



## Top 5 Reasons Associates Leave Firms

By **Dani Meyer**

Law360, New York (May 6, 2016, 3:37 PM ET) -- Every associate's decision to leave a firm is unique to them, but there are common reasons why they decamp for another firm or even another career, from a lack of work-life balance to a desire to do meaningful work. Here, experts discuss what drives associates to leave their law firms.

### **No Work-Life Balance**

Times have changed since Ken Young, co-founder of recruiting firm Young Mayden LLC, graduated from law school in the 1970s. For his generation, the top criteria when looking for a job included how much the firm paid and the chances of earning a bonus.

But lawyers today have different priorities and are much more likely to choose a less opulent lifestyle if they can have a better work-life balance and spend time with their families, rather than work the "clearly insane work hours" that some firms demand, Young says.

"I don't know if you call that burnout or whatever, but I've had young lawyers call me literally on the verge of mental breakdowns," Young said.

A lot of associates do understand that they're working in a client-driven environment and can't necessarily have predictable schedules, says Ru Bhatt, a managing director in the associate practice group at Major Lindsey & Africa LLC. But as part of work-life balance, they still want flexibility in the workplace, including the ability to work from home or outside the office.

The world is different now, says Don Prophete, a partner at Constangy Brooks Smith & Prophete LLP. With today's technology, people can access "anything at anytime from anywhere," and associates want to work where they have more flexibility.

"A lot of law firms are still very much stodgy," Prophete said.

### **Unsatisfying Upward Mobility**

In Prophete's experience, associates often decide to leave when they see a lack of access to potential partnership.

"A lot of associates you'll find know that it's virtually impossible despite good performance in some law firm settings to make partner, and they want to make partner. So by the time they hit the fifth year level, they realize they have to go someplace else ... in order to have that opportunity," Prophete said.

But associates also pick up on partner dissatisfaction and don't feel motivated to move up the ladder if they see that partners don't enjoy their jobs, said Amanda Martinsek, a

shareholder at Thacker Martinsek LPA.

"Why kill yourself for a promotion that doesn't seem to offer real rewards?" Martinsek asked. "There needs to be a real and tangible brass ring."

Young added that he's had associates tell him that they don't want to be like the partners they work for, especially a partner who "never sees his family and ... doesn't seem like he wants to."

On top of these issues, Young observed that the benefits of making partner just aren't there anymore. As an example, he says the idea of making partner used to mean nearly doubling your salary, but now it's more like a 10 to 20 percent increase.

"At most big law firms, there's not the opportunity for a huge jump in income. And people just say, I can make the same money elsewhere without having to bill so many hours," Young said.

### **A Lack Of Mentorship**

Bhatt has encountered a number of associates looking for a mentor or guidance counselor who can look out for them and ensure they're developing professionally. If associates don't have that at their firm or their mentor leaves for another firm, they often seek a new place environment where partners want to help.

"A lot of them look to go to a firm where they can find that person that's going to cultivate them maybe into a leadership role," Bhatt said.

In the same vein, Prophete said it makes a difference when a firm largely employs white males and there's no one of a different race or gender or sexual orientation with whom a diverse lawyer can identify. Such an atmosphere can make associates feel isolated and unable to connect with a mentor.

"Having been the first, or the only, black lawyer in many of the places where I've worked, I can understand that feeling, of having a comparator, or not having someone with which you can identify very quickly," Prophete said.

Martinsek believes mentorship is a "critically important" part of working at a law firm, as it's often a mentor who explains to an associate the strategy behind cases they're working on or who looks for training opportunities for associates.

"Ideally, an associate should have older associate mentors as well as partner mentors. For that to happen, firms need to reward the partners and associates who take the time [to] guide younger lawyers," Martinsek said. "And the rewards need to be just as tangible as the cost of losing valued associates."

### **Limited Meaningful Work**

Bhatt also identifies a desire to have do meaningful or impactful work as one of the key reasons why associates leave firms, especially with the younger generation of lawyers.

"I think what tends to happen for a majority of associates is they start their careers at a large firm or within a larger practice group, and they want a high level of responsibility early on. But law firms tend to be very hierarchical and it's a little difficult for them to gain that experience early on," Bhatt said.

Prophete added that he's also encountered a number of associates switching firms because they feel there's a lack of challenging assignments. He suspects a lot of that is because

many partners might not have enough work to keep themselves completely busy, so they pass more administrative work onto associates.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Martinsek said so-called “bad” work that doesn’t offer opportunities for meaningful interactions with clients or out-of-office experiences can send an associate to another firm.

“To keep a talented associate, varied work experiences and opportunities are critical. If they can’t happen right away, it is essential that the associate hear a believable commitment to make it happen down the road,” Martinsek advised.

### **Need For A New Career**

A number of young lawyers went to law school imagining it would be like what they’ve seen on television, according to Young, but decide to leave when they realize it’s not what they thought they were getting into.

“There’s very little that you learn in law school that tells you what it’s like to practice law,” Young said.

For a lot of attorneys, Bhatt points out that this is their first real job, and it’s when they’ve started on their career path that they “do a little bit of soul searching and realize maybe I want to do something different.”

He says many associates realize that law firm life isn’t necessarily the best fit for them and decide to take advantage of other career options that utilize their degree and training, from going in-house to starting their own business to becoming a legal recruiter, as Bhatt did himself.

Others, however, go to law firms with the intent to “sell four or five years of their life” in order to pay down debt, Young said, and then leave the firm when they’re ready to move on and follow their dream.

And some “are just disenfranchised. They don’t like it and they don’t like the feel of it. They just go and do something else,” Prophete said.

--Editing by Rebecca Flanagan and Kelly Duncan.

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