

SMART GROWTH STRATEGIES

For Midmarket and Smaller Law Firms

BY GENE COMMANDER



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PART 1

ESSENTIAL INVESTMENTS FOR 2030

Law firms today are resting on a fault line. A cluster of transformative trends is set to rock the legal industry, with some firms poised to enter the next decade on solid footing and others likely to crumble. How will you shore up your practice's business model?

Consider these emerging demographic, professional and technological trends as you evaluate strategies to safeguard your firm's growth.

Demographic Trends in the Legal Industry

Baby boomers are departing the legal profession in growing numbers, leaving gaps in leadership, business development and ownership roles. This trend will continue to affect law firms: [Almost 14% of lawyers](#) are now 65 or older, in contrast with a roughly 7% share of all U.S. workers. And by 2030, today's youngest baby boomers will reach age 65.

Just when the legal industry needs an infusion of next-generation talent, the pool of younger lawyers is contracting. College enrollment is expected to drop sharply starting in 2026 and continue declining through the late 2030s.

Furthermore, the ABA Profile of the Legal Profession reports that overall law school enrollment has dropped significantly since 2010, with a small rebound starting in 2018. On the brighter side, early data suggests that first-year enrollment in law school increased [5% in 2024](#) over 2023, and in 2025, the Law School Admission Council reported an [18.3% increase in applicants](#). Overall, however,

the influx of new talent into law firms has slowed and will likely become a chronic challenge.

Meanwhile, [survey data](#) indicates that Gen-Zers have less interest in long-term career paths at law firms than their older counterparts.

The Fault Lines: Talent, Price War, Culture

Steep attrition rates are compounding law firms' talent challenges. According to the NALP Foundation Update on Associate Attrition, associates typically departed their firms in 2023 and 2024 within four years of their hiring, rather than within the historical pattern of five years. While a serious problem throughout the industry, attrition rates tend to be highest for women and people of color. Given the profession's diversity goals and the steadily climbing proportion of women and people of color in its ranks, this disparity is troubling.

From a business of law perspective, firms pay dearly for attrition. Lost revenue plus replacement costs when an associate quits can easily total three times their annual salary. Financial losses mount further when partners and their clients walk out the door. These departures also lead to high workloads, lower morale and disruptions in the leadership pipeline.

Meanwhile, law firms have been confronting a punishing price war. The median first-year associate salary in 2025 is \$200,000, with \$225,000 the most common figure in the largest firms. Firms with 250 or fewer lawyers report a median first-year associate salary at \$150,000, while firms with over 700 lawyers spiked to a median of \$215,000. For smaller firms, these challenges are even more pronounced, as the resource gap has only widened compared to large firms.

Firms are also continuing to adjust to the hybrid work phenomenon. Employees resoundingly demand hybrid and remote work options, yet a hybrid model demands a more deliberate approach to training the next generation of lawyers and building a sustainable workplace culture. High attrition rates and hybrid work models also pose challenges to maintaining strong client relationships, which are crucial for a firm's growth and success.

Technology Trends

Generative AI will play a powerful role in shaping law firms' fortunes, offering a competitive advantage to legal practices that adapt quickly. AI can already perform a substantial share of traditional associate-level and paralegal work, and its capabilities are expanding rapidly. Going forward, AI will place a premium on training, adaptability, alternative fee arrangements and new value propositions. For talent-strapped law firms, AI may prove a saving grace.

Five Smart Growth Strategies

For firms looking to shore up their business model, yesterday's strategies will fall short — especially for midsize and smaller firms that lack deep bench strength and deep pockets. In particular, reliance on catch-and-release talent models, sink-or-swim professional development programs, speculative poaching strategies and obsolete billable hour-driven revenue models will not sustain tomorrow's law firm needs or the needs of clients.

Instead, smart growth is the answer to securing lasting financial and professional success. Smart growth does not necessarily mean upping lawyer headcount to grow your law practice. Rather, it entails adopting a suite of strategies that enable the law firm business enterprise to scale its business model to ensure that revenue growth outpaces the cost of doing business. Key to adopting an effective smart growth strategy is a commitment by law firm owners and leaders to learning, growing and investing each day in the future of the firm, its talent and its clients.

Firms should invest in the following essential smart growth strategies:

1. Leveraging Generative AI

As generative AI reshapes the business of law, firms must adapt to remain competitive. AI tools will offer unprecedented efficiencies, allowing firms to automate routine legal and operational tasks. This shift can free up attorneys to enhance client service revenue growth by focusing on more complex, high-value work. To capitalize on the opportunities, lawyers must develop new skill sets, including a strong understanding of AI technologies. Law firms also must overhaul their professional development initiatives and business operations as AI takes over entry-level legal work and routine administrative tasks.

Last, firms will need to shift away from traditional hourly billing to more flexible revenue models that leverage technology, including wider use of fixed fees and value-based pricing.

2. Prioritizing Professional Development and Career Advancement

Law firms have historically relied on hands-off, one-size-fits-all professional development programs, dedicating insufficient partner-level time and other resources to building up the next generation of lawyers. Today, lack of career development and advancement is a primary

reason employees leave their jobs, whether legal professionals or business professionals. So traditional approaches are a losing bet. Furthermore, clients are increasingly unwilling to foot the bill as associates learn their craft by performing entry-level work that AI can instead complete.

Robust professional development initiatives, therefore, should be viewed as essential investments in the future of the firm, its lawyers and staff, and its clients. Law firms can achieve this mindset shift by adjusting compensation models to reward valuable attorney time dedicated to training and learning, instituting deliberate mentorship programs and promoting lawyers' ownership mentality.

Reimagined talent development initiatives should be coupled with career advancement strategies that offer transparent career progression guidelines, sponsorship initiatives, leadership development programs and more.

3. Embracing Nontraditional Career Paths and Flexible Staffing

The proportion of women in the legal profession continues to climb, yet women still exit law firm jobs at alarmingly high rates, and firms are failing to help those who stay reach leadership and ownership roles. To better serve the needs of women lawyers and all caregivers while building sustainable bench strength, firms should adopt nontraditional strategies that provide, for example, part-time and flex-time work options alongside off-ramps and on-ramps for lawyers who leave the practice for family reasons and later have interest in rejoining a law firm. These strategies can be particularly beneficial for small law firms, which can leverage flexibility to attract and retain top talent.

4. Exploring Talent-Driven Mergers and Acquisitions

Given the shrinking talent pool, high attrition rates and the growing need for partner-level legal capabilities, law firms will feel increased pressure to secure a stable supply of highly productive talent. This is especially important given generative AI's transformative potential.

Traditional organic growth strategies have proved insufficient, however. Poaching lateral hires is a speculative strategy that portends disappointing attrition rates due to inflated expectations about candidates' portable books of business and unfulfilled promises by acquiring firms. As an alternative, firms should consider merging with other like-minded firms to build the strong bench of highly productive lawyers needed to meet the expectations of clients and talent.

5. Fostering a Magnetic Workplace Culture

Law firms can best position themselves to navigate evolving legal industry trends by cultivating magnetic workplace cultures that attract and retain top-notch talent. This entails doubling down on existing talent by adopting robust professional development and career advancement strategies, personal well-being initiatives and reimagined compensation models, while embracing principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. These measures can foster an environment where affordable, productive employees are committed to the long-term success of the firm and its clients.

A Mindset Shift

As the ground shakes beneath their feet, law firm management leaders must be prepared to jettison bankrupt business practices in favor of smart growth strategies. ■

PART 2

THE AI REVOLUTION IN THE BUSINESS OF LAW

A jaw-dropping 74% of the law firm services traditionally charged to clients using a billable-hour pricing model are potentially subject to automation by AI, according to Clio's 2025 Legal Trends Report. This and other news about the rapid rise of AI in the legal industry has caused many to ask, "Will lawyers be replaced by AI?"

Rather than a cause for hand-wringing, the advent of AI and other forms of legal tech innovation should be welcomed by law firms interested in pursuing smart growth business strategies. AI has the potential to transform the business of law, particularly among midsize and smaller firms, by filling talent gaps, attracting tech-savvy human capital and offering client services that provide greater value.

Where AI Stands in the Legal Industry

It's been more than three years since ChatGPT launched on November 30, 2022, and AI is transfiguring the practice of law. While law firms have relied for some time on various forms of AI to perform legal research, e-discovery and document management activities, the unprecedented pace of technological advancement over the last few years — particularly with generative AI (GenAI) capable of producing content — speaks volumes about AI's potential.

Law firms' current levels of AI use are hard to pin down, but rapid growth is undeniable. For example, just 28% of law firms reported

organizational use of GenAI in Thomson Reuters Institute's 2025 Generative AI in Professional Services Report. However, according to the Clio Legal Trends Report, a dizzying 79% of surveyed legal professionals reported using AI in their practice in 2025 and 2024 — up from just 19% in 2023. Along similar lines, the Wolters Kluwer Future Ready Lawyer Report found in 2024 that 68% of legal professionals in law firms used GenAI at least once per week.

Clio reports that the three most frequently used AI tools among lawyers are generic nonlegal tools like ChatGPT, AI-powered legal research platforms and document drafting tools.

Meanwhile, the 2025 Generative AI in the Professional Services Report found that the top five legal GenAI uses are:

1. Document review
2. Legal research
3. Document summarization
4. Brief or memo drafting
5. Contract drafting

Of course, law firms also use AI for administrative purposes, leading to reduced administrative staffing demands.

Looking ahead, AI tools in the legal industry will become more efficient, customized and predictive, offering firms the opportunity to substantially enhance attorneys' productivity.

Key Business Strategies to Adopt as Firms Embrace the AI Revolution

Three strategies will be crucial for firms as they formulate plans for capitalizing on these new opportunities.

1. Finding New Ways to Provide Value

Experience tells us that lawyers readily identify new tasks or priorities when time allows. As firms make greater use of AI, attorneys should expeditiously shift their focus to providing higher-value services to existing clients and securing additional high-value business from new clients. Certain attorney roles are not within AI's wheelhouse, at least for the foreseeable future. Professional and ethical judgment, emotional intelligence and creativity are human strengths — and firms should double down on their investments in talent to leverage these skills through the use of AI.

As legal industry commentator Jordan Furlong foresees, lawyers will transition from “mostly transactional, procedural, informational, and documentary activities to more strategic, advisory, and consultative services.”

Law firms and individual lawyers will need to adapt to these changing roles and provide more personalized client services. Lawyers should embrace AI and other emerging technologies with a sense of urgency, a willingness to learn and a curiosity to experiment.

Fortunately, this new professional framework can be a welcome and energizing

development for lawyers who value continuous learning and growth.

2. Rebooting Talent Development

Professional development programs should be rebuilt from the ground up to attract and retain talent that can meet client and firm expectations in the age of AI.

Law firms traditionally have depended on an obsolete professional development approach that first immerses inexperienced associates in entry-level tasks such as time-consuming document review, and then provides more challenging assignments over the next several years to further develop their legal skills. AI's growing abilities to perform entry-level work will call into question how firms should train raw talent to deliver high-value legal services as clients increasingly refuse to pay for humans to complete routine tasks.

The advent of AI provides the sorely needed impetus for law firms to reinvigorate underperforming talent development programs as a vital component of a smart growth strategy. These programs have failed because they typically employ a sink-or-swim, one-size-fits-all approach that overlooks the talent's varied professional development needs and neglects to make them feel like valued team members with the opportunity to collaborate on important client assignments.

The predictable results have included high attrition rates and an inability to develop a leadership pipeline.

Law firms should adopt individualized talent development initiatives that meaningfully involve tomorrow's talent in a range of real-world legal experiences to help them acquire the sophisticated legal knowledge, professional judgment, business acumen and emotional intelligence that will be demanded of attorneys in the age of AI.

Talent development must be a lifelong pursuit as law firms work to stay abreast of technological advances in the business of law.

In collaboration with a new and vital cadre of AI specialists within firms, lawyers will need ongoing training in matters such as:

- Using prompts to query AI tools effectively.
- Recognizing errors made by AI.
- Avoiding ethical quandaries posed by AI.
- Using AI agents to assist with both workflow and personal productivity tasks.

Unfortunately, the [Harvard Business Review](#) found in 2024 that only 5% of surveyed professionals worked in a business that was providing significant GenAI training, while the 2025 Generative AI in Professional Services Report found that 56% of law firms do not offer GenAI training. Law firms must fill this gap soon, or they will quickly fall behind their competition.

3. Designing Next-Generation Pricing and Revenue Models

To ensure fair compensation for legal services going forward, law firms will need to reduce their dependence on traditional billable-hour pricing models. As AI is further incorporated into legal workflows, law firms will be able to offer more valuable client services by producing work products of equivalent or higher quality using fewer attorney hours. Yet lawyers will continue to play an essential role in using AI outputs to thoughtfully counsel clients, which should become the highest and best use of lawyers' time.

Alternative fee arrangements — which have so far seen only modest use in the legal industry — can capture the value provided by lawyers who integrate AI into their practices, enabling law firms to maintain healthy profitability levels. These agreements may

include negotiated value-based billing, fixed fees, success fees and subscription plans. The advantages of these pricing models can accrue to both parties — for example, firms tend to receive more rapid payment with fixed fee billing than with hourly billing, while clients may gain greater transparency and budget predictability.

Firms and clients will need to adapt as they confront the challenges attendant to these new pricing models, such as the complexity of defining predictable fixed-fee arrangements. This will require firms to make smart investments of time and other resources to refine pricing and revenue models. But most attorneys and business owners are experienced negotiators, and the juice likely will be worth the squeeze.

Looking Ahead

As AI is further integrated into the practice of law, firms must ensure they are also attending to the ethical implications involving confidentiality, competence, reasonable fees and more, as addressed in ABA Formal Opinion 512, released in 2024. However, concern about potential ethical quandaries should not be an excuse for shrinking from the active pursuit of AI tools that can transform the business of law.

With talent gaps likely to persist into the next decade, midsize and smaller firms that are struggling to maintain adequate bench strength can leverage AI to consistently meet client expectations. And AI promises a reinvigorated approach to the practice of law that will help firms attract and develop new talent who can deliver high-quality services to clients in a more efficient and cost-effective manner.

For future-focused firms that embrace the AI revolution, AI has strong potential to bolster smart growth business strategies that will sustain lasting professional and financial success. ■

PART 3

REBOOTING LAW FIRM TALENT DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT STRATEGIES

Revitalizing talent development and career advancement strategies can propel midmarket and smaller firms into the next decade.

After more than a century of growth, the tally of active lawyers in the U.S. is shrinking. From 1950 to 2019, the number of lawyers nationwide ballooned from just over 200,000 to 1.352 million, with rapid year-on-year increases from the 1970s. Since 2019, however, the count has dropped to 1.322 million active lawyers in 2024 — even as the U.S. population has continued to grow by more than a million people each year.

What accounts for this shift? Should this be concerning to law firms? And how can reimagined talent development and career advancement strategies help firms ride out the changing tides?

Shifting Legal Talent Trends

Several noteworthy trends are contributing to a growing talent gap in the legal industry. Almost [14% of U.S. lawyers](#) are now 65 or older, compared to a roughly 7% share of workers across industries. Law firms should anticipate an exodus of baby boomers in the coming years, resulting in troublesome gaps in ownership, leadership and client service roles.

Meanwhile, the influx of new talent into the profession is slow to stalling. Law school enrollment has dropped substantially since its peak a decade ago. Despite a recent uptick in law school enrollment, the most recent official figures from the American Bar Association show there were 116,851 students seeking J.D.s in 2023, compared to 147,525 law students in 2010.

Several talent trends affect law firms in particular, especially when it comes to associate retention.

[Survey data](#) suggests declining interest in long-term law firm careers among younger generations. And the NALP Foundation's Update on Associate Attrition found an overall associate attrition rate of 20% in 2024 — an unsustainable level.

The costs of attrition for firms can be crippling when considering lost revenue plus replacement costs, low morale, disruption of the leadership pipeline and more. Attrition rates tend to be highest for women and people of color, and because these groups make up

a growing share of the law firm hiring pool, talent strategies tailored to women and people from other diverse backgrounds are a matter of business necessity.

Moving forward, it remains to be seen how the advent of AI will affect demand for lawyers. Some observers predict a shrinking need for associate-level talent as AI gains further proficiency in performing routine tasks. But a steady supply of experienced attorneys will remain necessary to apply human skills involving professional judgment, ethical decision-making, emotional intelligence and more, in tandem with the use of AI.

As talent shortages persist and AI's capabilities grow, catch-and-release talent strategies and sink-or-swim professional development programs will fail to serve firms' long-term needs. While other deficiencies (including lack of a magnetic workplace culture and short-sighted compensation models) also exacerbate these challenges, the following focuses on how revitalized talent development and career advancement strategies can propel midsize and smaller firms into the next decade.

Strengthened Talent Development Strategies

Historically, law firm professional development programs have been hands-off and half-hearted in nature, failing to provide the sustained, personal investments needed to cultivate top-notch lawyers and retain productive talent.

Lack of development opportunities is a key factor driving attrition. Across industries, a [McKinsey & Co.](#) survey found that lack of career development and advancement was the top reason employees left their jobs. Law firm leaders may be surprised to learn that this principle holds true not only for junior talent but also for partners — in a 2024 [survey](#), 23% of

“Uncertainty, dim prospects and lack of support in terms of career advancement will spur associates to look for other jobs, leading to squandered investments on the firm’s part.”

equity partners cited professional development opportunities as a reason for leaving their firm. The survey results strongly suggest that firms offering innovative talent development initiatives — when combined with effective recruiting, onboarding and talent integration practices — will enjoy a significant competitive advantage in the battle to attract and retain productive talent across all experience levels.

The advent of AI provides an added impetus for reinvigorating professional development approaches. AI is taking over many of the entry-level tasks through which associates traditionally learned their craft. The widening training gap must be filled by other learning opportunities. Moreover, lawyers will need talent development opportunities over the full course of their careers to keep pace with advances in technology and the practice of law.

Given these considerations, how should law firms change their approach to talent development?

- Law firms should make talent development a top priority when it comes to investments of time, money and other resources.
- Law firms should embrace a culture of life-long learning, ensuring that lawyers at all levels gain and maintain the evolving skill sets needed as technology and legal practice march forward.

- Business acumen and ownership mentality should be cultivated by integrating junior talent into internal business procedures, such as involvement in negotiating terms of engagement and reviewing client invoices.
- Firms should design their compensation models to reward partner-level time dedicated to training and learning while sending the message to associates through compensation and promotion guidelines, among other means, that their learning and development are an essential priority.
- Hybrid work models in firms should incorporate sufficient in-office time for both associates *and* partners to provide ample opportunities for formal and informal in-person learning opportunities.
- Firms should meaningfully involve junior lawyers in real-world practice, such as shadowing experienced lawyers, conducting depositions and participating in client meetings.
- Firms should provide individualized training that recognizes lawyers' varying backgrounds, skill sets, neurodiversity and learning styles.
- Given the high attrition rates for women and people of other diverse backgrounds and their growing representation in the profession, talent development initiatives should be tailored to these groups' needs and interests.
- Lawyers who have training responsibilities should be educated in effective training techniques.
- Supervisors should provide frequent, constructive feedback and recognition to support their charges' growth.
- Firms should institute robust mentorship programs that involve multiple mentoring avenues and establish meaningful expectations of participants on both sides of the equation.

“Lack of development opportunities is a key factor driving attrition. Across industries, a McKinsey & Company survey found that lack of career development and advancement was the top reason employees left their jobs.”

Enhanced Career Advancement Strategies

All too often, firms fail to lay out a transparent and achievable path for junior talent to rise to the partnership level. Perhaps only [15% of associates](#) ever make partner in Big Law, and the levels can be dispiriting in midsize and smaller firms too. Uncertainty, dim prospects and lack of support in terms of career advancement will spur associates to look for other jobs, leading to squandered investments on the firm's part.

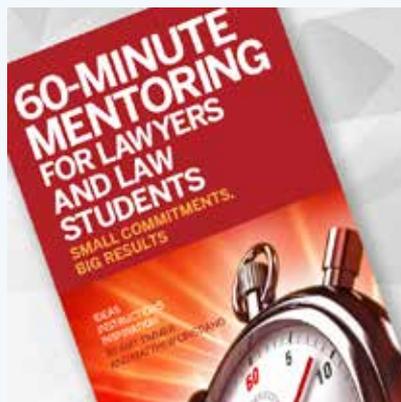
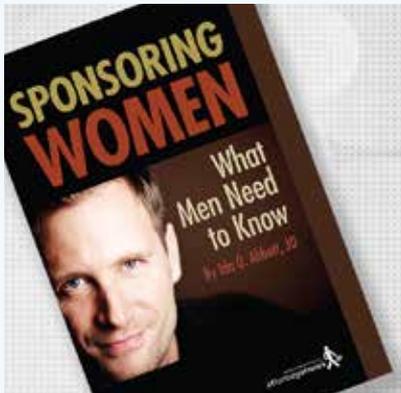
Law firms should consider the following upgrades to their career advancement strategies:

- Firms should adopt transparent career progression guidelines with clear milestones, ensuring that talent understands what is expected of them to move to the next level and that promotion decisions are fair.
- Firms should design their talent development programs to ensure employees receive the training and tools needed to achieve their career goals.
- Firms should create alternate career trajectories, which can help retain talented lawyers who are not ready or willing to take on an equity ownership role.

- Firms should support lawyers when they take time off for family reasons, encourage them to rejoin the firm when their circumstances allow and provide meaningful reintegration assistance when they do so.
- By embracing sponsorship and allyship initiatives, firms can help less experienced talent — especially women and people of other diverse backgrounds — navigate career paths. In sponsorship initiatives, younger attorneys are paired with more experienced attorneys who take them under their wing and advocate for their advancement. Allyship programs build broad allies for underrepresented lawyers in their journey within the firm.
- Firms should institute leadership training initiatives that identify and cultivate core leadership competencies through measures such as coaching, peer learning and actual leadership opportunities. These programs should foster development of business acumen, owner’s mentality and emotional intelligence.

Making Ongoing Investments Is Crucial

As the talent pool constricts and AI’s capabilities surge, continuous investments in talent development and advancement are a vital smart growth strategy. These investments will help law firms build the productive talent bench required as client expectations evolve. ■



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PART 4

LEVERAGING AGILE CAREER STRATEGIES TO RETAIN WOMEN LAWYERS

Women leave private law practice at an alarming rate for two noteworthy reasons: lack of support for caregivers and lack of career advancement. Adopting agile career strategies for all lawyers — from flexible hours to alternative career paths — benefits everyone in your law firm.

Women's representation in the business of law recently reached a milestone: According to NALP, female lawyers now make up a [majority](#) of law firm associates nationwide. This historic marker comes after a half-century in which the share of women in the legal profession has skyrocketed. Consider that women made up just 9% of U.S. law students in 1970. Now, 55% of law school graduates are women, while 41% of lawyers are women.

As explained below, firms should adopt innovative strategies to help advance the careers of female lawyers, particularly those with dependent children, with a focus on creative career options and nontraditional firm staffing opportunities. These commonsense initiatives will serve the needs not only of women but of all caregivers, helping to abate the alarming rate of attrition in firms across talent levels.

The Need to Better Integrate Women into Law Firms

The proportion of women in the legal profession will only climb as older lawyers (who

are predominantly male) retire and female students make up an ever-growing share of law school classes. Yet firms still struggle to advance women into leadership and ownership roles, and attrition rates remain disproportionately high. Little progress has been made in elevating women to the higher echelons of firms: Only 28% of law firm partners were female in 2023, according to NALP's 2023 Report on Diversity in U.S. Law Firms. Further, Above the Law's Associate Perspectives on the New Normal survey found that half of female associates planned to exit their jobs within one to two years, compared to one-third of their male counterparts.

These challenges are only compounded for women of color.

Women's departures from firms can be crippling when considering the squandered investments in talent, high costs of hiring replacement attorneys, impairment of valuable client relationships and damage to workplace culture.

These challenges come amid other concerns about a growing talent deficit as baby boomers exit law firms and firms fail to develop and retain younger attorneys. In the face of shifting demographics and talent challenges, firms must do a much better job of retaining women. If not, they will soon find they lack the talent bench needed to satisfy client expectations and fill vital leadership roles.

Sticking Points for Women in Law Firms

Two major challenges stand out when it comes to retaining and advancing women: issues relating to women's caregiving roles and firms' inadequate career advancement strategies.

Caregiving Roles

While not all women have children, caregiving roles often loom large for women in the workplace. According to the ABA and ALM Intelligence's Walking Out the Door survey, "care-taking commitments are the No. 1 reason (58%) why experienced female lawyers leave law firms."

Although both mothers and fathers may struggle to balance the demands of lawyering and parenting, a disproportionate share of parenting duties falls to women, per the ABA's Legal Careers of Parents and Child Care-givers report. Mothers are much more likely to shoulder childcare and household duties. For example, 65% of mothers, compared to 7% of fathers, are in charge of arranging childcare, while 47% of mothers, compared to 17% of fathers, are responsible for leaving work to attend to children's needs.

Unsurprisingly, then, mothers experience greater stress and burnout than fathers due to their family vs. career balancing act. Of mothers working in law firms, 70% "almost always" or "often" feel overwhelmed with everything they

need to do, compared to 41% of fathers. And nearly half of mothers surveyed felt that having children had negatively affected their legal career, in contrast with just 21% of fathers.

The ABA parenthood report illuminates possible solutions by identifying the major reasons mothers would choose to exit their jobs: 42% of mothers cited the number of required hours, and 34% identified work-life balance as a reason to leave. Meanwhile, 60% of mothers of dependent children said they would *stay* at a firm that allowed them to work a schedule that aligned with their caretaking responsibilities.

Career Advancement

In the ABA and ALM Intelligence [survey](#) noted above, "62% of men said they were satisfied with opportunities for advancement at their law firms, but only 45% of women felt the same." In the ABA's Where Does the Profession Go From Here report, 47% of surveyed women identified better opportunities to progress as a factor that was very or extremely important in deciding whether to switch jobs, compared to just 30% of men.

Agile Career Models Will Make a Difference

Without question, a wide array of strategies is vital for supporting women in firms, including targeted mentoring and leadership programs, family-friendly policies with ample parental leave and an inclusive workplace culture that does not tolerate bias or sexual harassment. The focus here, however, is on flexible career options, which can play an especially impactful role in supporting women with dependent children.

Notably, these strategies also support fathers and those caring for aging parents and are likely to appeal to younger attorneys who place an emphasis on work-life balance.

Flexibility in Work Hours and Location

Flexible work hours and location can be highly attractive to mothers, given the complex and ever-shifting nature of parenting responsibilities. As [McKinsey](#) observes, many caregivers “are ready to lend their time and talents to companies that are willing to work with their schedules. For them, workplaces that are inflexible and that don’t provide a pathway to advancement aren’t worth the sacrifice of going back to work while continuing their caregiving duties.”

Options for flexibility at multiple talent levels include the following:

- Hybrid or remote work
- Flexible work hours (where full-time employees work a schedule of their choosing, possibly subject to “core hours”)
- Extended leaves and sabbaticals
- Part-time roles

Law firms that offer customized work options should pay special attention to ensuring robust access to on-the-job training and career advancement opportunities that provide meaningful client and business development interaction. This can be achieved in part through syncing in-person work schedules with targeted training, mentoring and sponsoring initiatives.

Flexible work alternatives (like the additional strategies discussed below) should be wholeheartedly endorsed by law firm leaders and normalized within the firm. When firm leaders make it a practice to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments and excellence of *all* talent, the employees who avail themselves of nontraditional work options will feel they are highly valued members of the team. And these individuals, provided they

“Higher salaries will not be enough to attract and retain top talent while building a workforce that is able to greet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.”

meet the criteria enshrined in the firm’s fair compensation and promotion policies and practices, should not suffer diminished career advancement opportunities, nor pay disparities.

Alternative/Customized Career Paths

Not all mothers and caregivers have the bandwidth or desire to pursue an equity partnership track. Yet many of these lawyers seek a continued path to professional growth and have much to contribute. Firms should ensure that rigid career tracks do not push valuable talent out the door.

Alternatives to equity ownership are worthy options for law firms of all sizes. Many larger firms rely on non-equity partnership positions, in which lawyers do not own a stake in the firm yet enjoy many of the other benefits of partner status. Likewise, senior counsel positions may offer increased flexibility while providing a jump in prestige from associate positions.

Firms can further expand their career pathways by creating thought-leadership roles for skilled attorneys who choose not to follow a traditional partnership track. Options include practice group and special project leadership roles with appropriate compensation incentives. Firms can also provide valuable roles for lawyers in areas such as talent development, client relationship management and law firm operations.

In all these instances, firms should remain open to lawyers changing from a more rigorous track to a less rigorous one, and vice versa, as individual circumstances shift.

Off-Ramps and On-Ramps

The catch-and-release approach to talent development remains prevalent in law firms. However, this obsolete approach squanders firms' return on investment every time productive talent walks out the door. And the adverse financial consequences are even more devastating when they walk out with clients.

Instead, law firms should cultivate durable relationships with productive talent, emphasizing that lawyers who step away from the firm for family or other reasons will be welcomed back when the time is right, in roles that leverage their valuable experience. Further, firms should meaningfully support lawyers in rejoining the firm to ease the transition. This may include offering flexibility in work assignments and routines alongside assistance navigating shifts in firm dynamics and legal practice.

Through this approach, firms can benefit from the legal skills, business acumen and cultural understanding these lawyers gained during their earlier firm experience — a much better bet than hiring untested talent, who often prove a poor fit.

Contractual Relationships

Law firms should also consider building a stable roster of loyal contract-based and free-lance lawyers to whom they can turn when business needs ramp up. Women with young children may welcome opportunities to provide this service to maintain their legal skills and industry involvement while preserving

“When firm leaders make it a practice to recognize and celebrate the accomplishments and excellence of all talent, the employees who avail themselves of nontraditional work options will feel they are highly valued members of the team.”

family time until they are ready to devote more attention to their careers. By the same token, structured relationships of this nature can provide valuable flexibility for the firm — and some of these lawyers may prove to be excellent and well-vetted candidates for future permanent positions in the firm.

To make this strategy work, firms should ensure they treat contract lawyers as valued resources who are vital to the firm's mission and culture, thereby building meaningful and lasting relationships.

The Takeaway

As talent shortages loom on the horizon, law firms should double down on attracting, developing and retaining productive female lawyers. An expanded menu of career pathways and staffing strategies can provide the flexibility that women, caregivers of all stripes and your firm itself will find invaluable. ■

PART 5

TALENT-DRIVEN MERGERS: A SMART GROWTH STRATEGY FOR FIRMS OF ALL SIZES

Mergers between like-minded law firms can help firms assemble a bench of productive talent in the face of talent gaps. But successful mergers require a thoughtful framework to ensure robust pre-closing due diligence and effective integration efforts that continue long after inking the deal.

The legal industry has been abuzz with news of law firm mergers between global giants. Yet while Big Law mergers may grab headlines, midmarket and smaller firms are also getting in on the action.

According to Fairfax Associates, nearly all domestic law firm mergers in 2024 involved at least one firm with 100 lawyers or fewer. And 69% of mergers involved at least one firm that employed just five to 20 lawyers. As they compete for a dwindling supply of productive talent and the advent of AI amplifies the need for highly skilled lawyers, law firms of all sizes should consider joining forces with other like-minded firms to meet their talent needs.

Traditionally, law firms have relied on two strategies for securing productive talent: organic growth and lateral hiring.

Organic growth is a strategy based on recruiting and investing in newly minted J.D.s. The expectation is that these lawyers will remain

committed to the firm, but sole reliance on this strategy is risky. While organic growth is still an important piece of the smart growth puzzle, it is incapable of providing the dynamic growth many law firms are seeking.

Lateral hiring — also known by the less flattering moniker “poaching” — is a speculative strategy used to recruit talent with proven books of business. It should come as no surprise that it often yields disappointing results: most lateral hiring decisions are based on limited disclosures and minimal due diligence by both sides. And lateral candidates tend to make unrealistic claims about their portable books of business, while acquiring firms often fail to provide the client introductions, marketing budgets, support staff and ownership opportunities they advertise to lateral candidates.

In the end, nearly half of lateral partners depart within five years. A [Thomson Reuters article](#) estimated that the costs from these failed hires can easily reach seven figures.

Talent-Driven Mergers Are a Promising Alternative

When law firm lateral hiring and organic growth strategies fail to meet firms' talent needs, firm leaders should explore talent-driven mergers to secure the team of highly productive lawyers necessary to fulfill both the firms' and their clients' expectations.

The most frequently touted benefit of law firm mergers is the possibility of gaining market share (increasing gross revenue) through a broader geographic footprint, increased specialization and enhanced reputation. These may indeed be good reasons for firms to consider a merger, provided there is strong alignment between the combining firms.

But mergers can offer still more promising benefits to midmarket and smaller firms looking to assemble a dynamic mix of highly skilled talent with the strong leadership and ownership potential that will be crucial in the face of disruptive change. Through a merger, the combined firm can assemble the human capital required to achieve financial and professional success while blending the best elements of both organizations. And unlike a scattershot poaching approach, a merger can preserve teams that have already developed strong internal ties, bringing durable cultural capital to the combined firm.

Talent-driven mergers can yield a high return on investment by providing the participating firms opportunities they would lack on their own.

■ **Offering broader and higher-value services:** By merging, firms can harness a diversified and highly skilled talent pool, thereby strengthening their expertise, expanding their client service offerings and enhancing their reputation in the marketplace for talent.

■ **Meeting clients' needs more cost-effectively:** When considering a merger, a thorough

review of individual performance and practice group profitability is essential. This process helps in making strategic talent decisions, identifying cost-saving opportunities through economies of scale and ensuring smooth client transitions.

■ **Optimizing leadership continuity and ownership transition plans:** Merger negotiations present valuable opportunities for the combined firm to address sensitive topics, including governance structure, leadership style, partner compensation, attorney underperformance and succession planning. Through this process, leaders can align financial, professional and generational interests to safeguard the combined firm's future success.

■ **Revitalizing the firm's entrepreneurial spirit:** The merged firm can gain fresh momentum by assembling a dynamic team of aligned talent that can unlock new and exciting business opportunities. In addition to improving the combined firm's profitability, a merger can help cultivate a magnetic workplace culture that attracts and retains top talent and nimbly adapts to shifting economic, professional and technological trends.

Certainly, these benefits cannot be realized without significant investments by the firms, and there are obvious potential pitfalls. However, midsize and smaller firm mergers can create substantial benefits for the combined firm without all the complexities of larger firm mergers.

Key Aspects of Successful Law Firm Mergers: Due Diligence

While mergers hold significant potential for law firms of all sizes, they are also inherently risky, and should only be consummated upon finding a highly promising match. The due diligence process should involve several phases, during

which parties should remain patient and fully willing to walk away.

Phase One: Finances and Culture

The initial step in considering a merger is the search for a strong potential match. This should be a deliberate process with an emphasis on financial compatibility and cultural fit. Financial compatibility considerations include historic and projected billing rates and gross revenue, key financial performance indicators and partner compensation models. The multifaceted aspects of cultural compatibility encompass firm values, leadership styles and vision, and other key workplace considerations such as hybrid vs. in-person work models.

Phase Two: Operations, Clients and Talent

If the compatibility assessment is favorable, the next due diligence phase involves a deep dive — subject to a mutual nondisclosure agreement — into both firms' operations, client base and talent capabilities. A data-driven process will force both firms to assess all potential risks related to or arising from professional and business conflicts of interest, long-term liabilities (e.g., personal guarantees for office leases and bank lines of credit) and contingent liabilities (e.g., third-party professional errors and omissions claims or employer liability claims).

Phase Three: Consensus-Building

When all systems are go, it's time to build a consensus in support of the merger. To do so, leaders should ensure every voice is heard and concerns are taken seriously, from the mail room to senior leadership. Firm leaders should clearly explain to employees how the merger supports the firm's goals and how people's roles and compensation may be affected. The new firm's governance structure and leadership team should incorporate members from both

firms. This clearly demonstrates to all employees that their personal and professional interests are well represented. At the same time, existing firm policies and practices that are inconsistent with the combined firm's new vision should be jettisoned in favor of refreshed approaches that position the new firm for sustained financial and professional success.

Phase Four: Continuing Investment in a Smooth Integration

The work is not over once the merger agreements have been inked; in some ways, it's just getting started. The smooth integration of the combined firm's human capital and business operations will be the key to the firm's long-term success. To ensure the merger is achieving its stated goals, firm leaders should closely track metrics for success, including billing and collection realization rates, talent utilization, new client attraction, client and talent retention and operational cost savings through economies of scale. A commitment to further thoughtful investments in post-closing integration will be needed indefinitely to ensure the development and retention of newly acquired talent and clients. Also, a generous budget should be allocated to culture-building opportunities.

The Far-Reaching Rewards of Talent-Driven Mergers

Joining forces with other like-minded firms can build a strong bench of highly skilled, productive lawyers capable of providing the high-value legal services needed to serve clients as talent challenges and AI tools transform the business of law. Future-focused law firms — whether national firms or home-grown Main Street practices — should consider embracing talent-driven mergers as part of their smart growth initiatives. ■

PART 6

CAPITALIZING ON A MAGNETIC WORKPLACE CULTURE

Law firm culture plays a crucial role in creating a professionally satisfying environment where top talent want to build their careers.

Transformative forces — rapid technological advancements, shifting demographics, evolving workplace norms — are upending traditional law firm client service and business models. To navigate these disruptions, firms must reach beyond traditional strategies to build a dedicated and nimble workforce. The key to doing so lies in cultivating a magnetic workplace culture — one that attracts top talent, offers state-of-the-art professional development and instills a deep sense of belonging.

Three Catalytic Trends

Three forces are fundamentally altering the legal industry, presenting urgent challenges and new growth opportunities for law firms.

1. *Technological Trends*

The rise of AI is transforming the business of law by automating routine tasks and reshaping the human skills required for success, while also opening doors to enhanced client service models. These developments have amplified the need for highly skilled lawyers who can provide nuanced professional judgment, complex problem-solving and strategic advice — capabilities that AI cannot (yet) replicate. Firms that are unwilling or unable to cultivate

a resilient, tech-savvy workforce and embrace this transformation will quickly fall behind their competition.

2. *Demographic Trends*

The legal profession is aging: Baby boomers are retiring in increasing numbers, while law school enrollment has declined. Concurrently, a growing share of women and people of color are joining the legal workforce, but firms still struggle to advance these talented lawyers into rewarding, long-term roles and leadership positions. These troubling circumstances are contributing to a dwindling supply of productive talent.

3. *Professional Trends*

Attrition rates in law firms are near all-time highs across talent levels. Many lawyers cite excessive billable hour requirements, poor work-life balance and inequities in pay and career advancement as key reasons for leaving. Meanwhile, a price war has led to high salaries that midmarket and smaller firms often struggle to match.

Hybrid work has also become a defining factor as employees demand greater flexibility, increasing the need for more deliberate talent

development and culture-building initiatives. At the same time, many firm leaders perceive that junior talent lacks the deep personal commitment and business acumen needed to build a sustainable leadership and ownership pipeline.

Why Traditional Law Firm Cultures Must Change

Many law firms still rely on outdated workforce strategies, such as wasteful catch-and-release employment practices and sink-or-swim professional development philosophies. Further, in many firms, excessive work hours, poorly defined career advancement pathways and pay inequities create an unhealthy environment where lawyers feel overworked and undervalued.

These legacy approaches are proving increasingly problematic. According to a [Thomson Reuters Institute survey](#), factors such as feeling underappreciated, lack of career progression, lack of genuine regard for well-being, insufficient mentorship and inflexibility in work timing and location are primary reasons associates quit.

Law firm culture plays a crucial role in creating a professionally satisfying environment where lawyers want to build their careers. A “sticky” culture — one that cements participants to their community — is essential in the face of transformative industry trends.

Law firms need to form a durable foundation of highly skilled, tech-savvy lawyers who are equipped to succeed in the legal profession of tomorrow. To build a talent-centric culture, money is not enough — and in any case, most firms can’t compete with Big Law paychecks. Instead, midmarket and smaller firms must differentiate themselves by creating a culture of innovation and care where employees feel valued, supported and engaged.

“A sticky culture — one that cements participants to their community — is essential in the face of transformative industry trends.”

Five Growth Strategies

To build a magnetic workplace culture, law firms should invest in the following smart growth strategies.

1. Establishing Core Values that Strengthen Talent Alignment

A firm’s values shape its culture and determine its cohesion. Firms should define and consistently act on their values to build a strong sense of identity and purpose, making lawyers more likely to engage with and remain committed to the firm.

2. Improving Talent Development and Career Advancement

Firms should invest in talent development strategies that capitalize on GenAI, and move beyond outdated career advancement metrics and pathways. This includes:

- Continuous training and learning opportunities that equip lawyers of all experience levels with the tools they need to succeed as AI and other technologies reshape the practice of law.
- Robust mentorship programs that provide meaningful guidance to junior lawyers.
- Clear and fair pathways for career advancement, including alternate and flexible career models that meet the needs of a broad range of lawyers.

“A toxic law firm culture will drive talented lawyers away. Firms should firmly address behaviors that undermine a magnetic workplace culture, such as hostile and passive-aggressive behavior and excessive off-hours communication.”

3. Reimagining Compensation Models

Traditional compensation models often prioritize billable hours at the expense of other contributions that add long-term value to the business enterprise, such as mentoring, building firm culture and business development. Firms should:

- Embrace client service models that capture the value provided by AI-augmented legal services.
- Adopt value-based compensation models that reward contributions beyond billable hours.
- Make compensation structures more transparent to avoid any perception of unfairness or lack of trust.

4. Prioritizing Lawyer Well-Being

A thriving law firm culture supports employees' mental health and overall well-being through measures such as:

- Supporting work-life balance. Surveys indicate that work-life balance is a top priority for lawyers, yet many firms still prioritize billable hours above all else. Flexible work arrangements and reasonable expectations for work hours can improve retention.

- Hybrid work options. Hybrid work policies that offer greater autonomy for proven talent can increase productivity and job satisfaction across all talent levels, which is especially rewarding for working parents.
- Health and family support. Offering comprehensive insurance, health club memberships and generous parental leave can signal that the firm values its employees' physical and mental health.
- Zero tolerance for toxic behavior. A toxic law firm culture will drive talented lawyers away. Firms should firmly address behaviors that undermine a magnetic workplace culture, such as hostile and passive-aggressive behavior and excessive off-hours communication. Thoughtful investments in leadership training and talent development can mitigate these issues and create a more supportive work environment.

5. Cultivating a Deep Sense of Belonging

Although women and underrepresented groups make up an expanding share of attorneys at firms, they frequently experience exclusionary workplace behaviors, pay gaps and lower job promotion rates. Accordingly, law firms struggle to retain many of these talented lawyers, incurring both immediate and long-term costs. Indeed, a [recent research report](#) found that 33% of firms had lost clients to competitors with stronger commitments to hiring and retaining lawyers from underrepresented groups.

To attract and retain these lawyers, firms should:

- Implement personalized talent development, mentoring and sponsorship initiatives for all talent levels.
- Foster an aligned workplace culture where courageous and diverse viewpoints are valued.

- Publish and track billable hour, compensation and career advancement metrics to hold both talent and leadership accountable.

Final Thoughts on the Future of Law Firm Culture

As the legal industry navigates the catalytic trends described above, law firms should rethink their core values and focus on strengthening their workplace culture. Simply offering higher salaries will not be enough to attract and retain top talent while building a workforce that is ready, willing and able to greet the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Instead, firms should invest in talent-driven initiatives that foster an inclusive, innovative and rewarding environment — one where lawyers see a future and truly feel like they belong.

By prioritizing talent development, fair compensation, well-being and a deep sense of belonging, law firms can create a workplace culture that not only attracts outstanding talent but ensures their long-term commitment. In doing so, firms will position themselves for lasting financial and professional success. ■

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[Legal Compensation Strategies: From Market Analysis to Fair Pay Practices](#) by Camille Stell

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[The Hidden Cost of a Bad Hire in a Small Law Firm](#) by Doug Walker

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Thriving law firms don't just grow bigger—they grow smarter, with business models that attract and retain top talent while delivering exceptional client value. Gene Commander Inc empowers firm leaders to achieve that balance.

Excellence in legal practice must be paired with business acumen to ensure lasting success in the face of disruptive change. As AI reshapes workflows, client expectations shift, and traditional business models break down, firms that cling to outdated habits risk being left behind.

Law Firm Smart Growth Strategies

Sustainable success comes to law firms that learn, grow, and invest in the future by:

- Modernizing talent development, revenue, and compensation strategies.
- Developing talent and leadership pipelines that future-proof the firm.
- Creating a magnetic workplace culture to attract, engage, and retain top talent.
- Cultivating an owner's mentality that drives accountability and return on investment.

Business Advisor to the Legal Industry

Gene Commander Inc was founded in 2015 by Gene Commander, a thought leader, speaker, author, and executive business advisor with nearly 40 years of experience practicing in small, midsize, and national firms. Gene held leadership positions throughout his career, culminating in his role as managing shareholder in the Denver office of an Am Law 100 firm. Backed by a proven research team, Gene advises firm leaders nationwide on the business of law and smart growth strategies.

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