



The Law Society

Rethinking legal career development:

*How to enhance
returns on talent*

Career Satisfaction Report



About the research

In October 2014, the Law Society conducted a Career Satisfaction Survey with 344 members of its Insights Community – an online panel of members with various legal backgrounds. The survey included respondents at all stages of their legal careers, from newly qualified lawyers to managing partners and practice owners, across England and Wales. Its aim was to investigate the level of career satisfaction among members, to understand what motivates these legal professionals, and to discover the factors that exert greatest influence upon their career decisions.

The Law Society would like to thank all members of the Insights Community who regularly give up their time to participate in its valuable research.

Responding to shifting career demands

The solicitors' profession offers one of the most diverse career paths of any sector. After all, the profession spans the entire spectrum of industry – from banking and finance through to construction and manufacturing. Its members could find themselves working in-house at private companies or within government, at independent practices, or even in chambers, depending upon the career choices they make.

Each nuance of a legal career gives rise to a different set of challenges, widely varying financial remuneration, and unique demands on skills, expertise, leadership abilities, and even time.

On the whole, our research shows that solicitors find their careers highly rewarding, with the majority of our members feeling both that their work contributes to the success of their organisation, and that they are valued in their role.

At the same time however, the profession has generally been slow to adapt to the shifting expectations of its workforce – often continuing to rely on deep-rooted, historical models of leadership, career progression and decision-making structures, particularly within private practice.

Our research highlights several key risk areas for employers that are emerging as a result of this shift in expectations. For instance, our members expressed a strong desire for greater feedback on performance, wished to become more engaged in strategic decisions, and particularly amongst younger respondents, expected such things as enhanced mobility.

These findings therefore serve as an important wake-up call for employers in the sector to revise their understanding of what constitutes an effective career development strategy in today's environment. If they want to avoid losing valuable talent prematurely, employers of legal professionals will need to learn these lessons and react to these findings.

Executive summary

On the whole, solicitors find their careers rewarding, taking pride in the work they do

Our survey indicates that the majority of those working in the legal sector are satisfied with their careers. Over three-fifths (62%) of respondents are satisfied or very satisfied in their role, while three-quarters say they feel proud to work for their organisation.

Millennial mobility is an emerging risk for employers

Employers face a growing battle to hang on to young legal talent because this group are open to switching between jobs and organisations more frequently. In our survey, 35% of 25-34-year-olds say they're likely to change jobs in the next 12 months, compared to just 26% of the overall sample. The millennials' response is the highest of any group.

A lack of engagement with strategic direction is a key driver of employee departure

Respondents who are less involved in making strategic decisions about the future of the business are more likely to leave their role in the year ahead. In our survey, just 15% of respondents who are fully engaged in their organisation's strategic direction say they are likely to change jobs in the next 12 months, while 28% of those who are not engaged at all say the same. There is a split between older and younger respondents on the strategic direction of the organisation too.

Performance management is ineffective in one-third of organisations

There is a need for employers to do more for their staff in terms of providing constructive feedback and clarifying goals. Almost one-third (30%) of our survey respondents say they don't receive regular and constructive feedback on their performance. And with just under half (48%) of employees confident they're getting the feedback they need to develop effectively, it leaves a large proportion open to looking elsewhere for the mentoring that will progress their career.

A rewarding profession

For the most part, our research suggests that a career in law is a rewarding pursuit. Three-quarters of our survey respondents feel proud to work for their organisation and 88% feel that their work contributes to the success of their organisation.

We also saw that, as our members become more senior, their level of pride and appreciation of the impact of their work grows. This is demonstrated by the fact that 96% of managing partners / owners feel proud to work for their organisation and all of them (100%) feel their input contributes to organisational successes. This serves as a strong endorsement of the fulfilment that is commonly found in the sector by those that rise to senior positions. "I have achieved my career goal of owning my own practice, which gives me great satisfaction," says the managing partner of a small firm in the South East of England.

A number of our respondents suggested they derive career satisfaction through the service provided to clients, and the wide range of intellectually engaging areas they cover. One London-based solicitor from a large practice comments: "I am an immigration lawyer and the personal and highly politicised nature of immigration law makes it interesting." In our survey, 83% of respondents also feel that their team delivers the best service possible to its clients – another motivator for our members. "Employment law will never attract the highest salary but it is engaging work which is fast-moving, politically relevant and very people focused, making the most of my soft skills as well as my technical abilities," says a solicitor in a medium size practice in London.

Finding fulfilment in your field

On balance, our research shows that our members are enthused with the area of law they work in: 80% of survey respondents report being satisfied with the area of law in which they practise.

"Family law encompasses many disciplines and is interesting and rewarding", says one managing partner in a medium size practice in South East England. The survey results suggest that even though members are not always satisfied with their job – whether that's due to advancement opportunities, financial remuneration, strategic involvement, or otherwise – overall they have fulfilling careers in the areas of law they've chosen.

Having said that, those working in some areas of law feel less fortunate than others. This is often because of forces outside their control, however, rather than disillusionment with the actual field of law.

For example, some family practitioners highlighted the negative impact of the legal aid cuts. "Changes in the funding of family law leave me often unable to assist needy clients who are unable to afford private funding of often very complex cases. This is frustrating and demoralising," explains a managing partner of a small practice in the East of England.

And some personal injury and clinical negligence professionals say while their work is fulfilling, they are disappointed by a lack of recognition from the general public or the media. "I work in personal injury and clinical negligence and whilst the work itself is very rewarding, the perception of the work from the general public and media is poor and with constant changes to the way in which fees can be charged it is becoming harder," says a solicitor in a medium size practice in South East England.

"Family law encompasses many disciplines and is interesting and rewarding"

Managing partner in a medium size practice in South East England



Career trade-offs: Public sector vs. private practice

A legal career in government throws up very different demands and opportunities to one in the private sector. There will always be those members that move across the public-private threshold, and even back again. As our survey reveals, making the right choice for you is all about understanding what you really want from your career.

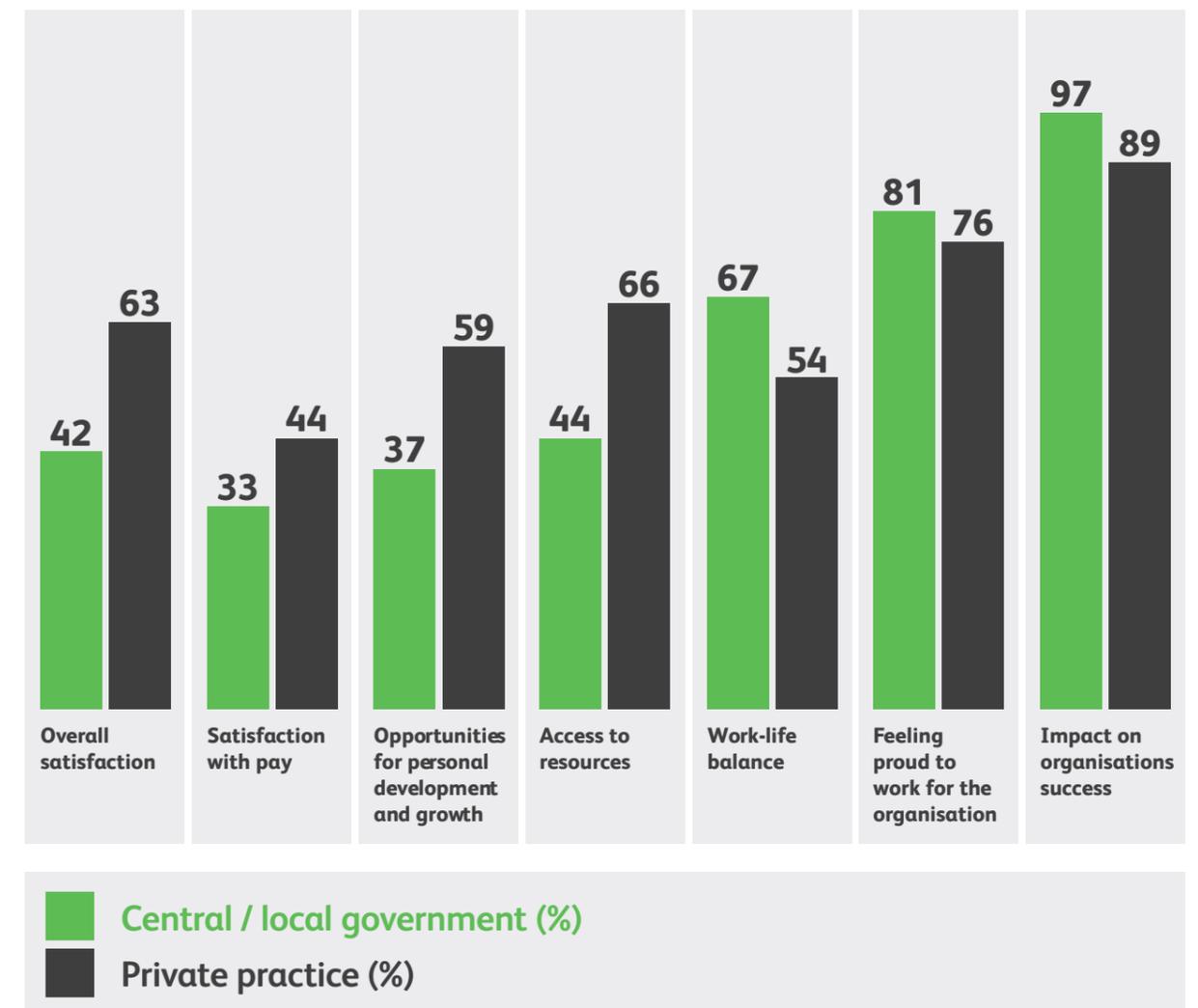
As the chart on the next page illustrates, those in the private sector show greater overall satisfaction; are happier with their pay; see greater opportunities for personal development, and say they have more resources at their disposal.

However, that is not to discount the positive attributes of public sector legal work. These respondents report a better work/life balance, a greater sense of pride in their work, and are more positive about the impact of their work on their organisation's success.

As one London-based public sector solicitor says: "I enjoy being a government lawyer. I enjoy the diversity of public law and public service. Until 18 months ago I worked in private practice. My area of work was very narrow, I was not given opportunities to progress and I was given a stark choice between career or children."

Another Yorkshire-based public sector solicitor acknowledges the trade-off in resources, but is driven by a sense of public duty. "I work in the field of criminal prosecution and am fully committed to delivering a fair, independent and effective service to victims, witnesses and the general public. This gives me satisfaction despite the challenges of working in the public sector and its resource reductions."

Public sector vs. private practice



Risks to employers

The majority of respondents (62%) report being satisfied with their careers, with the figure even higher for more experienced employees in the 55+ group (67%).

These scores are much higher than satisfaction levels reported across the UK workforce overall (50%).

Having said that, there are several areas of emerging risk to which employers should pay close attention.

Millennials' itchy feet

One of the trends we identified, which resonates with a barrage of research conducted on the attitudes of younger generations to careers, is that the millennial group in our survey (age 25-34) are most likely to report that they will switch jobs in the next year. Of this group, 35% say they are likely to move in the next 12 months, compared to 26% of overall respondents.

This finding is unsurprising when we look at studies conducted into the future of the workplace, which suggest millennials will be a job-hopping generation. Our survey also shows that it is those employees in commerce and industry who are most likely to leave their current position, with 38% of them reporting this, compared to 25% in both private practice and government.

Retaining young legal talent

In order to prevent valuable young legal talent from leaving, leading to lost value for the long-term and wasted costs on training and development, employers will need to look at where their expectations differ from older generations and react to this.

Our research identifies several key areas where the younger generation of legal professionals have markedly different expectations than their senior colleagues.

Organisational purpose

A mere 67% of the 25-34 age group are proud to work for their organisation, compared to 83% of the over-55 group. In addition, a greater proportion of under-35s do not think the outside world has a favourable view of their organisation. In response, organisations may need to reconsider how they define and communicate organisational values to help secure loyalty from future generations.

Input on strategy

Just 48% of millennials agree with their organisation's strategic direction, and only 56% are well informed about what is happening in the wider organisation. This compares to 67% and 77%, respectively, of over-55s. Younger generations are pushing for a greater strategic voice and organisations may need to move to more collaborative decision-making structures to accommodate this.

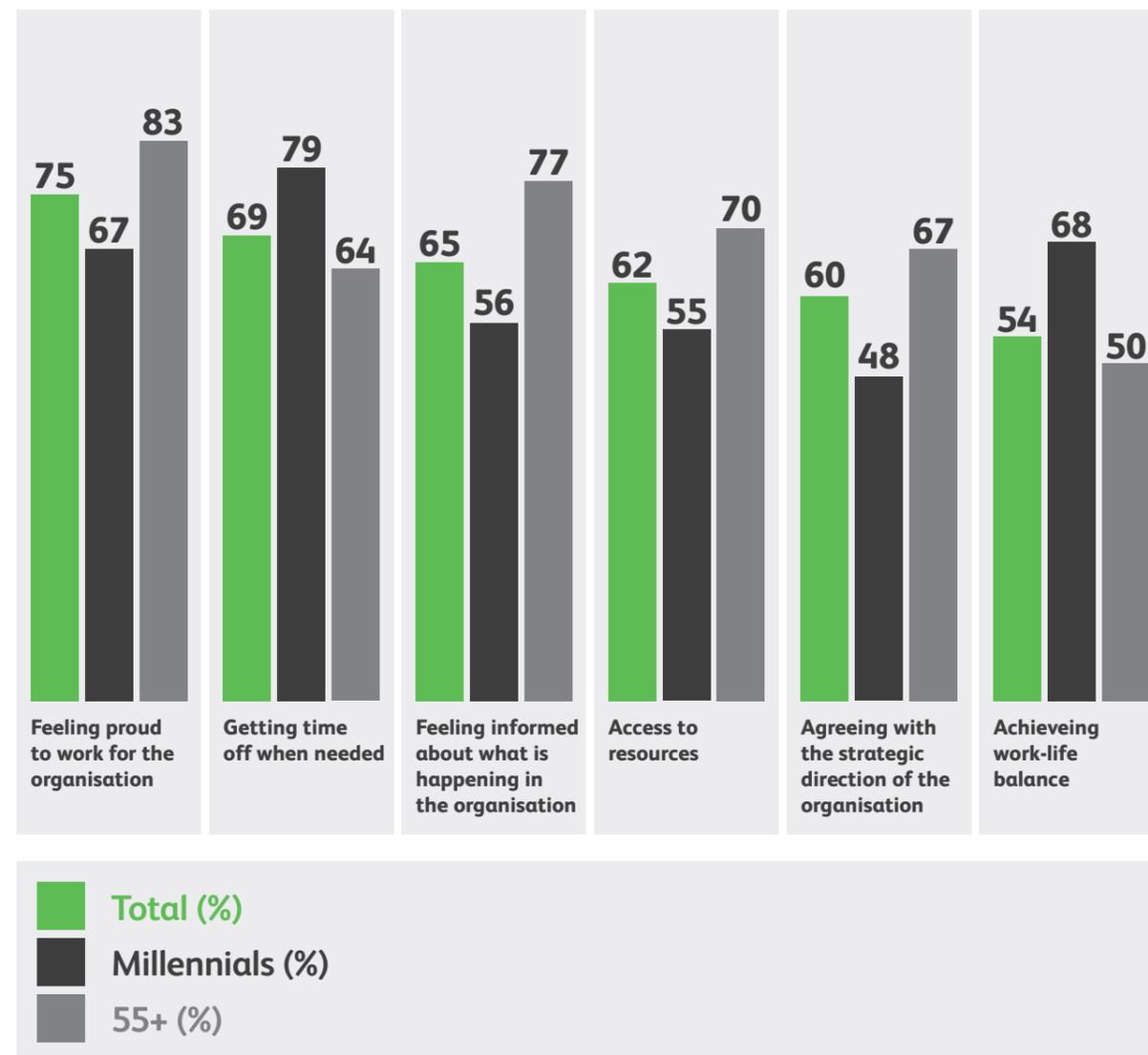
Flexible working

Millennials are demanding greater flexibility and it is evident that employers are already accommodating this to some extent: 68% of under-35s are striking the right work/life balance and 79% are getting time off when they need it. This compares to 50% and 64% respectively of over-55s. Employers must be aware that younger generations will expect this flexibility to remain throughout their careers.

Access to resources

Just over half (55%) of the youngest group surveyed feel their organisation provides the resources they need to work effectively, while 70% of the 55+ group say the same. As younger, more tech-savvy generations enter the workforce they will demand access to the latest digital technologies, which they view as natural tools of work. Organisations that do not invest in this area risk losing talent to more digital-ready competitors.

Millennials vs. 55+ group



Feedback and rewards

Constructive feedback from senior figures and management is critical for career development. Solicitors need this at every stage of the journey as they seek to develop their expertise, take on greater leadership responsibility and hone soft skills involved in managing client relationships, to name but a few.

It should therefore concern legal employers that 30% of our survey respondents do not receive regular and constructive feedback on their performance. While this is particularly common among more junior respondents – 40% of members under 35 say they don't receive regular feedback – it is also more prevalent for those working in-house in commerce and industry. "There is very little feedback from partners and no constructive criticism or support, although I do give such support to the rest of the staff," says one manager in a small North West England firm.

Unfortunately, solicitors are not the only group lacking constructive feedback. In 2014 CIPD reported that 38% of employees from across various sectors who took part in its Employee Outlook research said that their organisation's performance management processes were ineffective.

Overall, one in five respondents to our survey say they don't have opportunities for personal development and growth in their organisation, which is likely linked to the fact that performance and development needs are not regularly discussed. This should be of concern for employers as our research shows that having the opportunity to develop is the second most important driver of career satisfaction.

There are issues around recognition of good performance too. Just over half (56%) of respondents are satisfied with the recognition they receive for doing a good job. Members aged 55 or above were much more likely to be satisfied with recognition received (63%) than members

aged 35 or under (44%). Those working in the smallest organisations (fewer than 50 employees) tended to be much happier with the recognition they receive than respondents working in the largest organisations (over 250 employees). This could be a result of limited client exposure in larger organisations, which can restrict opportunities for legal professionals to understand the wider impact of their work, and make it more difficult to obtain first-hand feedback from clients.

Our study also found that just 44% of respondents are satisfied with the pay they receive. This is in line with the latest PC Holder Survey carried out by the Law Society with over 2,200 members working in private practice, government and the in-house sector. According to the PC Holder Survey, 50% of PC holders overall are either satisfied or very satisfied with their pay.

Having said that, the Career Satisfaction Survey shows that managing partners / owners are almost twice as likely as associates to be satisfied with pay (60% vs. 34%). Interestingly, in the sense that it appears to defy common perceptions about gender pay inequality across other sectors, men and women show very similar levels of satisfaction with their salaries. In addition, 45% of respondents say they are satisfied with the overall benefits package offered by their organisation.

Clearly, the level of feedback, recognition and reward provided to legal professionals has a significant bearing upon morale and performance. Where gaps in these areas exist, employers must seek to remedy the problem swiftly, not least owing to the damage it could do to their long-term growth to ignore these issues.

Sharing the strategic voice

Those who lack input into the strategic direction of their organisation are almost twice as likely to leave their current job in 2015 as those who are fully involved in strategic decisions.

Owners, managing partners and practice managers tend to have the highest career satisfaction, and this is related to their involvement in decision-making. There are, however, one fifth (21%) of respondents dissatisfied with their career progression to date, and this response was particularly common among those with no involvement in strategic decision-making (28% vs. 10% among those who were fully involved in making strategic decisions).

Moving forward, it will be important for organisations to consider whether their decision-making structures are suitable for a modern legal workforce. Expectations for a more collaborative approach to decision-making are growing, and research has shown that greater cross-practice collaboration within law firms has a positive impact on revenue, as well as client and talent retention.

Striking the work-life balance

Career fulfilment and the potential for advancement is important to all of our members and their broader wellbeing, but this does not necessarily mean it is the most important aspect of their life.

“Work-life balance is the most important thing to me. Any expectation to work outside office hours on a constant basis is not feasible or healthy. My career is not my sole concern in life and it would be a shame for it to take over to the extent that other aspects of life cannot be enjoyed,” explains one solicitor in a medium size firm in London.

For employers and managers in such a demanding sector, the challenge is to ensure solicitors are not over-worked to the detriment of their wellbeing. Failure to address this could ultimately see some of the best, most hard-working talent going out of the door. Nearly one-third (30%) of our survey respondents are not able to strike the right balance between their work and home life. The Law Society’s recent PC Holder Survey paints a similar picture: around one in five respondents from private practice are dissatisfied with the extent to which they can balance their work and non-work interests and further 26% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Women are significantly more likely to struggle with achieving work-life balance than men (34% vs. 24%).

The difficulties women experience when trying to balance personal life and career seem to distinguish the solicitors’ profession from the UK workforce overall; according to CIPD 22% of female employees struggle to achieve work-life balance compared to 28% of men.

It is worth noting that only 13% of respondents to our survey said that their workplace does not support their need to take time off when necessary.

Young members were the most likely to get time off when necessary, possibly because employers acknowledge the importance of giving study leave or because of limited involvement of junior staff in strategic activities.

“Employee involvement in decision-making is a foundation of a successful company.

It opens up lines of communication between top management and staff, helps staff better understand internal processes, encourages employees to act as internal consultants and ultimately increases their contribution to the success of an organisation.

Organisations that don’t embrace this are at risk of losing staff.”

Mark Griffin
Head of Law Society Consulting

Key drivers of employee satisfaction

Our research identifies 7 areas which drive overall career satisfaction:

1. Satisfaction with pay
2. Opportunities for personal development
3. Involvement in strategic decision-making
4. Good cooperation in the team
5. Favourable opinion of the organisation externally
6. Being able to strike work-life balance
7. Receiving satisfactory recognition



