for the big law segment of the legal profession at least a decade before it MAY have come organically.”

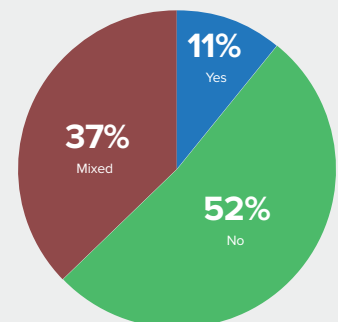
Associates who work remotely on a full-time basis reported the highest degree of flexibility—but also the greatest loss of boundary between their home and work lives. According to one respondent: “We now have complete freedom to work from home whenever we’d like—that’s an improvement. Otherwise, we have more work than ever, no separation time between being at work and not at work, and no free time.”

More than a third of all respondents said that these experiences are worse than they were prior to the pandemic, and another 40 percent say that the results are mixed. But few associates foresee things improving soon.

Would you say your experiences with respect to the above are worse than they were prior to the pandemic?



Do you foresee these things improving soon?



PANDEMIC IMPACT

Communication breakdown

Communication about how the firm is doing is one of the lowest-rated areas of associate satisfaction. Respondents tend to feel almost as strongly that management does not care about their well-being as they do that the leadership is actively trying to address their concerns.

Many firms have floundered in their communications with associates since the onset of the pandemic. Some failures are related specifically to return-to-office plans, but what seems to be most upsetting to many associates is their firm's unwillingness to hear and address associate concerns.

As one associate explained, "The pivot to WFH was great, and the leadership was encouraging and did everything right. But as soon as they realized they had built a strong case for permanent WFH options, they started scrambling and made an abrupt change. The result has been very mixed messaging, stupid public statements, and frustratingly vague and ever-changing policies on what 'hybrid' means. Not once has the firm's leadership made an attempt to survey associates and hear our thoughts on the issue, and that's why we keep pushing back on all their lame attempts to 'preserve firm culture' by getting us back in the office."

"The isolation, man"

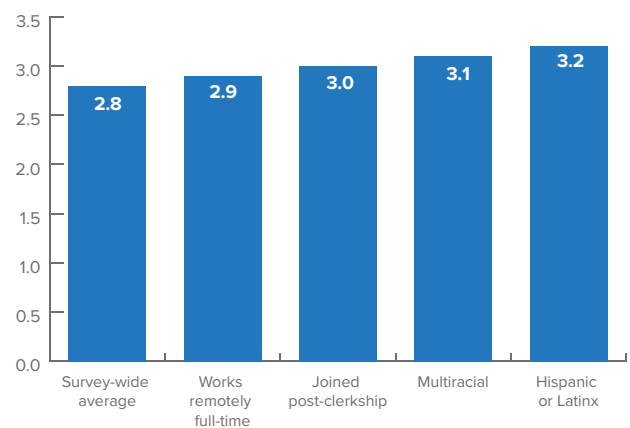
Remote work options may have been the silver lining in the pandemic cloud, but they have also led to increased loneliness and disconnection. More than half of associates said they experienced feelings of isolation "a moderate amount," "a lot," or "a great deal." Feelings were strongest among associates who work fully remote schedules, associates who started at their firm following a clerkship, and some people of color, including multiracial and Hispanic or Latinx associates.

One associate described the isolation as the greatest challenge of the last two years: "I am definitely burned out and feel mostly like a set of hands receiving instructions via email. I have little interaction with others at my firm beyond being told to do something."

According to another associate, "My firm has not leaned into the new normal and has not figured out how to manage attorneys who are remote. I have been left alone for most of the past two years, which is OK on the one hand, but I am bored."

It's not only those who work from home who feel isolated. "Few other associates come into the office on any given day," says one respondent. "I have never met most of the people I work with face to face. It is very lonely."

Associates reporting the strongest feelings of isolation



PANDEMIC IMPACT

A matter of trust

Even if working from home can be lonely, many associates expressed frustration with leadership that doesn't offer the flexibility to work remotely. They argue that this attitude doesn't recognize the reality of the pandemic and what was accomplished during the work-from-home period. Some find the implied lack of trust demeaning.

In the words of one associate, "After showing for the past two years that I can do this job effectively from home, it's demoralizing and exhausting to realize that the firm doesn't trust associates to continue working remotely and instead wants to babysit them and monitor their in-office presence."

Another respondent reports, "The firm is adopting a strict 'return to office' policy and mandating that associates work from the office—even though our billables have been up over the last two years while everyone worked from home. Associates have been loud and clear that they prefer remote work and flexibility, but the firm did not take this feedback into account whatsoever."

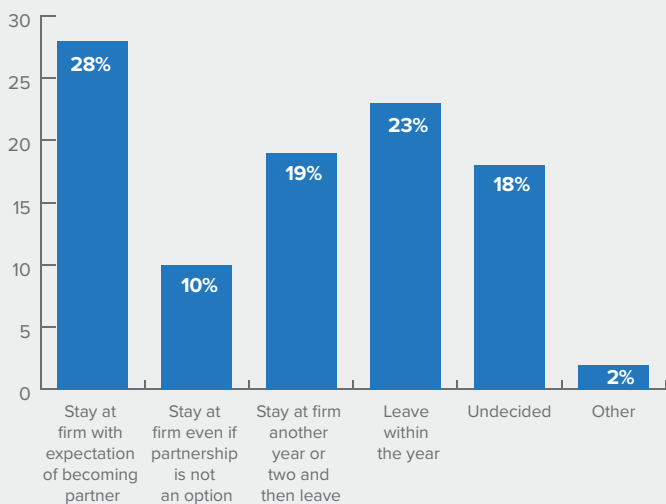
"We don't need to have our butts planted to our chairs at the office to get your document drafted."

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

In addition to surveying associates about their experiences at their current firms, we asked them about their plans for the future. Do associates intend to continue their careers at the same firm, or are they looking elsewhere to find greater job satisfaction?

Their plans run the gamut. While 28 percent of respondents said they plan to stay at their firm with the expectation of making partner, another 23 percent said they plan to leave within the year, and 19 percent expect to stay only another year or two. Many associates remain undecided.

What are your current career plans?



“Other” responses include:

- I left a few months ago
- Just left prior Am Law 50 and started at new firm
- Leave this [firm] immediately, then try to work up to partner with a new firm that isn't horrible
- Looking to go in-house, but no timeline for that move.
- Want to find the right thing so I'm not jumping at everything I see just because it sucks to work at a firm.
- Stay 3-5 years and then leave
- Stay if they will let me stay remote, otherwise quit in a year or two

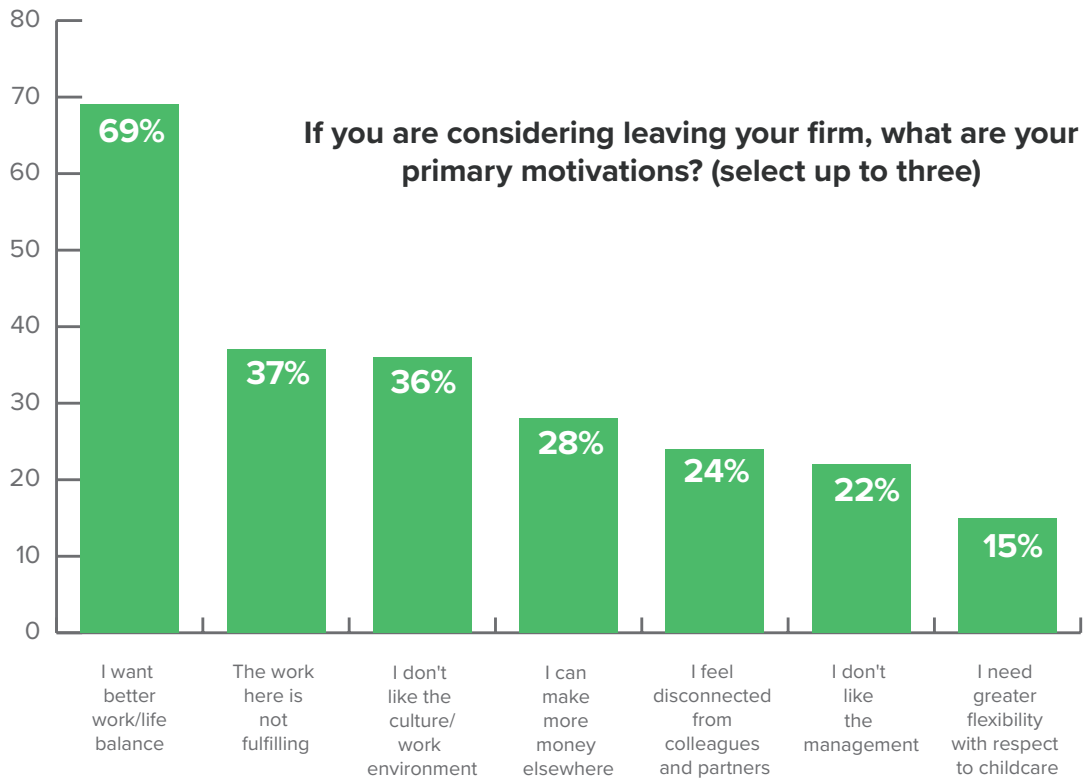
There must be some way out of here

Overall, more than 40 percent of associates said they do not intend to remain at their firms. The foremost reason for leaving is a desire for better work-life balance, cited by more than two-thirds of associates.

Substantial numbers also say their work is not fulfilling and/or they don't like the culture or work environment. Compensation was cited by less than 30 percent of respondents.

“Associates are leaving in droves.”

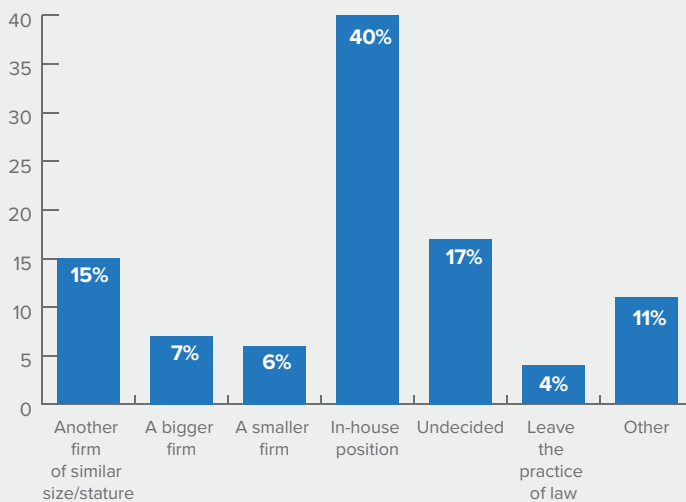
SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?



Many roads lead in-house

Among those who anticipate leaving, the largest group reports they are most likely to go in-house, perhaps in a quest for the elusive work-life balance. Only 15 percent said they would lateral to another firm of similar size and stature, and 13 percent said they'd go to either a smaller firm or a larger firm.

If/when you leave, where would you be most likely to go?



“Other” responses include:

- Clerkship
- Government
- Government or academia
- I have a clerkship in a couple of years. After that I'll go to some firm to get a bonus and then leave for somewhere more manageable.
- Ideally lateral into a firm abroad
- Independent practice or with a colleague
- LLM Program
- Retire
- Solo

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

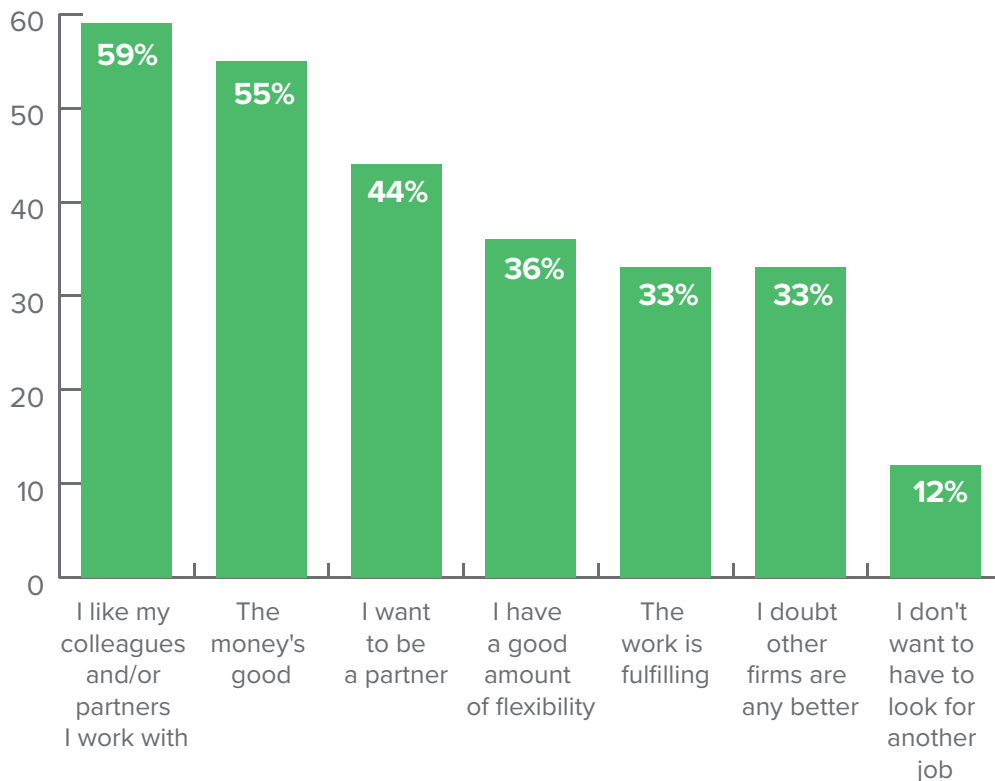
All my friends are here

Although money may not be a primary factor in nudging associates out the door, it is a key reason many choose to remain at their firm. More than half of respondents said they're staying at their firm because the money's good. Partnership dreams also keep more than 40 percent of associates in place.

But the most common reason associates are choosing to stay where they are is that they like their colleagues and/or partners, a factor cited by almost 60 percent of respondents.

Appreciation for colleagues and contentment with compensation both far outweigh a sense of fulfillment with the work. In fact, associates who plan to stay are as likely to do so simply because they "doubt that other firms are better" as because they find their current work fulfilling.

**If you plan to stay at the firm, what are the primary reasons you'd like to remain?
(select up to three)**



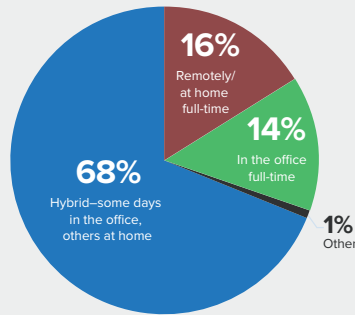
A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

The majority of associates survey-wide currently have hybrid work arrangements, in which they work some days in the office and others at home. Hybrid arrangements are most common at larger firms. More than half of associates at Am Law 200 firms have hybrid schedules, compared with 30 to 40 percent of associates at smaller metro area, regional, or boutique firms.

Many respondents tout the advantages of working from home or having a hybrid work schedule, and yet the survey results also highlight some potential drawbacks.

“Being able to work from home is a game-changer.”

Where do you work?

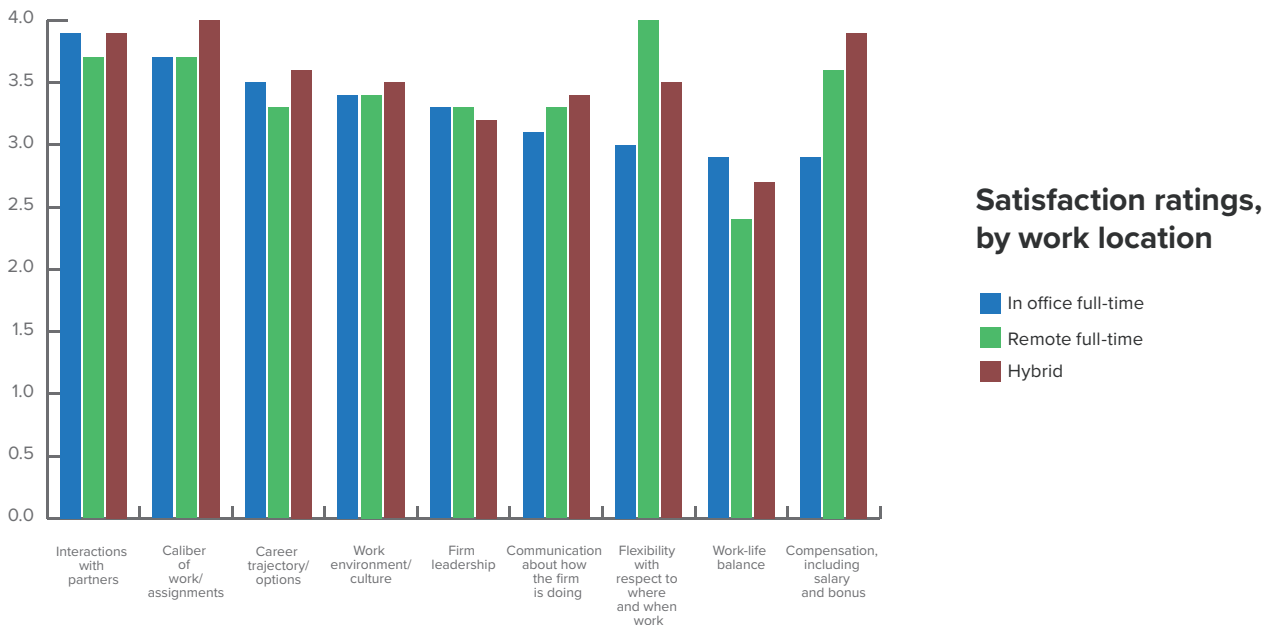


“Other” responses include:

- 90% in office
- Currently remote but rapidly transitioning from “no face-time requirement” to three days per week (minimum) in office
- Free to work from home or office as much as we want. I go in almost every day.
- Supposed to be hybrid but fully WFH

Out of sight, out of mind?

While those who work full-time in the office gave notably lower satisfaction ratings for flexibility and compensation than those with remote or hybrid schedules, they are more satisfied (relatively speaking) than their remote colleagues with partner interactions, the firm culture, and especially work-life balance.

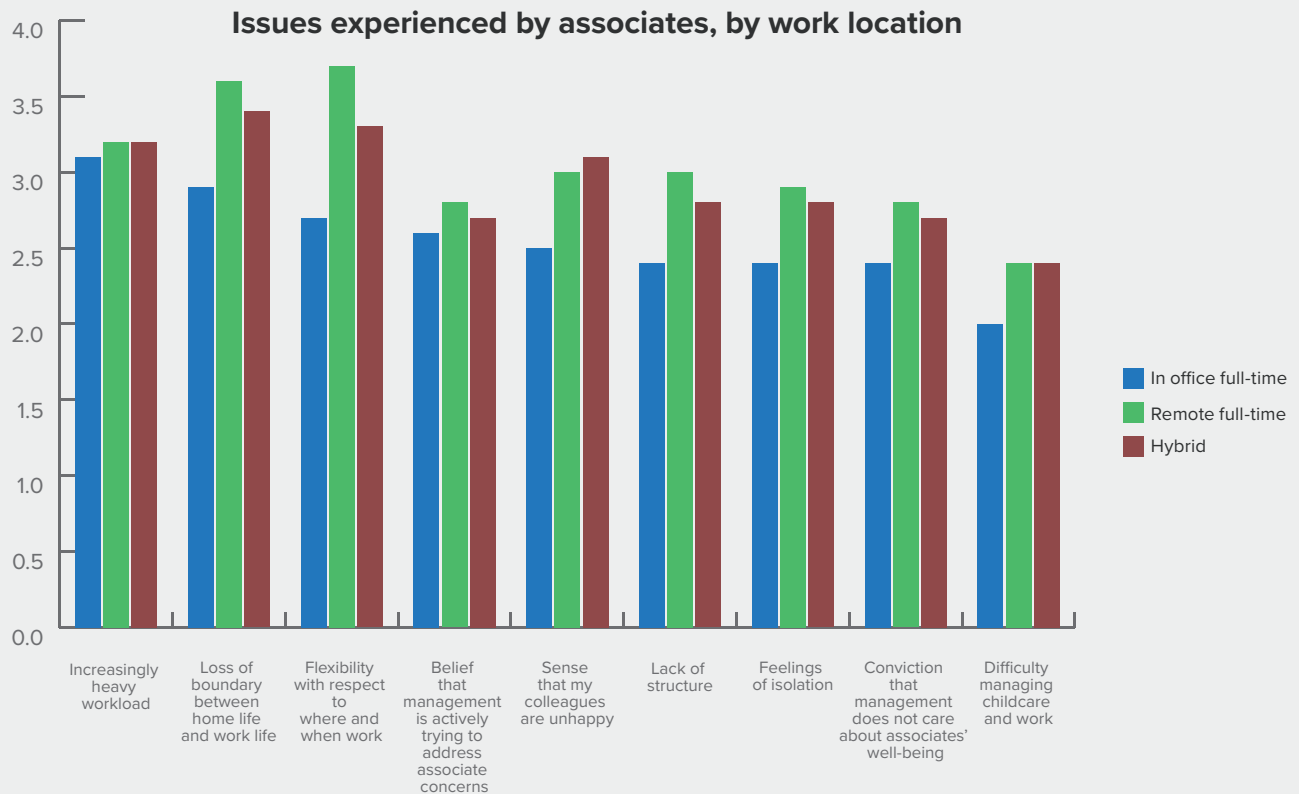


A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

One respondent notes that working remotely can be particularly challenging for newer associates both for training and establishing connections with colleagues: “Especially for junior associates, non-office work and few or no social events is tough. I have been around a while and know people, but it’s very hard for brand new juniors who know nobody and also don’t know what they’re doing.”

Associates working either fully or partially remote schedules reported higher levels of flexibility, but also greater loss of boundary, feelings of isolation, and conviction that management doesn’t care about their well-being. They were also more likely to say that things are worse since the pandemic and to believe things are unlikely to improve soon.

“Hard to see a future with people you’ve never met.”

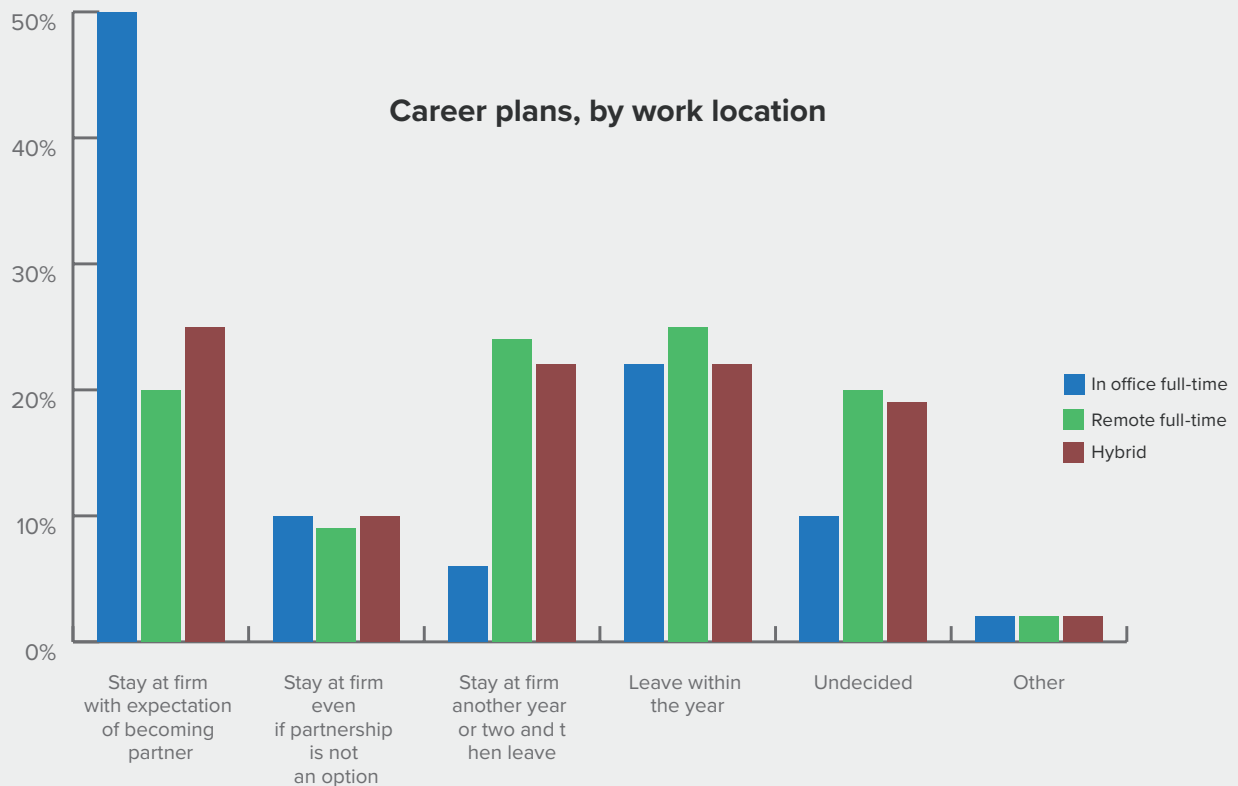


According to one remote worker, the worst aspect is the “lack of a boundary between work and life; since I work at home, I could work during all downtime and that thought is always there even if I choose not to.” Another notes, “There is no visibility when someone is struggling, swamped, or overworked. Beyond just the number of hours on a spreadsheet, which most partners directly correlate to their own wallet.”

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

Office perks

Not only do associates who work full-time in the office report higher levels of satisfaction with their work-life balance, firm leadership, and interactions with partners, but they are also more likely to plan to stay and become partners themselves.



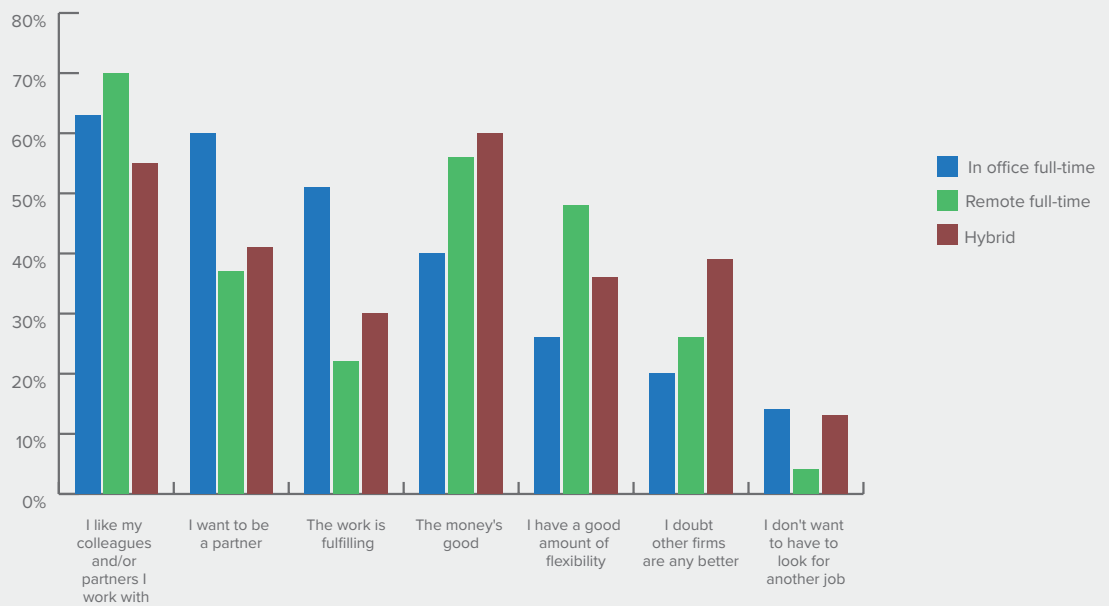
More than half of those who work in the office cited fulfilling work and a desire to be partner as reasons to remain at their current firm—far more than associates with fully or partially remote schedules.

And for those who do want to leave, feeling disconnected from colleagues was less frequently cited as a reason than it was among associates with remote or partially remote schedules.

“If I want to make a run for partner eventually and start developing client relationships, I really do want to be in office with my peers so that I can make those connections.”

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

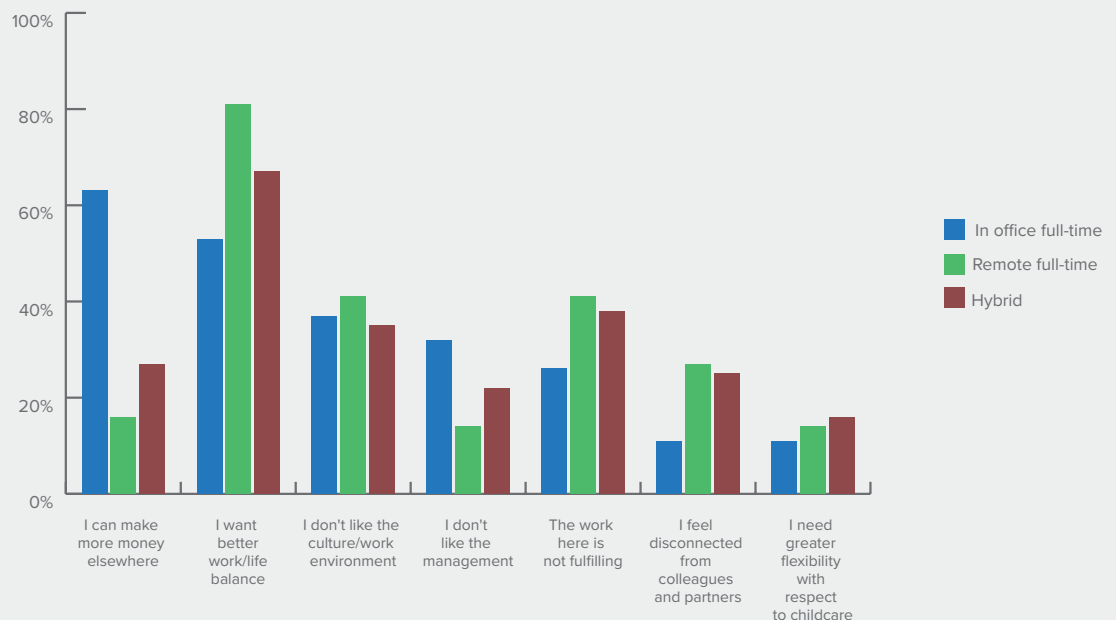
Primary reasons associates remain at firm, by work location



That said, among respondents who plan to leave their firms, associates who work in the office are more likely than their remote colleagues to identify better pay and dislike of management among their reasons.

Some of that sentiment might be fueled by resentment of a mandatory return-to-office policy: “The more the firm requires me to return to the office, the less I get done and the less happy I am. It feels a bit like some partners need to play ‘office’ to feel important. But my work can usually be done anywhere. Why take the time to dress up, pack up, commute, restart computer when it freaks out due to the switch in venues, all to sit in an uncomfy chair in a glass box and not talk to anyone anyway (except on Teams)? I can do so much more with that time—including billable work!”

Primary motivations for leaving firm, by work location



WHEN SIZE MATTERS

The associates surveyed work at a variety of firms—from small boutiques to midsized regional firms to some of the largest firms in the country—with the Am Law 200 particularly well represented. The results indicate that associate perspectives can vary dramatically depending on where they work and that being a member of the Biglaw elite is no guarantee of career satisfaction.

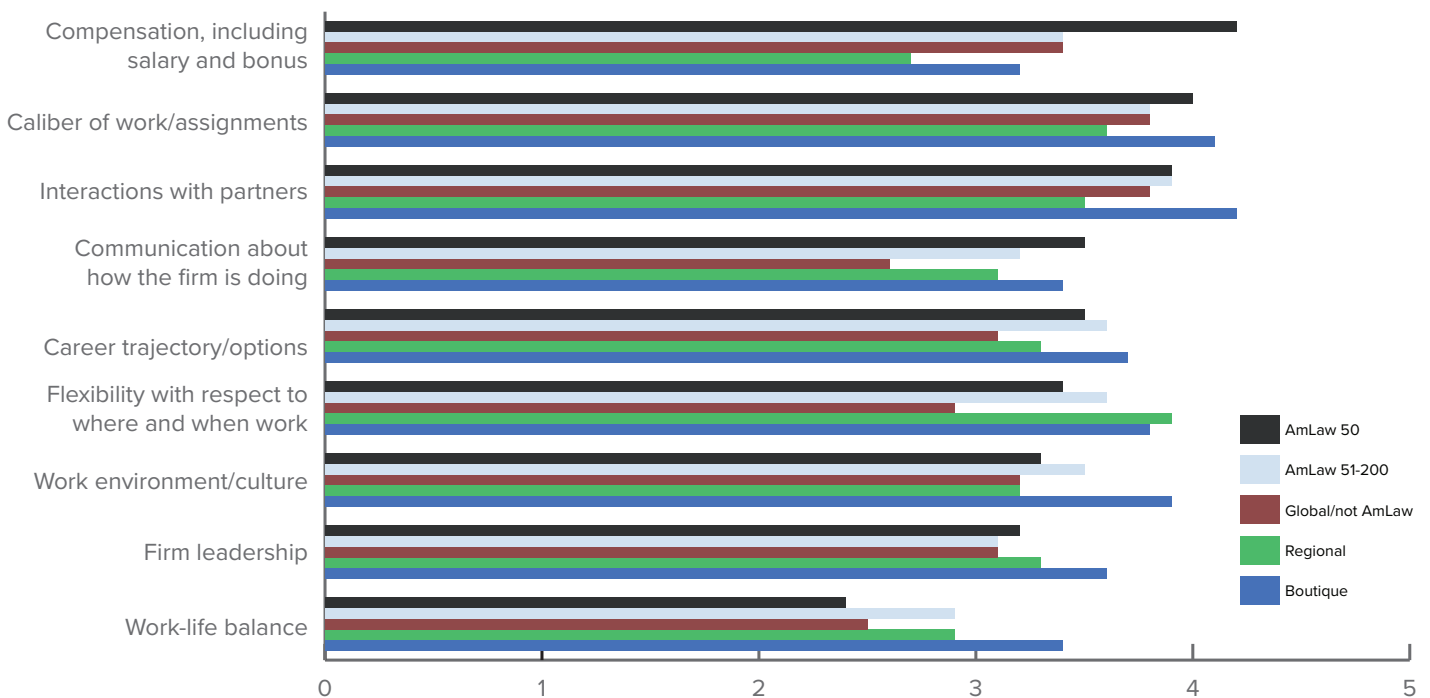
Take the money and run

Of all groups, associates at Am Law 50 firms are happiest with their compensation—by a significant margin. They are also among the most satisfied with the caliber of work, firm communication, and career options.

But of all the groups surveyed, they are the least satisfied with work-life balance, and they reported both the greatest loss of boundary between personal and work lives and the biggest increase in workload.

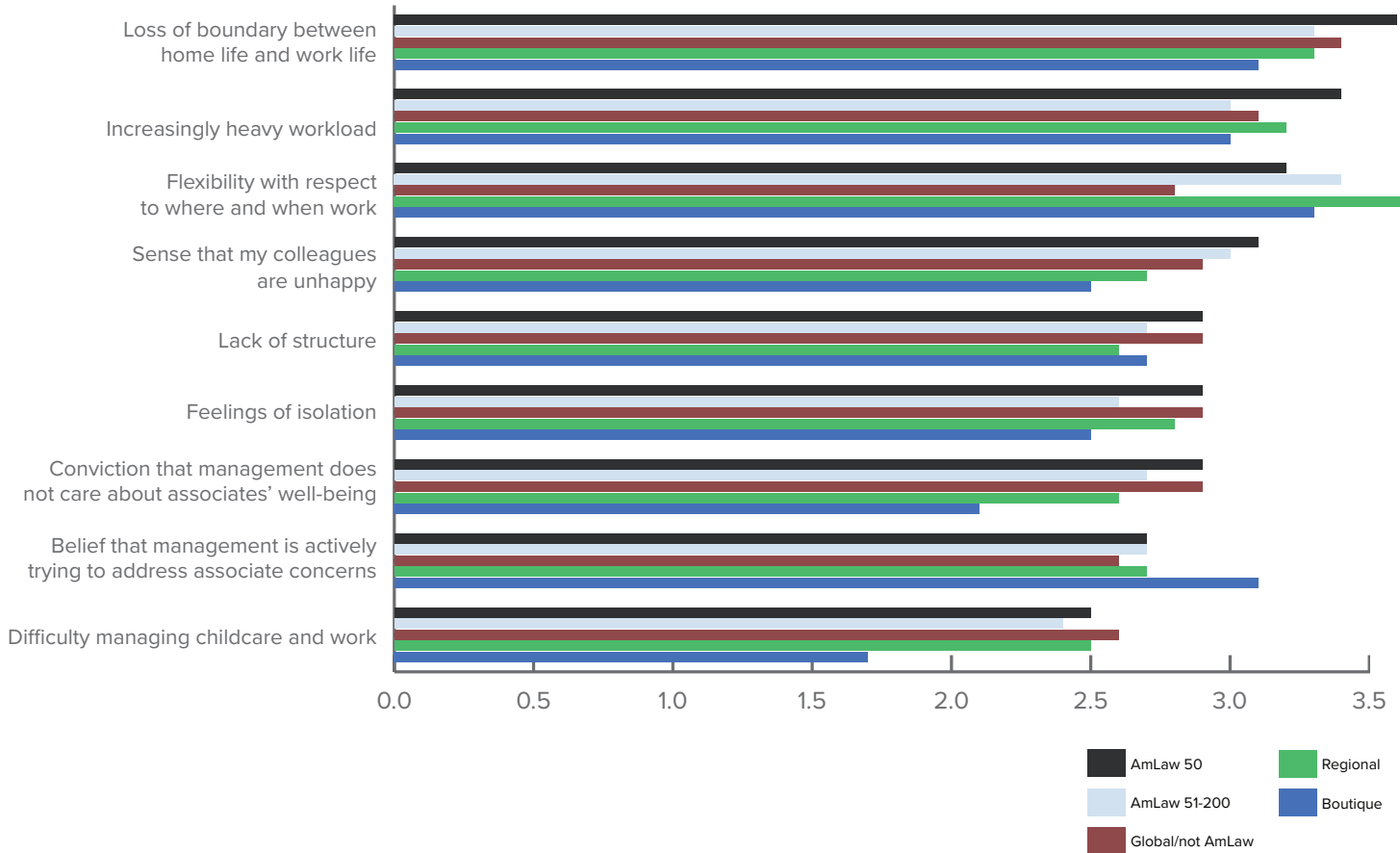
Associates at Am Law 50 firms are also among the most likely to say that their firm handled the pandemic “horribly” and the most convinced that management doesn’t care about their well-being and that their fellow associates are as unhappy as they are.

Satisfaction ratings, by type of firm



WHEN SIZE MATTERS

Issues experienced by associates, by type of firm



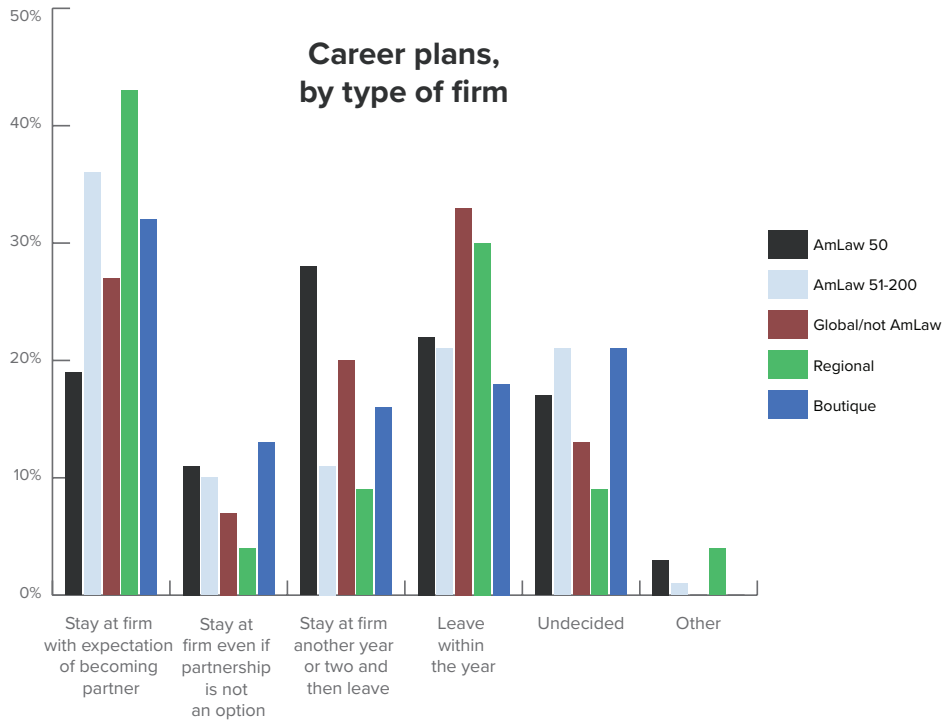
Many Am Law 50 respondents suggest that the leadership is out of touch with associate experiences. “We are way busier now than before the pandemic and, possibly because we haven’t been in-person for so long, partners don’t know what types of work associates are doing,” says one associate. “Most partners assume every associate has time to help with their deals and that is not the case.”

Another associate suggests that pre-existing problems simply became worse over the last two years: “Issues that were problematic before (overwork, lack of support, lack of mentorship) in the firm have now become ingrained as partners/senior associates do not see trainees/junior/mid-level associates on a regular basis, meaning interactions are exclusively professional and not informal.”

“The pandemic pulled the mask off of the ‘fancy,’ ‘prestigious’ jobs that I always thought I should want or should be embarrassed not to have—Biglaw is a glorified mill.”

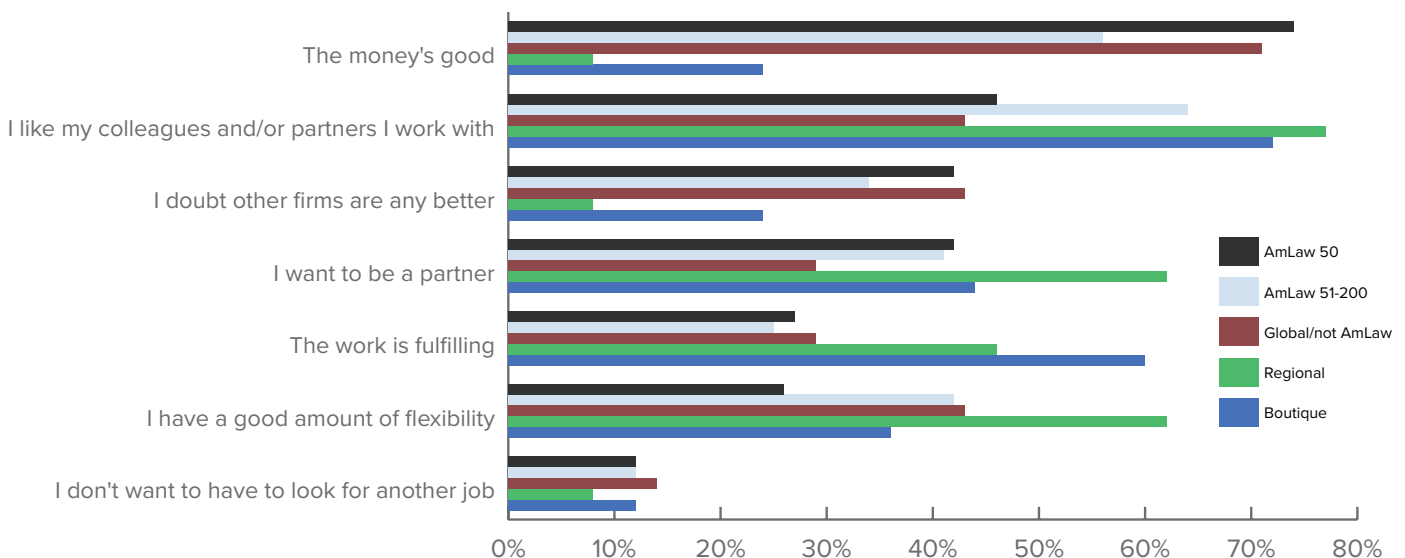
WHEN SIZE MATTERS

Even if their future prospects seem pretty bright, respondents at Am Law 50 firms are unlikely to see partnership at their current firm as part of that trajectory. Less than 20 percent of Am Law 50 respondents expect to stay and become partners. They are more likely planning to leave within the next couple of years.



Among those who do expect to remain, money is the primary motivation, cited by more than 70 percent of associates at Am Law 50 firms. “I like my colleagues and/or partners I work with” was selected by less than half of respondents, and fulfilling work was named by less than 30 percent.

Primary reasons associates remain at firm, by type of firm



WHEN SIZE MATTERS

Can't have it all

Associates at Am Law 200 firms ranked below the top 50 seem to be a little more satisfied than their counterparts at higher-ranked firms with respect to workload, boundaries, sense of isolation, firm culture, flexibility, and work-life balance.

Compensation ratings are, however, notably lower: on average, associates at Am Law 50 firms rated compensation 4.2, while those at Am Law 51-200 firms gave it 3.4. But for some, the trade-off is worth it. One respondent at an Am Law 51-200 firm reports that he “turned down offers from other firms with higher pay in order to stay with a team that cares about me.”

Others are less satisfied. “Firms who can afford to pay market but don't should realize that if everything else is equal, but an associate can make more money elsewhere to work the same amount of hours, they will leave. ‘Culture’ does not make up for under-compensation.”

While the money may not be the most convincing reason to stay, it is nonetheless a factor for more than half of respondents at Am Law 51-200 firms. Other reasons include appreciation for colleagues, partnership potential, and a good amount of flexibility. Yet, like Am Law 50 associates, relatively few respondents say they stay because they find the work fulfilling.

What's flexibility worth?

The highest rating for flexibility comes from associates at regional firms. These respondents are, however, significantly less satisfied with compensation than their peers at larger and smaller firms, and somewhat less happy with the caliber of work and their interactions with partners.

Many associates at regional firms are critical of the way their firm handled the pandemic; dislike of management and feeling disconnected from colleagues are frequently cited reasons among associates who plan to leave their firms.

The most common reason, however, is a belief that they can make more money elsewhere. One associate complained, “We got a lot of promises about yearly bonuses, raises, etc. before the pandemic that have never since materialized.” Asked what aspects they foresee improving soon, another associate responded, “Nothing, which is why tomorrow is my last day.” Many of those who plan to leave are opting for larger firms.

That said, regional law firms have the highest percentage of respondents (over 40 percent) who expect to become partners at their firms. And more than 70 percent cited appreciation for colleagues and partners as a reason for staying—far more than associates at the Am Law 50.

“Law firms outside the Am Law 100 need to stop focusing on profits so much. I'm convinced that lawyers can be both profitable and happy, but it's extremely hard to be profit-maximizing and happy. The focus on profit-maximization needs to change because the practice of law is becoming significantly less enjoyable.”

WHEN SIZE MATTERS

Let's get small

While their compensation score was the next-lowest after regional firms, associates at boutique firms gave the highest satisfaction ratings in nearly every other category—particularly partner interactions, work environment, and work-life balance, but also firm leadership, caliber of work, and career trajectory.

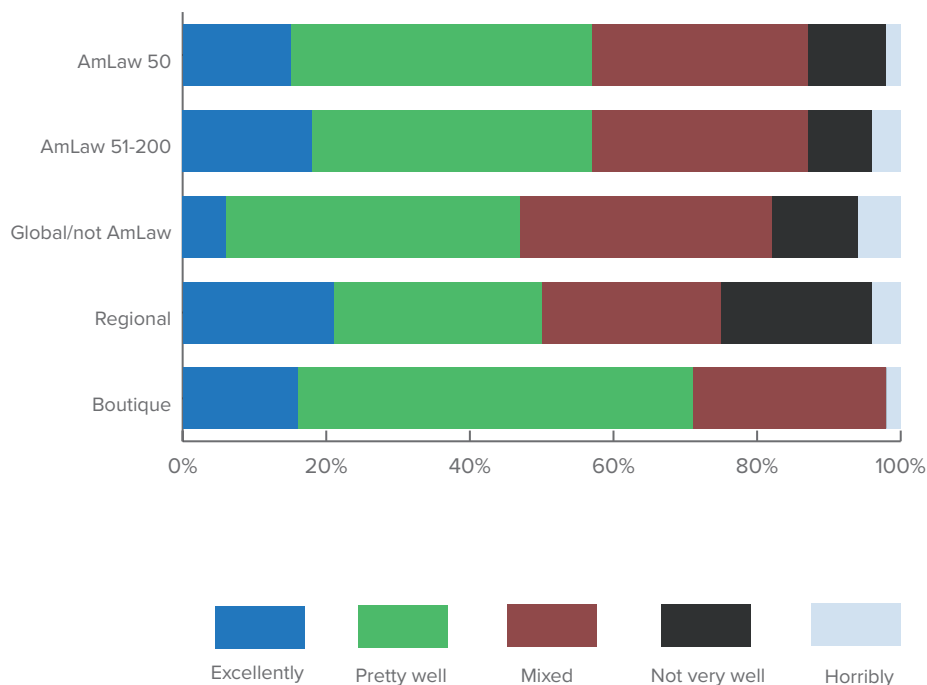
Boutiques also scored the highest among associates for their handling of the pandemic. “My firm was conservative about certain things but continued with business as basically normal,” reports one associate at a boutique firm. “The main difference is they now allow lawyers to work from home about as much as you want, which can be nice. [...] I had a normal summer associate experience (sans social events) during 2020 which was definitely not the experience of all of my peers.”

Boutique associates also have the strongest sense that management is actively trying to address their concerns and the most optimism about things improving. “Things look rosy for small law,” according to one respondent. “However, it appears to me that large firms and solos are crumbling.”

Among the different types of firms, associates at boutique firms are the least likely to be planning to leave within the year. For those who do want to leave, a bigger firm is as likely a choice as an in-house position.

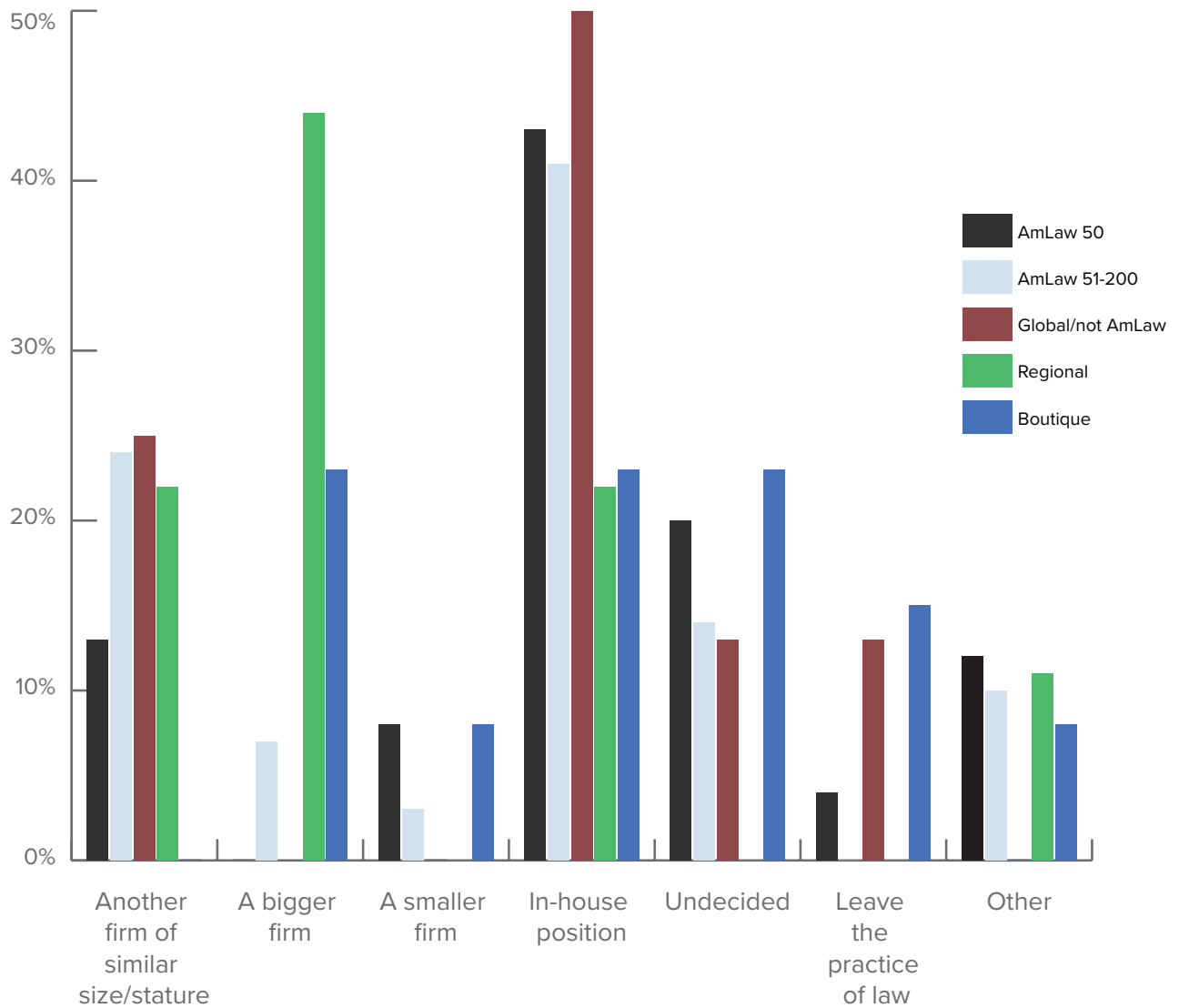
“I don't really think things need to improve. I'm very happy with the way things have been going for me!”

How firm has handled the pandemic, by type of firm



WHEN SIZE MATTERS

Where associates would go, by type of firm



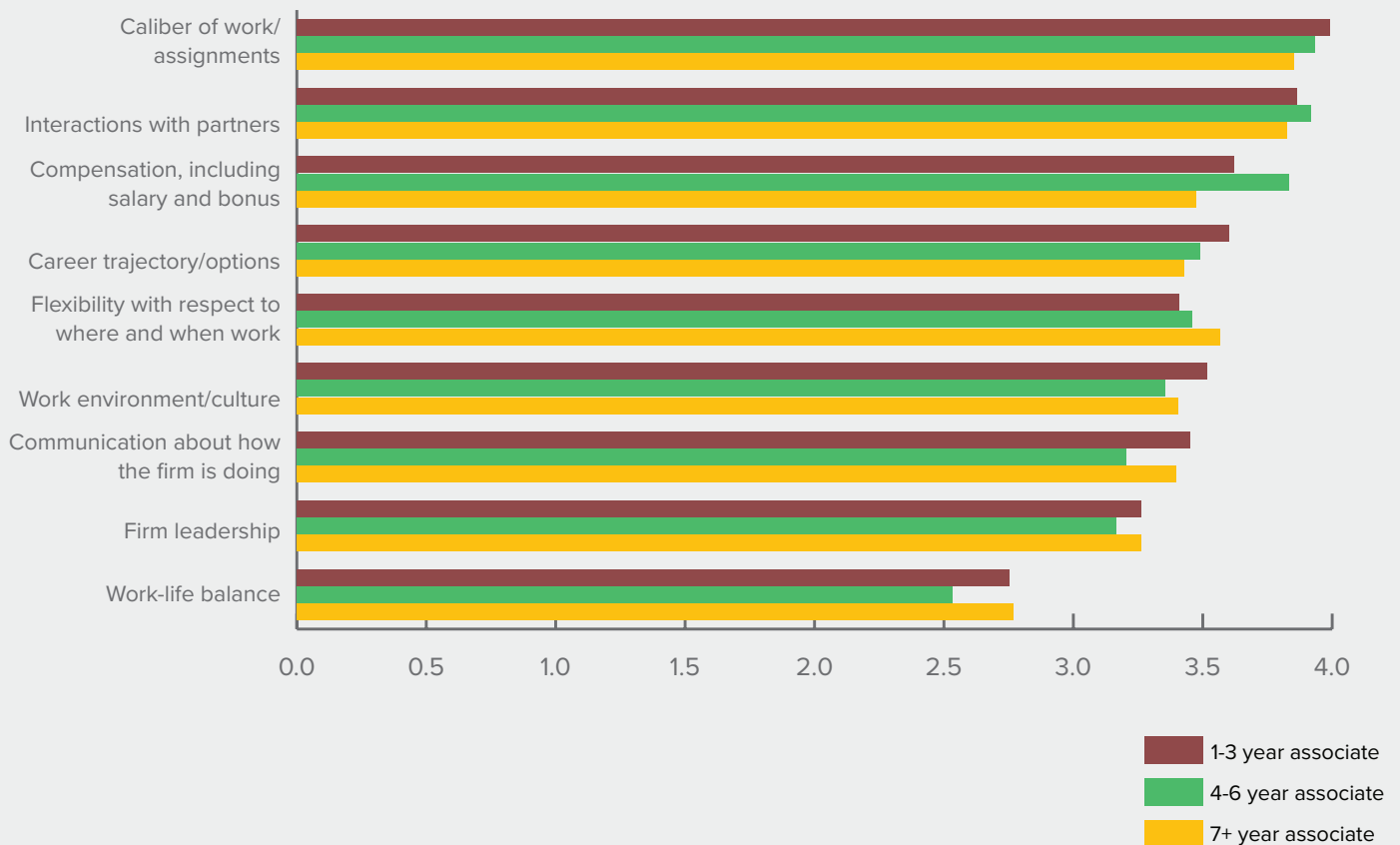
For those who plan to remain, the most common reason after appreciation for colleagues and partners is fulfilling work, cited by 60 percent of respondents. This contrasts strongly with the responses from associates at larger firms. Less than 30 percent of respondents at Am Law 50 or Am Law 51-200 firms chose “the work is fulfilling” as one of the primary factors keeping them at their firm.

MIDLEVEL CRISIS

The survey pool is relatively evenly divided by experience: 28 percent are juniors (1-3 year), 37 percent are midlevels (4-6 year), and 30 percent are seniors (7 years and above).

Of the three groups, midlevel associates are generally less happy than their more junior and senior peers—with the notable exceptions of compensation and, to a lesser degree, interactions with partners and caliber of work.

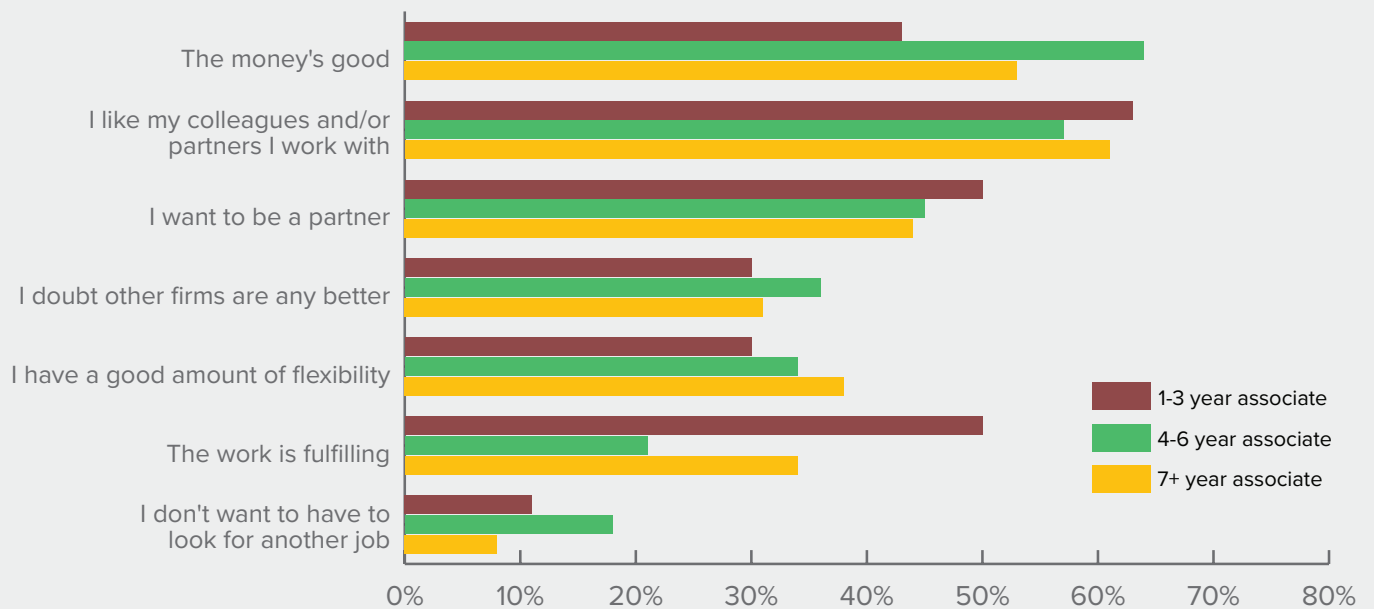
Satisfaction ratings, by level of experience



MIDLEVEL CRISIS

Midlevels rated compensation much higher than junior and senior associates, and compensation is the primary reason they gave for remaining at their firm.

Primary reasons associates remain at firm, by level of experience

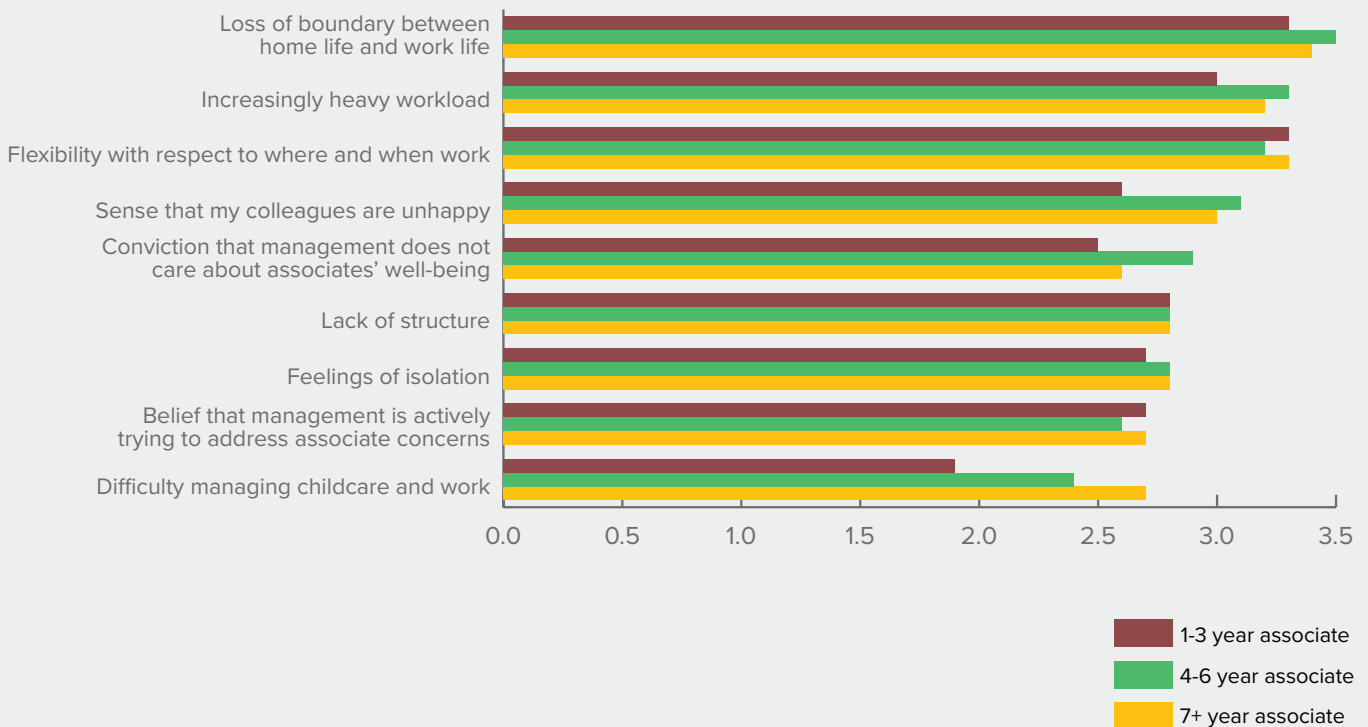


MIDLEVEL CRISIS

Can't buy me love

On the other hand, midlevel associates gave the lowest scores for firm culture, communication, leadership, and work-life balance. They also tend to experience work-related issues to a greater extent than juniors and seniors, including loss of boundary between home life and work life, increasingly heavy workload, sense that their colleagues are unhappy, and conviction that management doesn't care about their well-being. And they are more likely to say these experiences have become worse since the pandemic.

Issues experienced by associates, by level of experience



Many of the most negative remarks in the survey come from midlevel associates, who often focus on their firms' perceived failures to address their concerns. "There is no sense of community and associates are leaving in droves," reports one midlevel. "The firm doesn't seem to notice or do anything to address it."

"They (firms) are focused on 'issues' but not really the issues that matter to associates," explains another respondent. "We are working more, sleeping less, living our lives less all in the name of profit for others. Sure, we received raises and bonuses, but frankly, none of that is enough to change our lives in any meaningful way. I'd rather work 10 to 25 percent less and take an equal or larger pay cut. The expectations are unreasonable and any questions about them fall on deaf ears. No one really seems to be addressing real burnout, mental health issues and just completely unsustainable culture that is big law; no one can work 2,500-3,000 hours a year and still have a long, happy, fulfilling life."

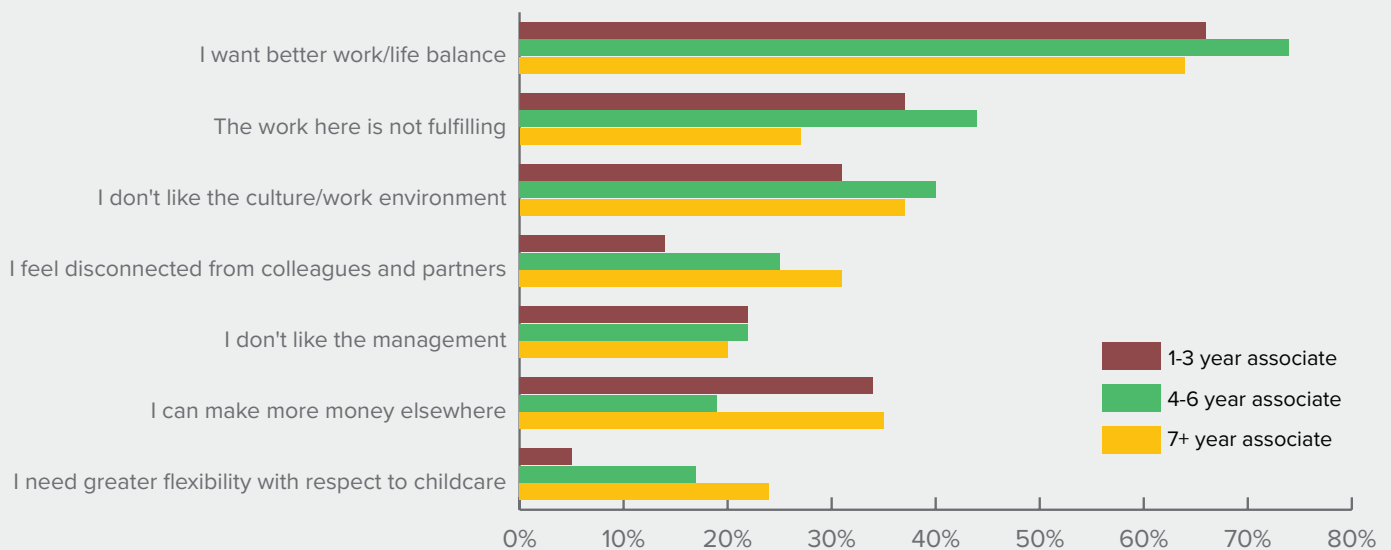
MIDLEVEL CRISIS

“I don’t know a single happy associate”

While desire for better work-life balance is the most common reason for all associates to leave their firms, it is cited most frequently by midlevels, who also often say the work is not fulfilling and they don’t like the culture. In the words of one midlevel, associates are “tired, overworked, and belittled by a false gospel of self-care.”

Another explains that, as bad as things are, they were even worse pre-pandemic when there was no option for remote work: “I don’t think the pandemic made things worse—there were no boundaries before. If anything, WFH made this job much more manageable. Taking that away and minimizing its value has made me and others reconsider how much longer we really want to stay at the firm.”

Primary motivations for leaving firm, by level of experience



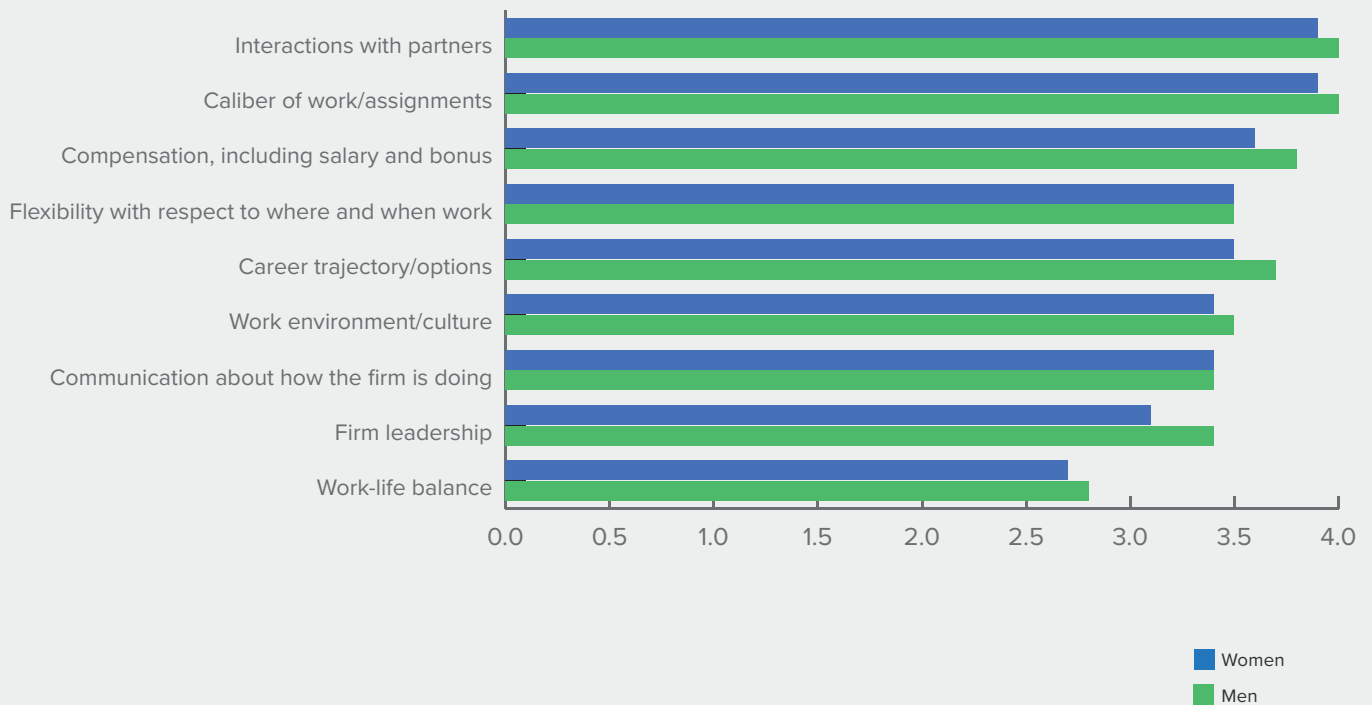
The feeling of burnout is palpable among many respondents. “I don’t know a single happy associate at my top 10 white shoe law firm,” an associate told us. “Overall,” explains one respondent, “there is a general consensus among associates that we are burnt out and that there is no reprieve in sight. There is no work-life balance, and most associates are contemplating leaving the firm.”

GENDER GAP

The survey results underscore a clear gender divide when it comes to associates' satisfaction with their jobs and career outlooks.

Female associates rated every satisfaction category lower than male associates. The widest gaps are with respect to compensation, career trajectory, firm leadership, and caliber of work.

Satisfaction ratings, by gender



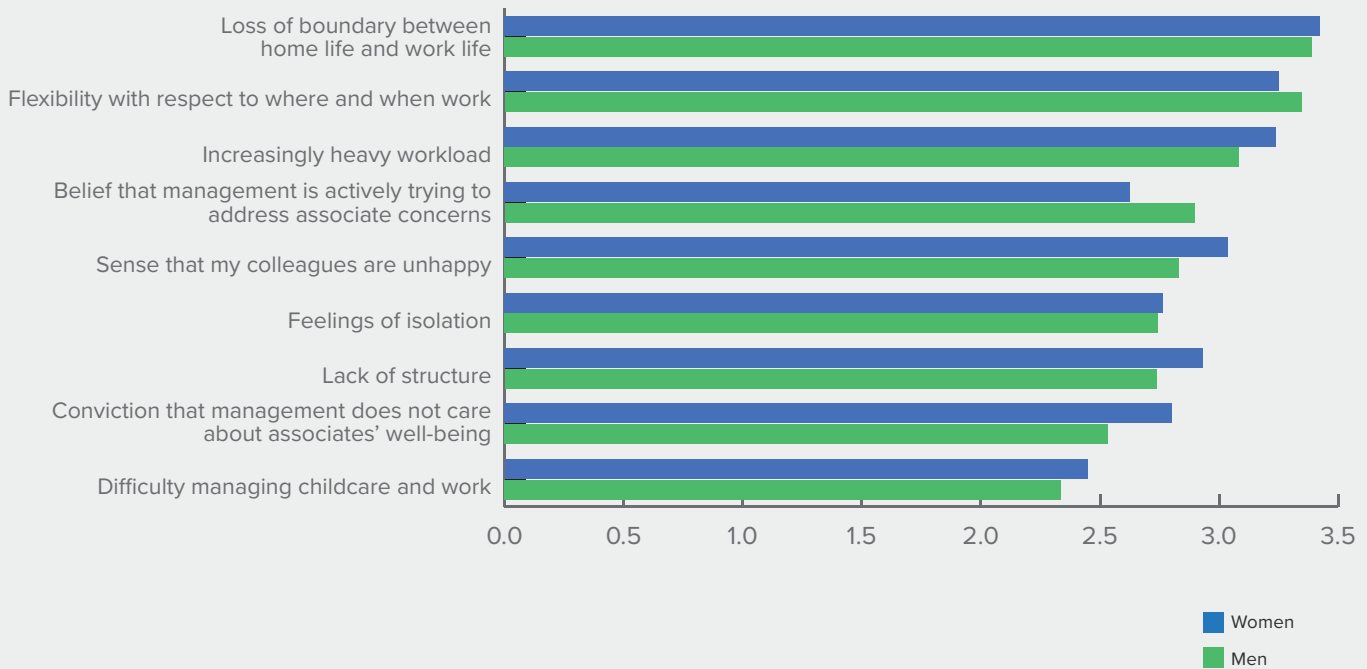
GENDER GAP

“That’s how this business is”

Women also reported experiencing the highest levels of negative workplace issues, including an increasingly heavy workload, loss of boundary between home and work, feelings of isolation, sense that colleagues are unhappy, and especially a conviction that management doesn’t care about associate well-being. By contrast, male associates generally have a stronger belief that management is actively trying to address associate concerns.

One female associate said, “I have raised my concerns to a couple of partners and have been told some version of ‘that’s how this business is.’” Asked how she thinks her fellow associates feel about their experiences, another respondent told us, “They all left. Pretty sure they weren’t happy. Now I am not happy.”

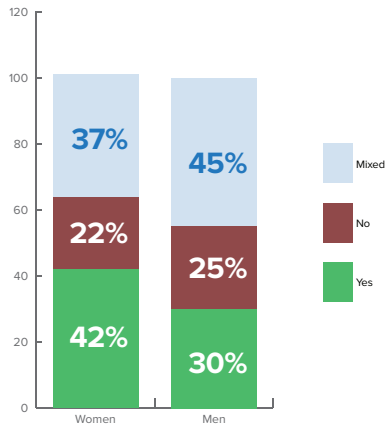
Issues experienced by associates, by gender



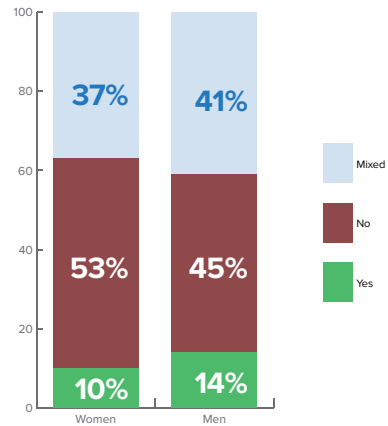
More women than men believe things are worse since the pandemic, and they are less likely to foresee any improvement soon. “I don’t see anything improving,” said one female respondent. “This is a partner-centric firm not concerned with associate desires.” According to another, “Other than young children turning five and getting vaccinated, I’m not sure firm culture or the billable hour is changing. We have support networks and flexible options, but the latter come with decreases in pay and a real hit to your career path.”

GENDER GAP

Are issues worse since the pandemic?



Do you foresee these things improving soon?

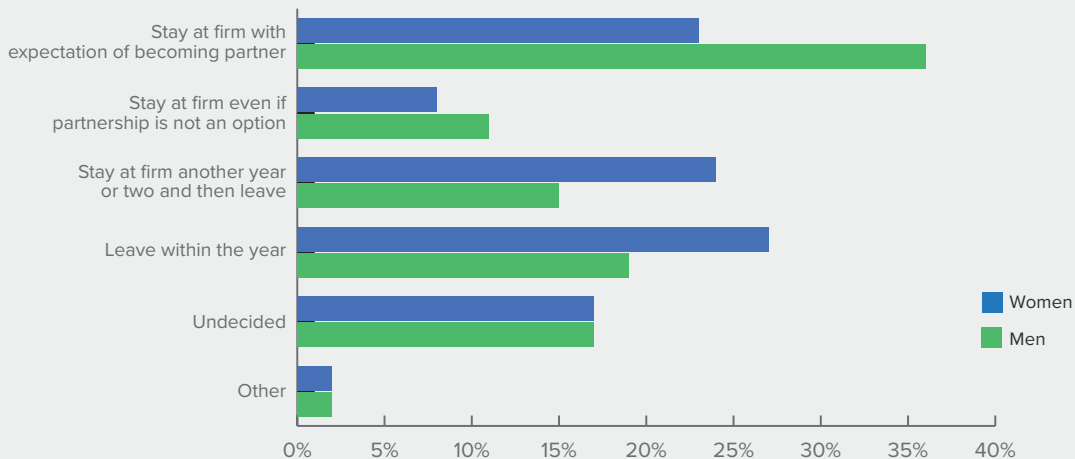


Still, some women voiced hopes that increased revenue and hiring will mean the “potential alleviation of high work burden.” “We’ve been growing,” says one associate, “and I think the work pressures will ease up this year.”

One foot out the door

One of the biggest differentiators for who plans to become a partner and who plans to leave is gender. More than 35 percent of male associates want to stay at their current firm to make partner, but only 23 percent of women do. More than 50 percent of women plan to leave either within the year or within the next couple of years, compared to 34 percent of men.

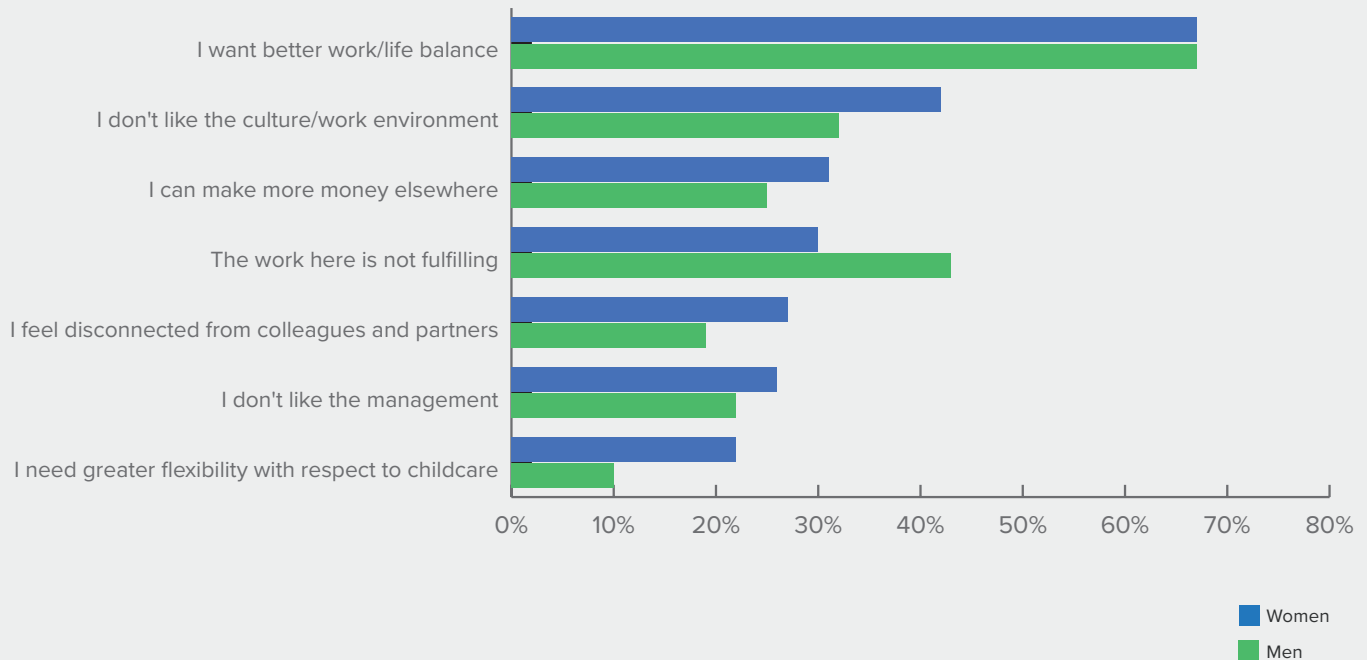
Career plans, by gender



Although both men and women named a desire for better work-life balance most often as a reason to leave, male associates were much more likely to cite unfulfilling work, while dislike of the culture or firm management was named by more women.

GENDER GAP

Primary motivations for leaving firm, by gender



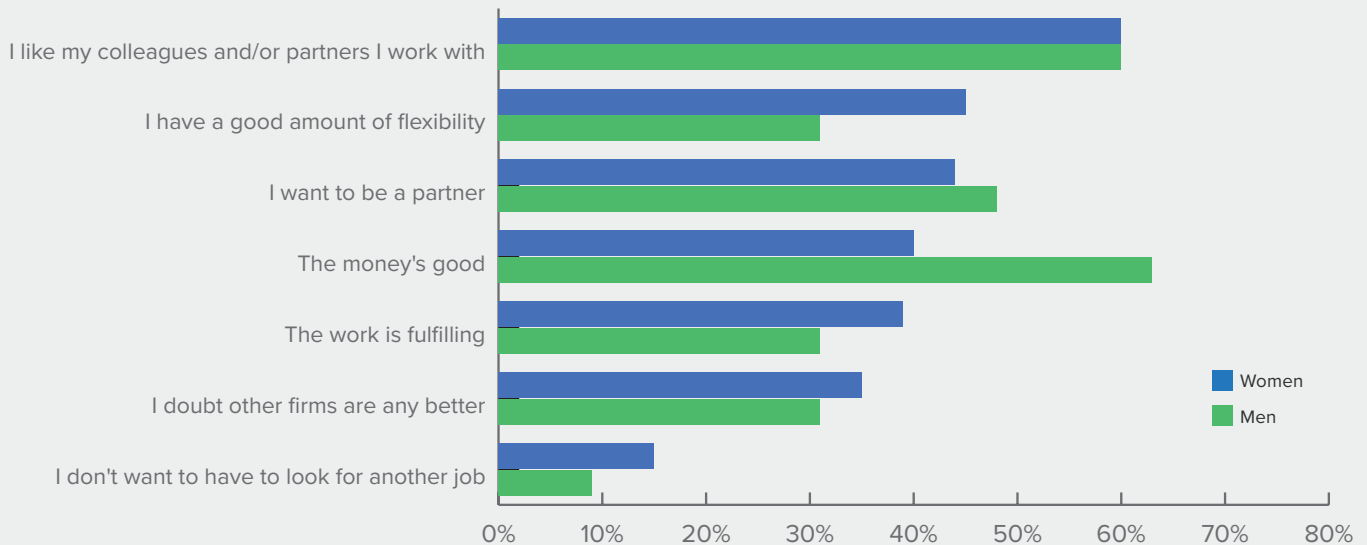
Childcare issues were also identified by twice as many women as men, and a number of female respondents specifically addressed the challenges faced by working parents and the seeming indifference on the part of their firms. “Several male associates seem fine going back to office,” said one respondent, “but most of the female associates I have spoken with have discussed seeking a different job if required to go back to office because of family obligations that are more easily dealt with by a flexible work-from-home schedule.”

“I don’t know of any mothers who have not left the firm or gone part-time.”

“I am a working mother,” another associate told us. “At the start of the pandemic, my son was just over one year old. Childcare became unavailable. I destroyed my health trying to keep things going for the firm, while also taking care of a small child. Of course, I didn’t make my hours, but I also kept clients and colleagues happy. The firm had its best financial year ever. I received neither a raise nor a bonus when 2021 comp was set based on 2020 performance. The entire world knows what happened to working mothers with very young children during the pandemic. After [more than a decade] of service for below-market pay, there was no need to slap me in the face like that.”

GENDER GAP

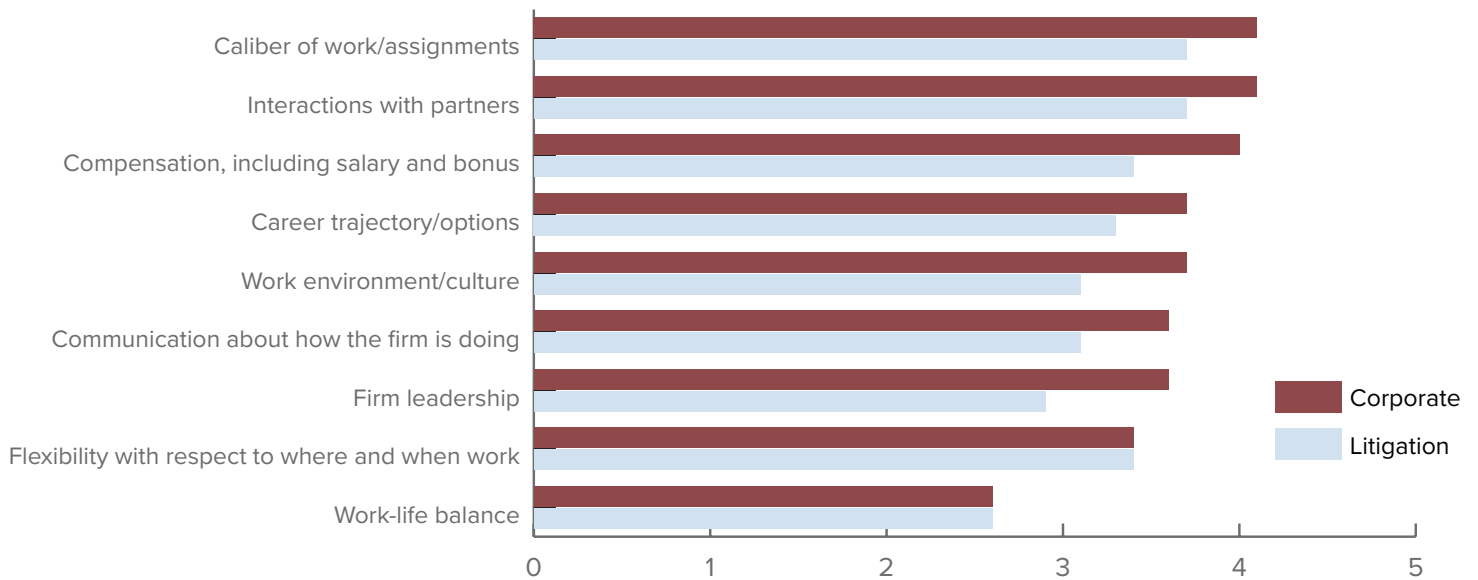
Primary reasons associates remain at firm, by gender



There are also gender differences in the reasons associates choose to remain at their firms. While appreciation for colleagues is a strong motivating factor among both men and women, money and partnership prospects are more likely to keep male respondents at their firms than female respondents. Proportionately more women than men cited flexibility, fulfilling work, and doubt that other firms are better as reasons to stay where they are.

NO PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Satisfaction ratings, by practice area



Corporate vs litigation

Corporate and litigation are the most common practice areas among associates surveyed. Within corporate, most associates work in M&A or private equity.

Corporate associates had some of the highest satisfaction ratings among all practice groups, but the contrasts are especially sharp compared to responses from litigators.

Corporate associates are most satisfied with the caliber of work, interactions with partners, and compensation. They are, however, less satisfied with work-life balance, the only area in which their average rating falls below 3.0. “There is no end to the work,” laments one corporate respondent.

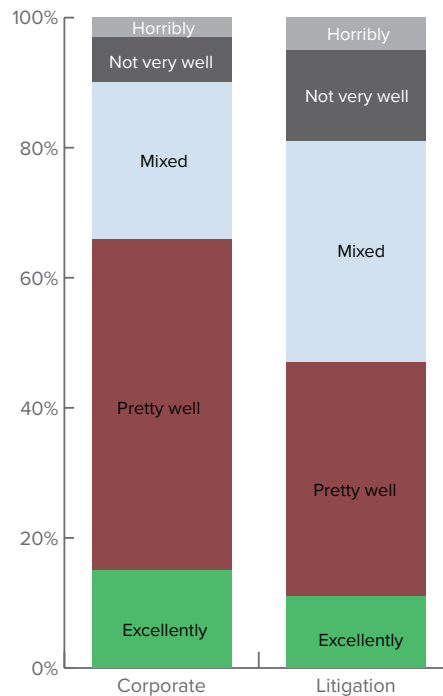
By contrast, litigation has many of the lowest ratings, including for firm leadership, firm communication, and work environment. In these areas, as well as in compensation, litigation associates’ scores are more than half a point lower than those of corporate respondents. The only two categories in which the average scores from corporate and litigation associates come close are flexibility and work-life balance.

NO PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

“We are all unhappy”

Litigators were the least positive about their firms’ handling of the pandemic—less than half of respondents said their firm handled it “pretty well” or “excellently,” and one in five said “horribly” or “not very well.”

How firm has handled the pandemic



The extent to which associates experience negative workplace issues is also higher among litigators than corporate attorneys, particularly with respect to feelings of isolation, lack of structure, sense of colleagues’ unhappiness, and the conviction management doesn’t care about associates’ well-being. Corporate associates, on the other hand, have greater belief that management is actively trying to address associate concerns.

There is a “lack of meaningful action on associate issues,” complains one litigation associate. And according to another, it “doesn’t seem like enough is being done to ensure junior associates get the training and experience they need to progress at the appropriate pace.”

NO PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Issues experienced by associates, by practice area



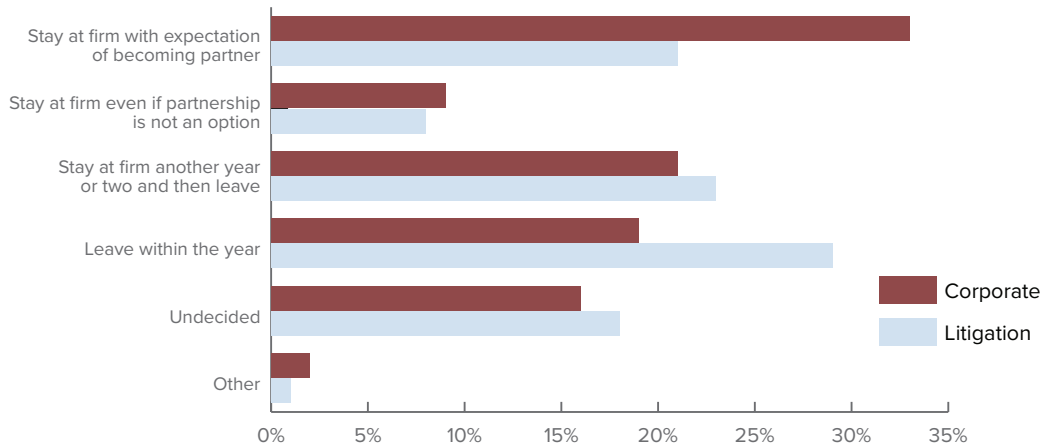
“We are working more, sleeping less”

Corporate associates are more likely to foresee partnership in their future, while litigators are more likely planning to leave.

“There is a general consensus that everyone is overworked, and that the Biglaw raises (although appreciated) are not the solution,” explains one litigation associate. “There also seems to be agreement that the older partners and office management are unaware of the job market realities, and do not understand the plethora of options available even to the most junior of associates.”

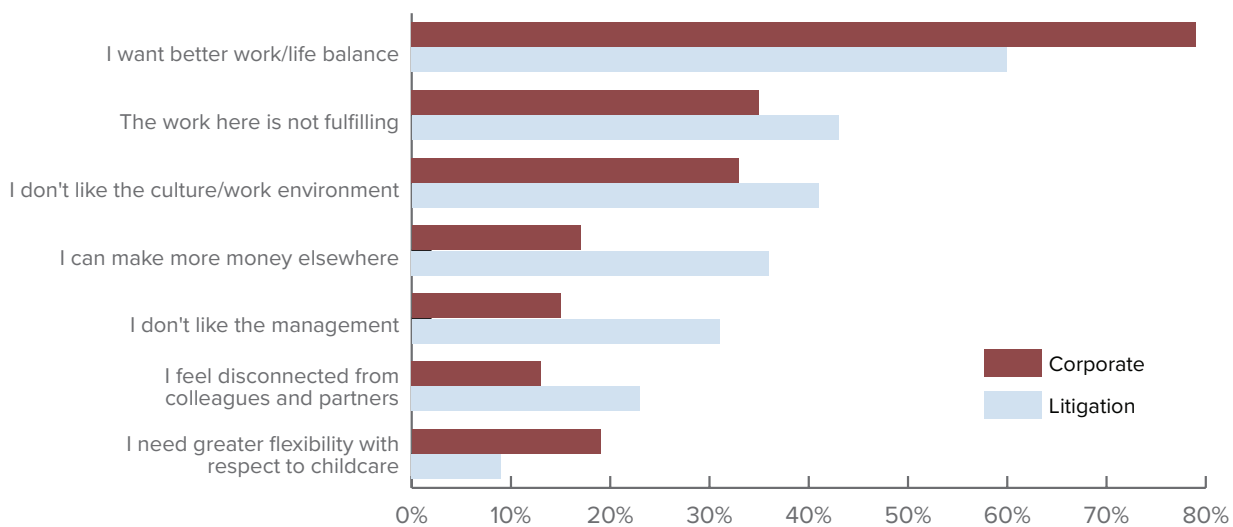
NO PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Career plans, by practice area



While no one is very satisfied with their work-life balance, corporate associates seem to feel it more keenly—or at least to consider it an impetus for changing jobs. Almost 80 percent of corporate attorneys who said they plan to leave their firms named the desire for better work-life balance as a primary motivation.

Primary motivations for leaving, by practice area

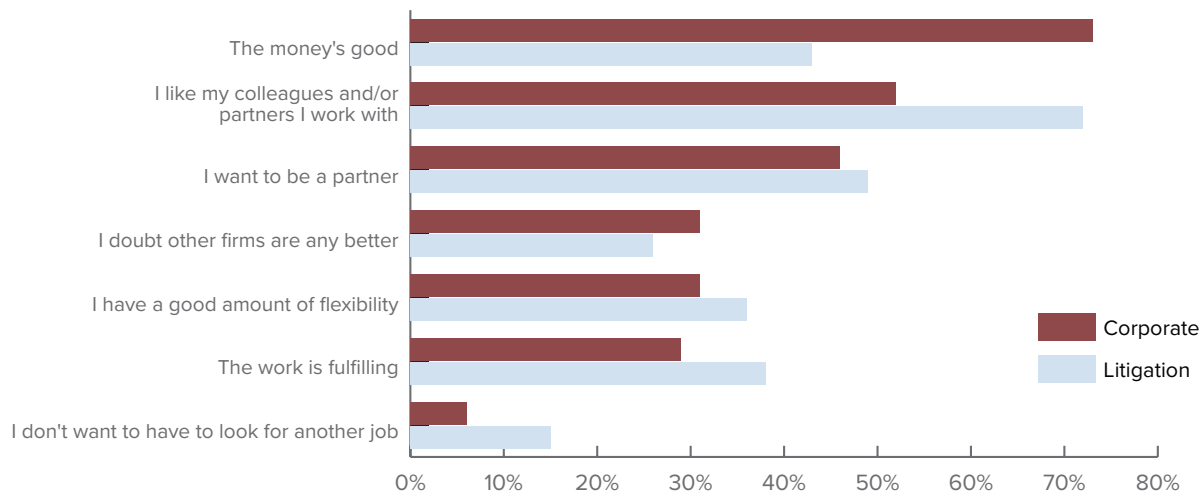


NO PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

But more litigators than corporate respondents identified unfulfilling work, dislike of the culture and/or management, disconnection from colleagues, and the opportunity to make more money elsewhere as primary motivations for leaving.

On the flip side, more than 70 percent of litigation associates who plan to stay at their firms said it is their colleagues that keeps them there, compared to just over half of corporate lawyers. For corporate associates who plan to remain, money is, by far, the most common reason.

Primary reasons associates remain, by practice area



LATERAL MOVES HAVE PAID OFF FOR SOME

Just over half of associates who took part in the survey joined their current firm as a lateral hire. For the most part, associates who lateraled to their current firm gave higher satisfaction ratings than those who started at their firms either right after law school or following a clerkship.

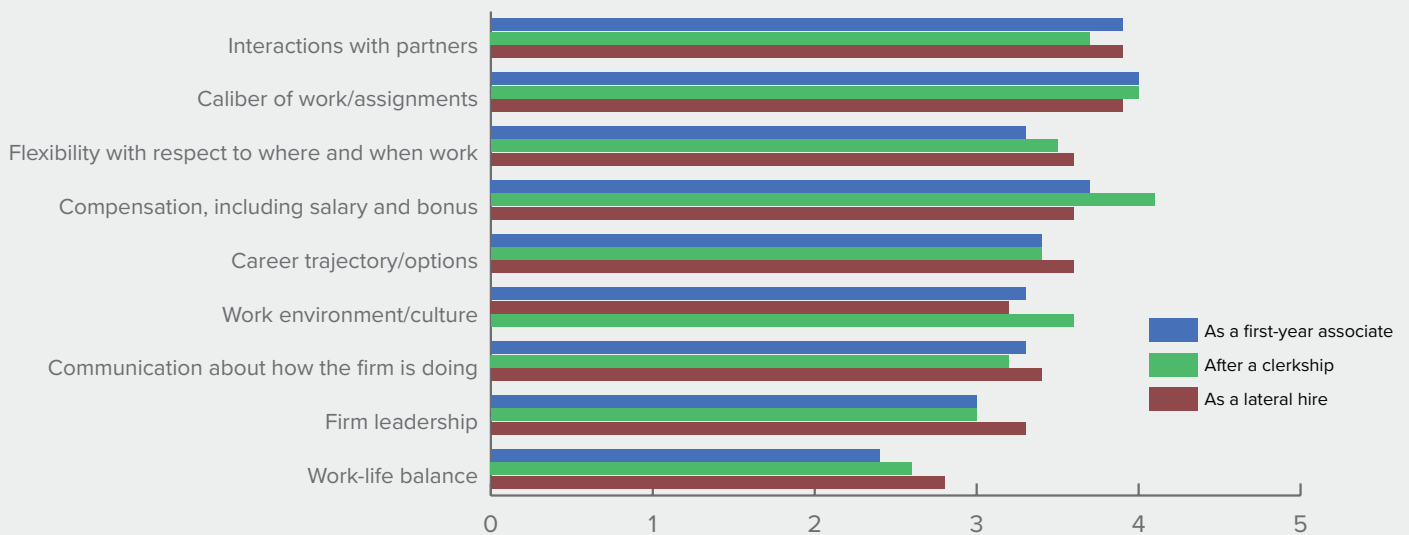
“The second firm is always going to be better”

Laterals have the most positive view of their firms’ handling of the pandemic and are also the most optimistic about things improving. They reported higher levels of flexibility than other associates and have the strongest belief that their firm’s management is actively trying to address associate concerns.

Some respondents who switched firms recently did so specifically because they felt their previous firm was responding inadequately to the realities of the pandemic.

“I moved firms in February 2022 in part because my prior firm did not have a great plan during the pandemic and there was a big breakdown of communication,” reports one associate. “The new firm I’m at is a cultural match. I still work the same hours, but I’m willing to do it for a firm that cares.”

Satisfaction ratings, by when associates joined firm



LATERAL MOVES HAVE PAID OFF FOR SOME

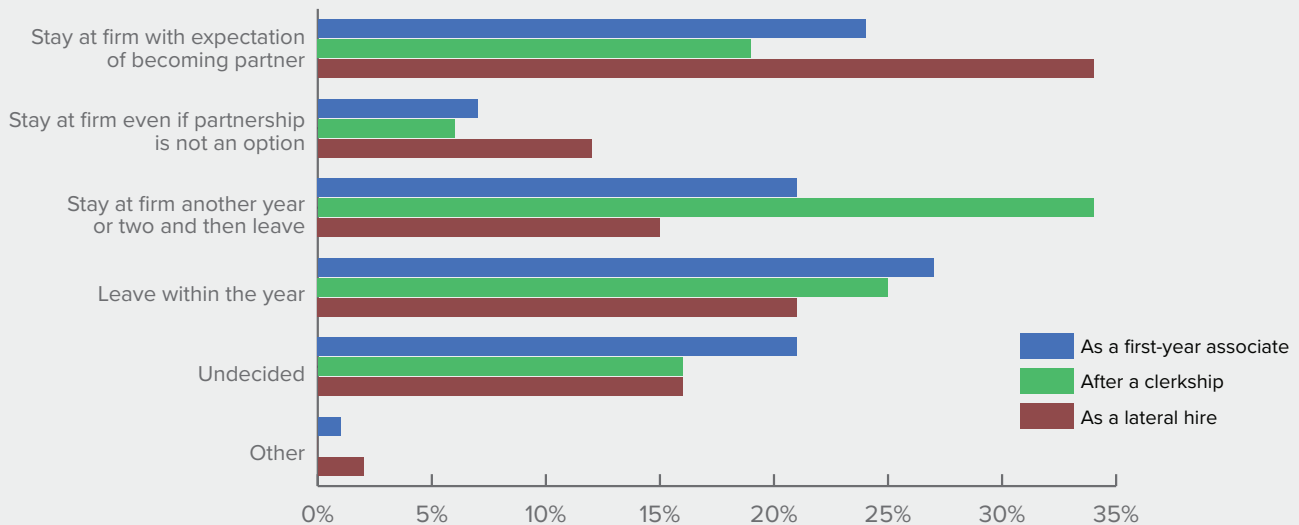
Those who joined their firm as laterals are the most likely to plan to stay to become partner and the least likely to plan to leave in the next few years. According to some associates, that’s because their research and experience have paid off. “When I moved firms,” one respondent explains, “I was very selective in the interview process and wanted to make sure my values aligned. This firm goes into the office on the same days, so there’s great communication and teamwork.” As another associate says, “The second firm is always going to be better than your first. You know so much more about how to navigate law, prioritize, create boundaries, etc.”

Some of the laterals who downsized from larger firms seem to be particularly happy with their choices—or at least relieved to have escaped a harsher world. “Biglaw blows,” declares one associate. “Small law and practicing in less-than-sexy places (rural areas, smaller cities) offers associates who seek client-centered work a lot of opportunity to build their own practices.”

“BigLaw blows.”

Another respondent finds that “plaintiff side is so much more humane and fulfilling than the defense side, even when the hours are similar. The attorneys/culture is also so much more humane. It’s a night and day difference from big law.”

Career plans, by when associates joined firm



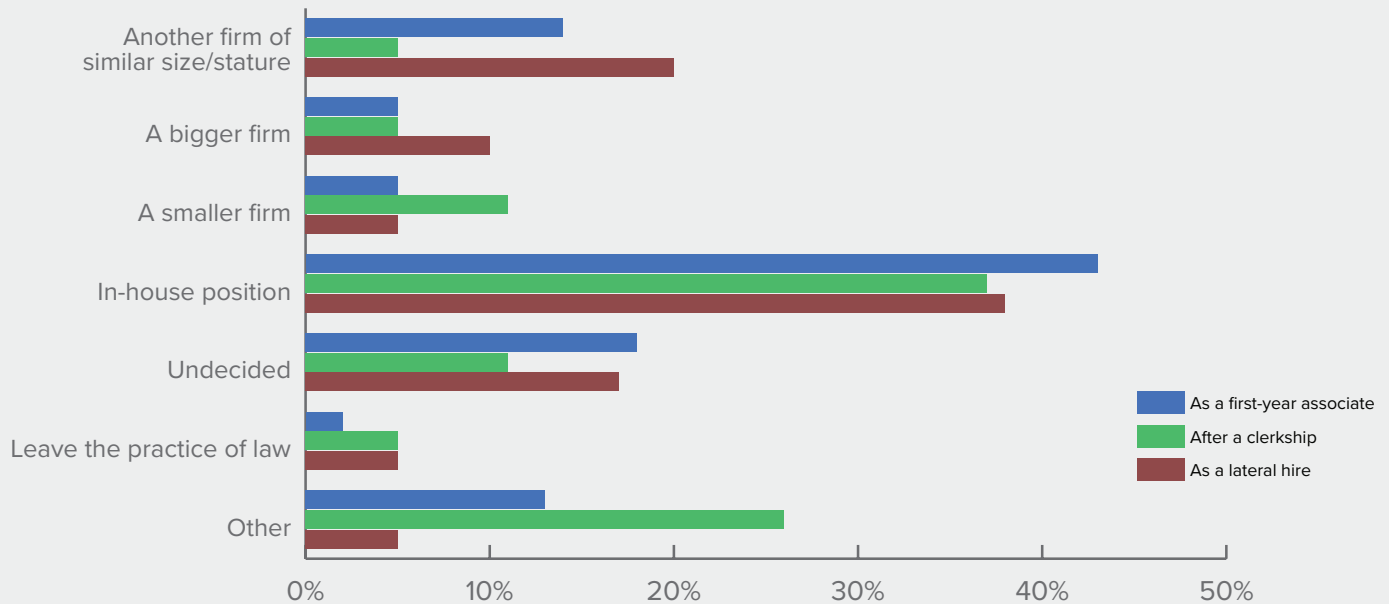
LATERAL MOVES HAVE PAID OFF FOR SOME

Still haven't found what they're looking for

Still, the grass isn't always greener, some associates are finding—or at least it is green only in patches. “I came from Biglaw last year and things are much better,” says one lateral. “But we are having trouble hiring and it's making the promised work-life balance a bit more out of reach than expected.”

In fact, more than a third of laterals don't plan to stay at their current firms, and one in five of those associates intends to move to another firm of similar size or stature.

Where they would go, by when associates joined firm



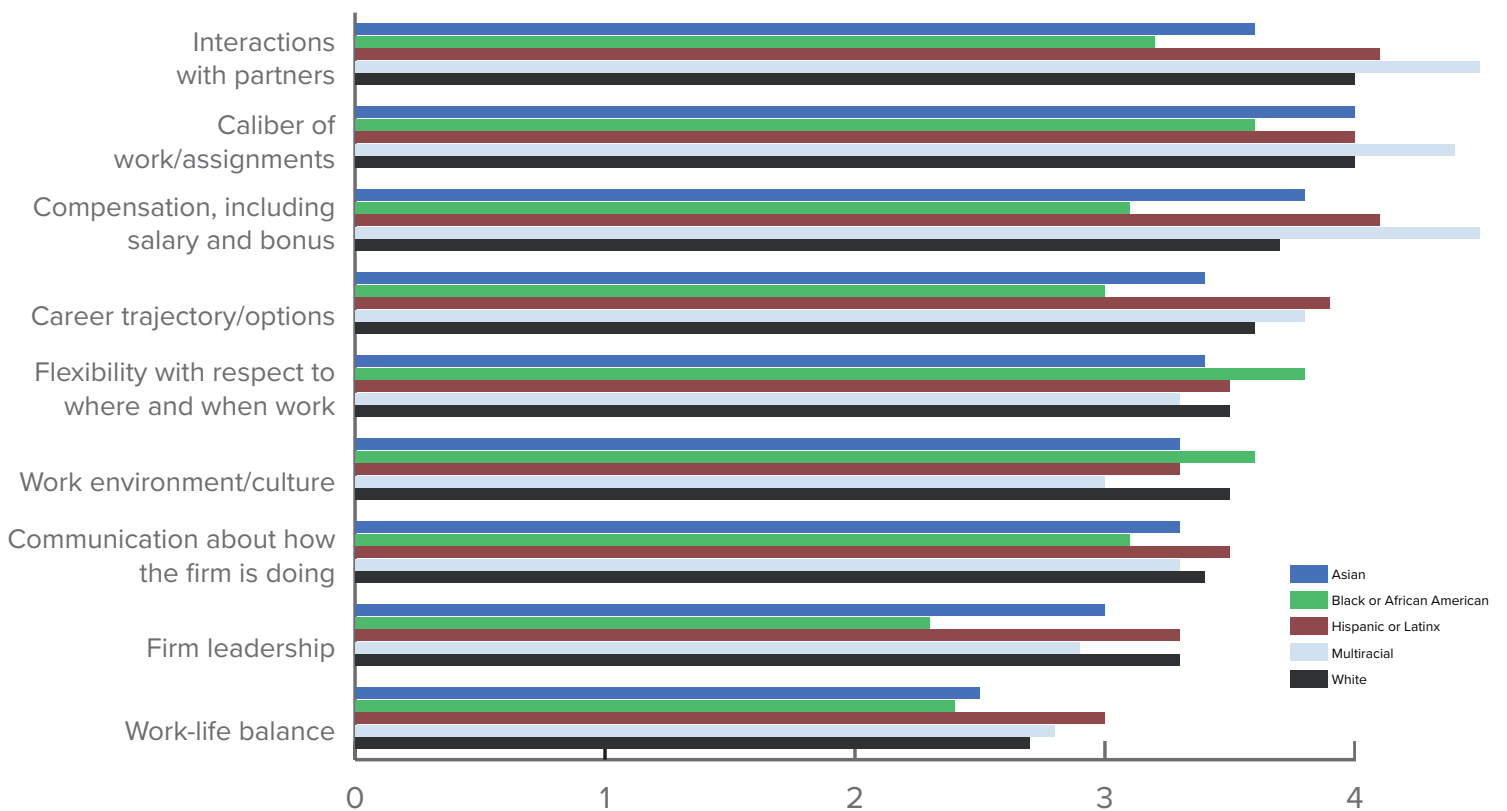
Associates' criteria for a new employer may encompass specific requirements for the new normal. As one associate who joined their current firm as a lateral explains, “If I lateral or change jobs, I would look for a fully remote position or one with no in-office requirement (even if there are expectations that I be in person occasionally, i.e. 1-2 times a month).”

RACIAL DISPARITIES

Of the associates who chose to identify their race or ethnicity, almost 80 percent identified as white. While the number of responses from people of color is relatively small, the results—which suggest lower levels of satisfaction within certain racial/ethnic minority groups—are in line with other studies which have found higher rates of attrition among attorneys of color.

Compared with other racial/ethnic groups, Black associates gave the lowest satisfaction scores almost across the board—particularly with respect to partner interactions, compensation, career trajectory, firm leadership, and communication. The only areas in which their ratings topped those of their peers are flexibility and work environment.

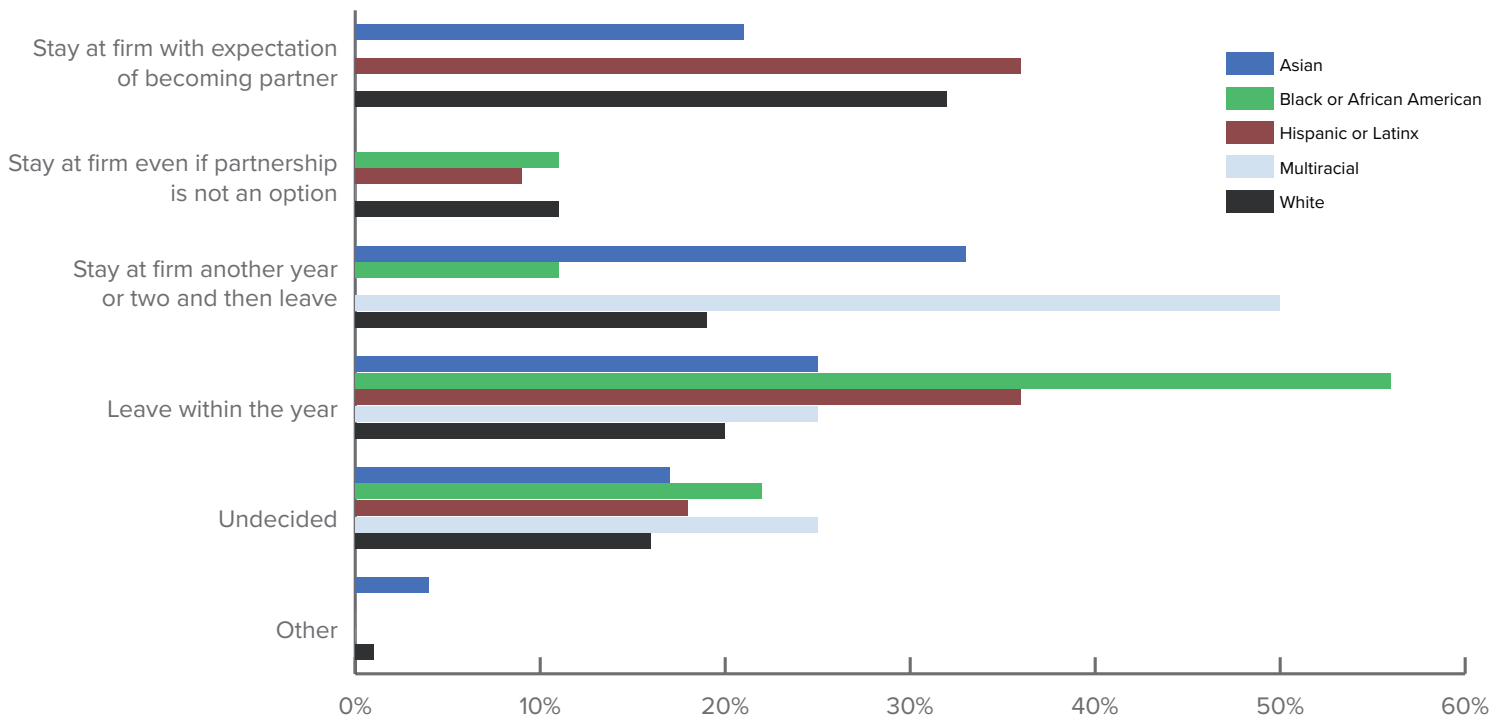
Satisfaction ratings, by race/ethnicity



RACIAL DISPARITIES

More than half of Black associates said they expect to leave their firms within the year, and none said they plan to stay to make partner. According to one Black respondent, “I am mostly isolated, and there is a dysfunctional management structure.”

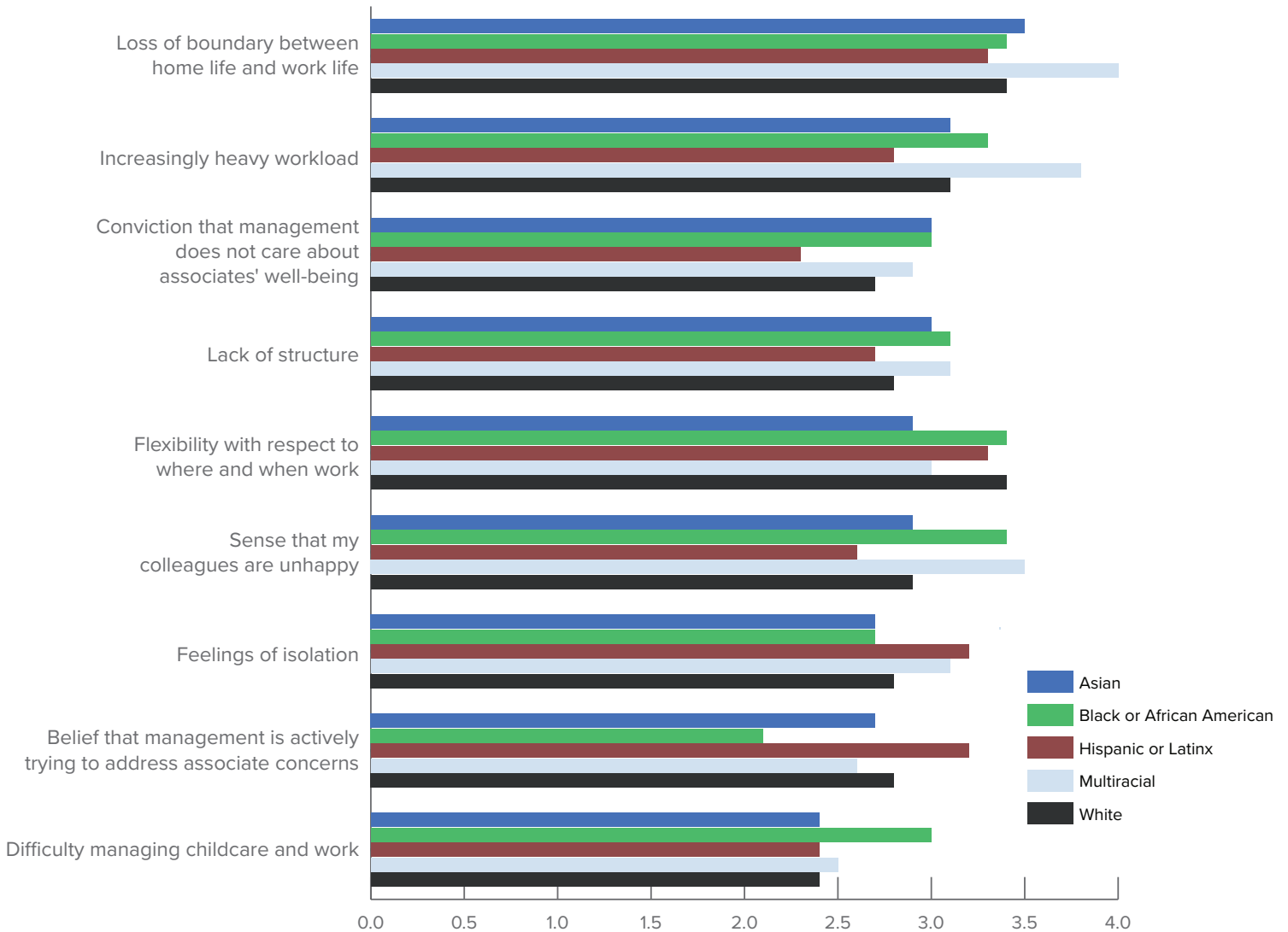
Career plans, by race/ethnicity



While associates who identified as multiracial gave the highest scores for partner interactions and compensation, they also reported the most loss of boundary between home and work life, greatest increase in workload, and deepest sense that their colleagues are unhappy. Half of multiracial respondents said they plan to remain at their firms only another year or two before leaving, and none anticipates sticking around for partnership.

RACIAL DISPARITIES

Issues experienced by associates, by race/ethnicity

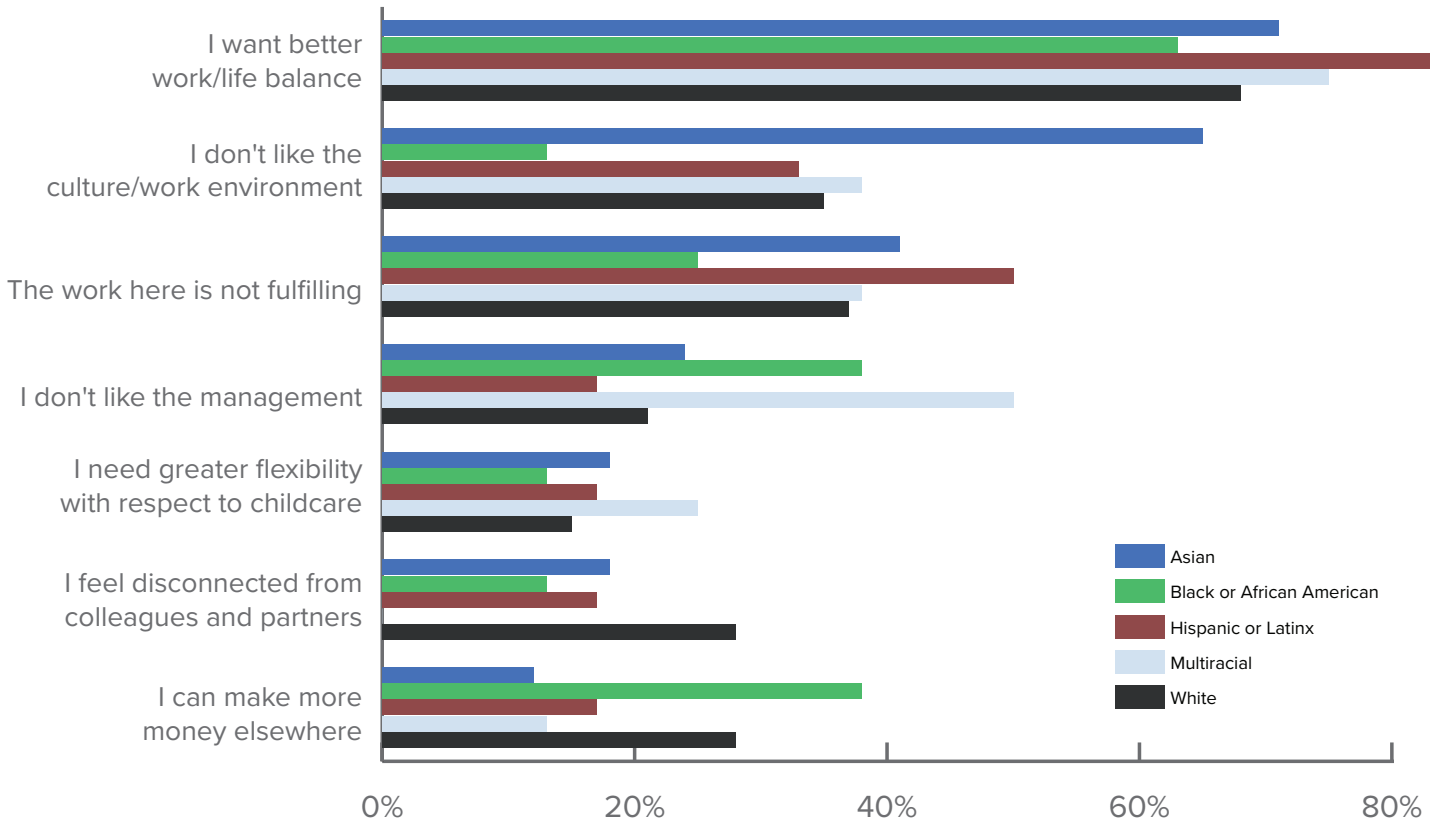


The strongest ratings for career trajectory, firm communication, and work-life balance came from Hispanic and Latinx attorneys. They are also the group that is most convinced that management is actively trying to address associate concerns.

Along with white associates, Hispanic and Latinx respondents were the most likely to cite partnership as their career goal—although the same number said they plan to leave their firm within the year.

RACIAL DISPARITIES

Primary motivations for leaving, by race/ethnicity



Just over 20 percent of Asian respondents expect to make partner at their firm, but a higher proportion plan to stay for just another year or two and then leave. After work-life balance, the most common reason for leaving is dislike of the culture, cited by 65 percent of Asian respondents, a far higher percentage than any other group.

IS THIS ALL THERE IS?

On the one hand, associates report reasonable levels of satisfaction with certain aspects of their jobs—including the caliber of work, interactions with partners, and (at least in Biglaw) their compensation—as well as some appreciation for the difficulties faced by their firms’ leadership over the last few years.

On the other, many evince frustration with ever-growing workloads, a disappearing distinction between home and office, and an unwillingness on the part of management to hear—much less address—associate concerns. Respondents refer frequently to “burnout” and a “mass exodus” of colleagues. “The first firm that figures out how to treat associates like the assets they are will have a recruiting bonanza,” declares one associate.

“The partners do not look happy”

Relatively few respondents plan to stay at their firms to become partners. Some of that may simply reflect the structural reality of law firms, where there just isn’t room for every associate to join the partner ranks, but it also suggests a certain disillusionment with the goal of partnership—and in fact the whole world of Biglaw.

“I’m one of many associates that are choosing not to be partners,” one respondent told us. “I know I’m partner track and would have a strong chance. But I’m not interested. Many of my peers are the same way. And I’m kind of shocked by how many of my male colleagues are ‘opting out’ of partner track. There’s a real development and change going on.”

According to one midlevel, “It’s hard to process looking ahead to the future and seeing what partnership looks like. The partners do not look happy. They do not look like they enjoy strong family connections. They do not look like they

particularly want to be at work, and they certainly do not want to establish any kind of real and honest relationship with associates.”

Your old road is rapidly agin’

One of the greatest frustrations, according to one associate, has been “getting anyone 60+ to understand that it’s actually possible to practice law at home in my sweatpants. No, we don’t need to have our butts planted to our chairs at the office to get your document drafted.”

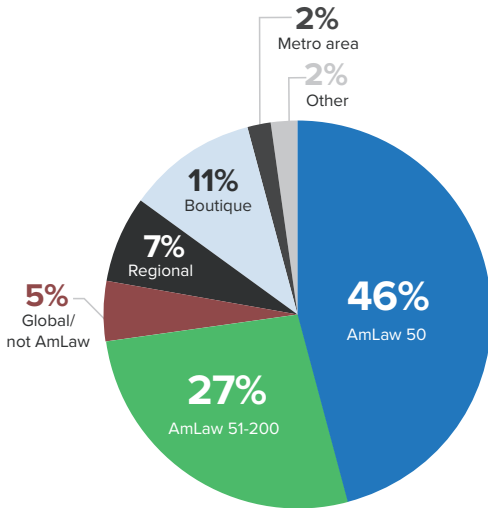
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“Partners are out of touch with associate wants/needs,” complains another respondent, “and I can’t imagine that will change any time soon purely because they will always prioritize profits and continue to believe associates should suck it up just because they did when they were associates. No recognition for generational changes. If they suffered, we should, too.”

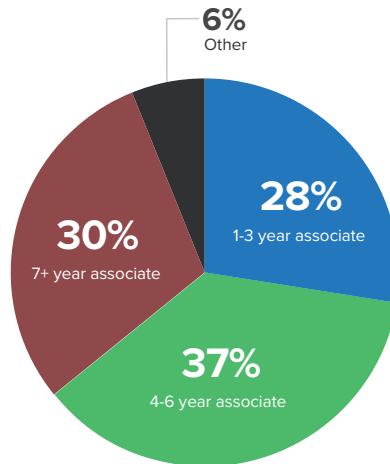
And yet, it is just these generational differences that may augur change—at least in the view of one optimistic associate: “As younger partners get more control and decision making, perhaps the battle between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ norms will not be as relevant. Senior associates and younger partners seem more aware that the changes brought by the pandemic are permanent, and that in order to stay relevant, workplace culture will have to shift.”

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

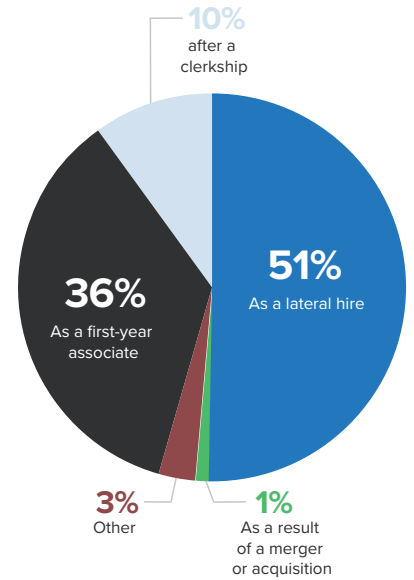
Which category best describes your firm?



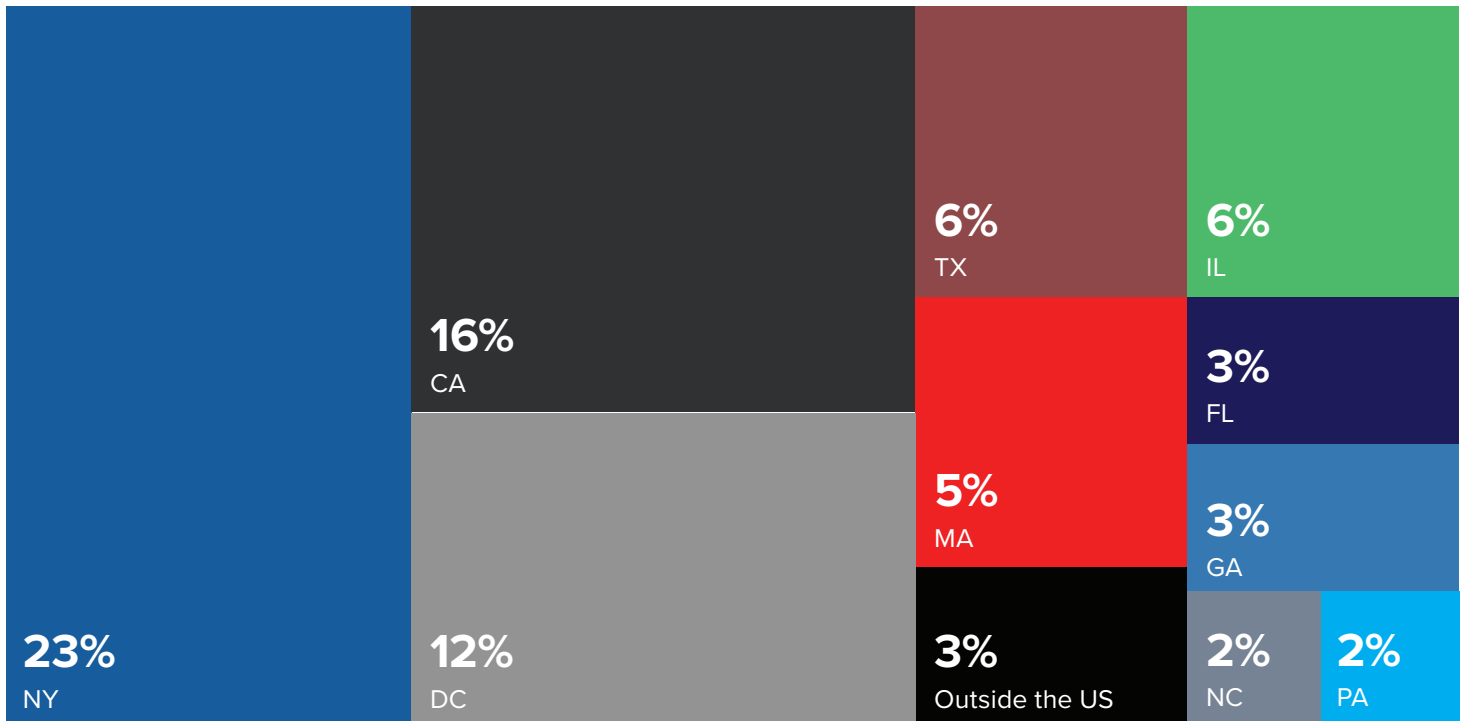
Which category best describes your level of experience?



When did you join the firm?

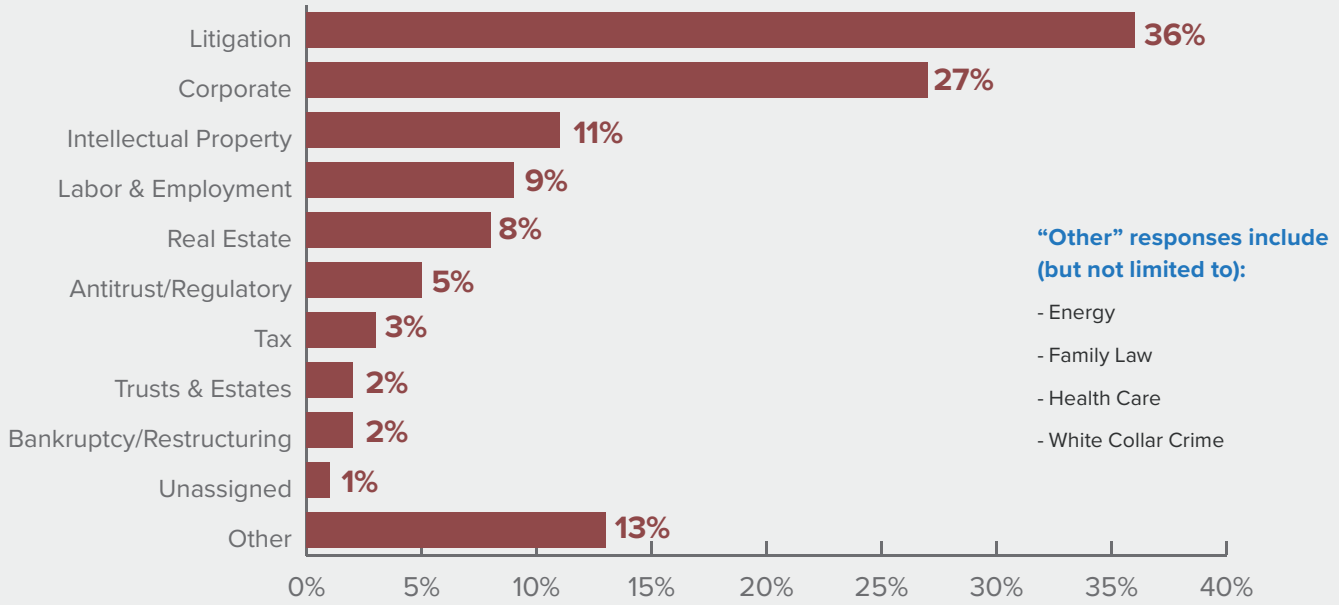


Where are you located?
(includes regions with at least 10 respondents)

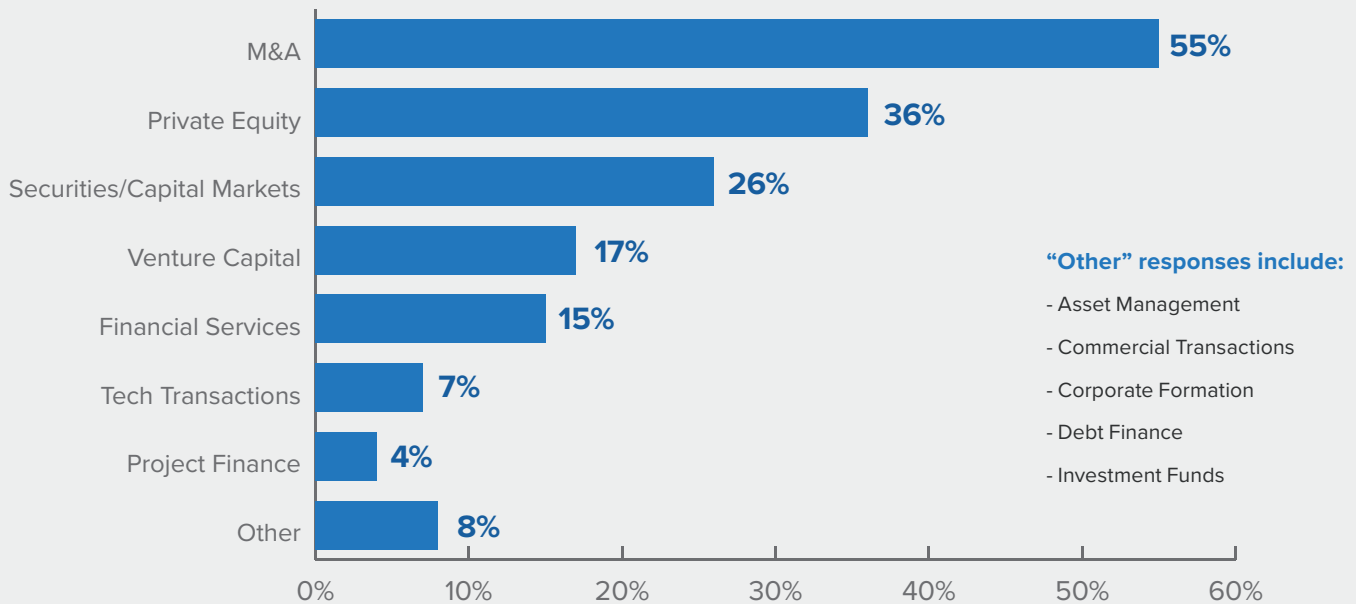


SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

What is your primary area of practice? (select up to two)

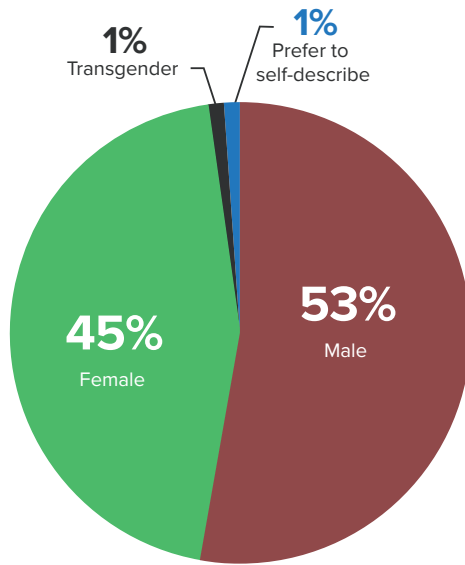


If your practice focuses on a specific area(s) of corporate law, please select from the list below:



SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

What is your gender identity?



What is your race/ethnicity?

