

Why Firm, Legal Dept. Leaders Should Pay Attention To Gen Z

By **Michele Gorman**

Law360 (June 30, 2023, 4:49 PM EDT) -- Flexibility, work-life balance, financial stability, meaningful work. These factors, often tossed around when referencing Generation Z, are already having implications for the legal industry.

While covering the legal profession, I've written about **millennials transforming** the practice of law with their use of TikTok and Instagram for career searches, high standards for diversity and inclusion metrics, and expectation of nontraditional perks such as paid meals and gym allowances.

I'd argue that the push for the industry to ditch traditional, rigid constraints — in favor of more flexibility — took hold with millennials, but that Gen Z lawyers are taking those desires to the next level. And they've only just begun.

Perhaps a large part of it is that some of Gen Z, often defined as anyone born between the mid-1990s and 2012, witnessed parents lose their jobs during the 2008 economic recession and experienced firsthand the COVID-19 pandemic that forced the workforce at large to make significant changes.



Michele Gorman covers in-house legal departments for Law360 Pulse

By the numbers

Fewer Attorneys Want to Work in BigLaw

Since Major Lindsey & Africa conducted the survey in 2020, attorneys' desire to join a BigLaw firm has decreased, from more than half three years ago to less than half in 2023.

39%

of respondents in 2023, down from ...

59%

of respondents in 2020

Source: Major Lindsey & Africa

But in the legal profession, those changes might not have gone far enough for the youngest adult cohort currently in the workforce. Recent data shows that their long-term career objectives are shifting from traditional law firm paths.

In a **recent survey**, 39% of Gen Z respondents said that they would join a BigLaw firm, down from 59% who said the same in Major Lindsey & Africa's previous version of the report, which the legal search firm put together in spring 2020.

More than half of the 250 respondents — located around the globe — had a long-term goal to transition to an in-house role, join the government or a nonprofit organization, or work in academia, compared to 23% who hope to one day make partner at a firm.

While revolutionary change might not happen tomorrow, eventually Gen Z could alter the industry as we know it.

To me, these numbers add up to a huge red flag to any business leaders who might be swimming against the current. How will this affect law firms? It already has, in some cases.

Jackie Bokser LeFebvre, a managing director in Major Lindsey's New York associate practice group and co-author of the report, said going in-house and partnering with one client in both legal and business capacities makes the young lawyers feel more connected to daily operations.

"I think that they're motivated by that because it involves more hands-on experience and something that's a little bit more tangible in nature, as opposed to performing junior-oriented tasks within a law firm," she told me.

Gen Z Lawyers Are Split on Long-Term Goals

Some Gen Z survey participants think in-house and government roles provide a better work-life balance than do law firms, which has led some of their career objectives away from the traditional law firm track.

Other firm roles include in-house or nonprofit organization

Source: Major Lindsey & Africa • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Historically, law firms haven't had ways for senior associates to advance unless they're promoted. And working in-house allows lawyers the chance to work and feel integrated with the goals of one

client and have more predictability in their schedule, without the fear of expiring at a certain level of seniority if they don't make partner, Bokser LeFebvre said.

But in recent years, some larger firms have been taking a more frank and transparent approach with associates than in the past, she said. Some firm leaders suggest to an associate who isn't on track to make partner — or doesn't want to make partner — job openings with an in-house client, as one example.

"I think over time more and more firms are likely to engage in these type of conversations," Bokser LeFebvre said. "I think that the reality that [the] partnership path is not for everyone is something that more partners and more associates are starting to feel comfortable expressing within their group."

Josephine Bahn, chair of the American Bar Association's Young Lawyers Division and an associate at Cozen O'Connor, has seen firsthand how some firms have adjusted to evolving industry standards. This includes giving resources and time to community and pro bono programs that individual lawyers are passionate about.

"There are some firms at the forefront of that, focused on work-life balance and developing whole people, not just, 'How many hours can I get out of you for three years before we burn you out and you go somewhere else?'" she said. "That kind of law practice is gone, and it's how firms are responding to what and who can be here long-term."

Bahn, who one day hopes to make partner, told me she prioritizes being able to have dinner with her children every night and attend their field trips over billing and making market rate. And being able to take part in these events will keep her in the legal profession for the long run.

"The practice of law isn't really linear like it has been," she said. "For folks coming out of law school, the push is going to be, 'Where can I see myself long term that's going to provide me the things that I need at every stage of my career?'"

Yes, there's time to adjust to the next generation's wants and needs. But my takeaway from the Major Lindsey data is that firms and legal department leaders should act before it becomes an issue of attracting talent.

--Additional reporting by Kevin Penton. Graphics by Ben Jay. Editing by Jill Coffey.

In and Out is a column by Michele Gorman. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Portfolio Media Inc. or any of its affiliates.