

Compensation, Colleagues, and Career Paths

**Insights on Associate
Retention Drivers
from The NALP
Foundation's Newest Study**

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What motivates associates to stay at their firms? For the first time, we now have unique answers directly from 3,374 associates, who shared their views in The NALP Foundation's newest study *Should I Stay or Should I Go? Key Factors Driving Law Firm Associate Retention*. The study's detailed and sometimes surprising results will enable firms to tailor their retention efforts to focus on the issues associates say are critical to their tenure, while illuminating key issues for the legal profession as a whole.

15 Key Factors

Community, Culture and Inclusion:

- Firm Culture/Social Ties
- Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
- Pro Bono/Community Involvement

Compensation, Benefits and Policies:

- Compensation
- Benefits
- Firm Policies (e.g., billable hours, leave)
- Hybrid Work Policies (remote or flexible work)

Location and Reputation:

- Location
- Market Perception (e.g., prestige of firm)

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Associates from 57 leading firms across the U.S. and Canada participated in the study between September 7th and October 13th; they ranked and rated the importance of 15 factors (See graphic below):

Work-Life Balance

Associates also responded to four narrative prompts:

- I have stayed at my firm because...*
- I would leave my firm if...*

Professional Development and Growth:

- Career Path
- Mentoring
- Practice Area Alignment with Personal Interest
- Professional Development
- Work Allocation/Workflow Management

Work-Life Balance:

- Work-Life Balance

What can your firm do better to engage you?

What other factors influence your tenure at the firm?

Finally, they rated their level of engagement with their current firm as well as their overall experience there.

The report contains not only the aggregate data from all associates, but slices the data by firm size, location, seniority, and a host of demographic factors, including gender, race/ethnicity, veteran status, first generation status, and more.

What Came Out on Top – What Does it Mean?

The three top reasons associates cited for staying at their firms were compensation, work-life balance, and career path. However, their narrative comments made clear that while compensation was the leading driver, it was not simply high (or higher) compensation that associates sought; rather, they want their compensation to reflect the rigor of the work they are performing, the market in which they do so, and the toll their work takes on other aspects of their lives. Indeed, taken together, these rankings and the narrative responses make it clear that associates are seeking sustainable lives which integrate high level, engaging

careers (including opportunities and support for advancement) with other important aspects of their lives.

Differentiated Priorities and Experiences

The study also revealed distinct differences in how various cohorts value specific issues. For example, Black/African American associates assigned higher importance to mentoring than either other associates of color or white associates. Associates' scores for hybrid work policies went up as firm size increased. While female associates rated leave policies higher in importance than their male peers, junior associates valued wellness and mental health initiatives, as well as programming, training and resources more highly than did their senior peers.

When They Didn't Differ

Intriguingly, there were almost no differences in the data between associates who had been hired as entry level associates and those hired as lateral associates. For many of the study factors, there were also no differences by gender, most notably the scores for professional development, opportunities for advancement, and the ability to pursue current practice area interests were generally close. And as firms grapple with resource allocation,

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associates at firms of all sizes gave formal training programs the lowest scores within professional development, but the highest scores to the opportunity to develop client relationships.

The Ties That Bind

Repeatedly, associates declared that it is the combination of the people and the work that keeps them at their current firms. Challenging, interesting work, and committed colleagues who not only support them but provide developmental guidance, forge compelling organizational bonds for these associates.

Hybrid and Remote Work

Associates are not at all keen on firms retrenching on remote and flexible work options, repeatedly identifying this as one of the leading reasons they would leave. In fact, many point out that the ability to flex when and where they work has enabled them to continue practicing at a high level while still engaging with their families and communities in meaningful ways. Associates also point to firms' success while lawyers worked remotely:

I would leave my firm if the firm began requiring in person work in the office on set days and tied such attendance to bonus or compensation. We need to look beyond the antiquated ways of working in the past. It has been three years since my firm committed to expanded work from home capabilities and during this time my firm



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has had two of its most profitable years in history.

(Re)defining Engagement, Even When it is High

The vast majority of associates (72%) reported they were either highly or somewhat engaged with their firm, with even more – 81% – saying they have had a positive experience at their firm.

However, in one of the study's most intriguing results, associates exhorted firms to expand their definitions of engagement from high billables or participation in firm citizenship events, to a more nuanced one, recognizing associates' differing life circumstances:

I do think employers need to be aware and promote the idea that 'being engaged' is



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different for everyone. It is much easier for a single person, or a person whose partner stays home with children, to be engaged vs. a person with two working parents.

Leadership Matters

Finally, associates at all levels stressed the importance not just of effective firm leadership, but of leadership transparency about firm status and priorities, as an important factor in deciding whether to stay at a firm:

It is well managed with thoughtful strategic vision and good communication from the executive committee and partners to associates.

The full report is available on The NALP Foundation's website [here](#). Custom reports are also available to firms; to discuss these, please contact Jennifer Mandery (jmandery@nalpfoundation.org). 



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