

TBD

“

I routinely feel proud of my work – the feedback, supervision and support mean my effort actually feels seen.

”

THE TRUTH

ASSOCIATE SURVEY | DECEMBER 2025



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INTRODUCTION

This groundbreaking report is the first edition of an annual benchmark that will gauge the priorities and happiness of the beating heart of law firms – their associates. We have canvassed their opinions to understand the factors influencing their satisfaction, engagement, and retention across the UK top 250 firms.

Associate experiences within UK law firms are undergoing significant transformation, shaped by evolving expectations. Workplace culture emerges as a critical differentiator, with mid-sized and smaller firms consistently achieving higher culture ratings and recommendation rates. Yet challenges remain when it comes to safeguarding mental health and wellbeing, and creating the right environment to retain and nurture staff.

Associates today are looking for firms that foster genuine mentorship, value transparency in promotion pathways, and offer meaningful opportunities for professional growth. They increasingly expect flexible working arrangements that support their well-being while still enabling meaningful career development, alongside workplace cultures that recognise effort beyond billable hours, reward teamwork, and make space for – or even encourage – individuality.

Crucially, the true value of this research lies not only in the sector-wide trends it uncovers, but in the opportunity it provides for firms to benchmark their own results against their peers. Our early adopters are turning our findings into positive change, clearly focused on building reputations as employers of choice and climbing further up our rankings of the best firms to work for.

By comparing their own associates' experiences with external standards, firms can identify unique strengths, expose hidden vulnerabilities, and prioritise targeted interventions that will have the greatest impact.


This comparative approach transforms raw data into actionable insight, empowering firms to move beyond anecdotal evidence or inward-looking staff surveys and make informed, strategic decisions.

Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you would like to gain the same advantage.

Simon Marshall
Founder of TBD Marketing



FLIGHT RISK IS REAL

 **49%** of associates would **consider interviewing with another firm** if called by a headhunter today

 **43%** of associates wish to **pursue partnership at their current firm**

 **25%** of associates have not had a conversation in the last six months **about their future and progress**

M&A AND PRIVATE EQUITY ARE VIEWED NEGATIVELY

 M&A **-66.1**

 PRIVATE EQUITY **-59.6**

Negative net promoter scores for both M&A (-66.1) and private equity (-59.6) reveal a deep scepticism among associates about the strategic value these investment routes bring to the legal sector.

CULTURE, BELONGING AND SECURITY



24%

Culture scores well numerically but fails to resonate emotionally. Associates rate their firm's culture as 8/10 on average, **BUT 24% of associates do not believe they belong at their firm.**



41%

Psychological safety must be improved. 41% of associates do not believe their firm supports psychological safety.

ADVOCACY AND RECOMMENDATION



25% GAP

There is a 25% recommendation gap - firms must convert intention into action. 93% of respondents would recommend working at their firm to friends and family, **BUT** only 68% have actually done so.

93%

68%

GAPS IN PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT TRANSPARENCY



32%

do not believe that their firm has a constructive feedback culture.



23%

have no idea how their contribution is measured.



15%

believe their contribution is measured unfairly.

ARE YOUR ASSOCIATES DRIVING YOUR RECRUITMENT RACE?

93% of respondents would recommend working at their firm to friends and family, BUT only **68%** have actually done so

Women are more likely to be detractors: **7.8% would not recommend their firm vs 1.6% for men**

Men are more likely than women to have suggested applying for a role at their firm as a place to work: **75% vs 65%**

While nearly all UK law firm associates say they would recommend their firm as a good place to work, a smaller proportion actually do so by sending job adverts to their network. This highlights a gap between internal sentiment and external advocacy.

Gender and tenure further shape advocacy behaviour. Male associates are more likely than their female counterparts to recommend their firm to others. Associates who have been at their firm for 5-10 years emerge as the most likely to endorse their firm, possibly reflecting a sweet spot of engagement before progression pressures intensify.

For firms committed to building a consistent talent pipeline, bolstering overall happiness and deepening engagement with recruitment drives will be central to turning passive associates into active advocates.



**Simon
Marshall**

"This disconnect matters in an era when word-of-mouth recommendations remain one of the most trusted sources of information for making career decisions. Associates are often a firm's most credible ambassadors, and if their willingness to advocate is not translating into action, it suggests obstacles in culture, workload, or recognition that dampen genuine enthusiasm. Understanding and addressing those barriers could meaningfully strengthen a firm's recruitment narrative in a competitive legal talent market."

CULTURE TRUMPS SIZE

Average culture rating
across top 250 firms:

7.8 /10

Mid-sized and smaller UK law firms consistently stand out for their strong workplace cultures, with culture ratings of 8/10 or over and recommendation rates above 95%. Top 50 firms have a lower rating of 7.4.

These findings may prompt larger firms to take a closer look at where, in the journey from smaller to bigger, the associate experience starts to shift from 'inclusive' and 'flexible' towards feeling more 'pressured' or 'rigid', and what can be done to preserve the best of small-firm culture at scale.

It must also be noted that beneath this generally positive picture lie more fragile aspects of culture – particularly around how safe associates feel to speak openly about concerns and mistakes.

% of respondents that **don't believe**
that they belong at their firm:

24%

Positive descriptors dominate across all groups, including "inclusive", "supportive", "collaborative", "open", and "flexible".

Negative descriptors (e.g., "pressured", "overworked", "rigid") are less frequent but do appear, especially in comments from more experienced staff and larger firms.

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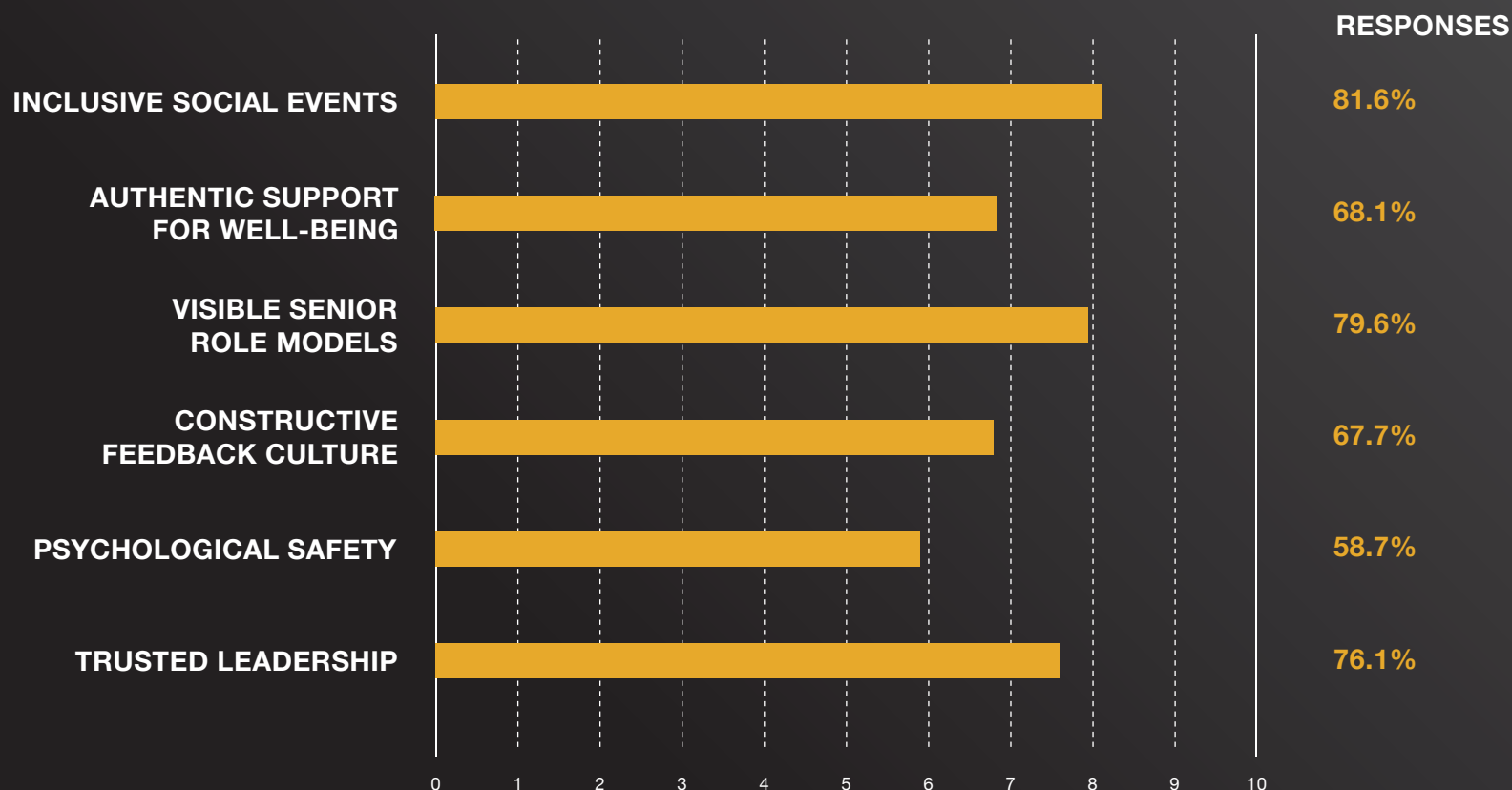


**Simon
Marshall**

“Overall, the experience at UK law firms is defined by high levels of engagement, inclusivity, and support, although firms should remain alert to subtle shifts in sentiment as associates move through their careers and their firm’s size increases. Our findings further into this report suggest that there is still work to be done.”

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY MUST BE ADDRESSED

WHICH HALLMARKS OF A HIGH-PERFORMING, MODERN LAW FIRM
APPLY TO YOURS? RATED FROM 0-10.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY MUST BE ADDRESSED

41%

of associates **do not believe** their firm supports psychological safety

Trusted leadership and senior role models are widely praised

Psychological safety remains a significant challenge within UK law firms, with more than four in ten associates feeling that their firm does not foster an environment where people feel safe to speak up, share concerns, or make mistakes without fear of negative consequences.

Alongside this, around a third of associates believe their firm lacks a constructive feedback culture, signalling that many do not experience open dialogue about performance, learning, and professional growth. These insights show that firms still have work to do to create atmospheres in which associates can be candid and proactive about both work challenges and their own development.

32%

of associates **do not believe** that their firm has a constructive feedback culture

Across all firms, **inclusive social events** are the most frequently cited marker of a positive workplace culture

Although openness and feedback remain challenges in some firms, many associates do recognise positive aspects in their workplace environment, particularly praising the trustworthiness of leadership and the presence of senior role models.

Inclusive social events are frequently acknowledged and valued by associates, suggesting that efforts to nurture team spirit and a sense of belonging are resonating. However, without parallel improvement in psychological safety, these social strengths risk being undermined, making it essential for firms to embed psychological safety more deeply into their cultural DNA.

SALARY SATISFACTION IS FAR FROM UNIFORM

RESPONDENTS WERE ASKED TO RATE THEIR SALARY AND BENEFITS OUT OF 10.

Average Salary Score:

6.2 /10

Average Benefits Score:

6.9 /10

Salary and benefits satisfaction among UK law firm associates is noticeably shaped by both age and firm size. Overall, associates rate their salary at 6.2 and their benefits at 6.9 out of 10, highlighting moderate satisfaction across the profession. Those working in smaller firms, as well as associates with longer tenure or from older age groups, tend to report higher satisfaction.

More recent joiners are less satisfied, which may reflect differences in pay structures, career stage expectations, or perceived value of benefits packages.

For senior leaders, a useful test may be whether associates at different stages could explain, in simple terms, how pay and benefits are structured and why. If newer joiners in particular are less clear on that story, or feel that the terms they agreed to no longer match their expectations, that is likely to show up quickly in conversations.

COMMUNICATION AROUND CONTRIBUTION MEASURES MUST BE IMPROVED

Associate awareness around how their contribution is measured within their firm must be significantly improved. As the data shows, there is a critical transparency gap in performance management that can undermine trust and engagement.

Without clear communication and understanding of evaluation criteria, many associates remain disconnected from how their efforts impact career progression and rewards. This highlights an urgent need for firms to clarify and effectively communicate their assessment processes.

A practical starting point is to ask whether an associate in any given team could accurately describe the criteria used in their most recent performance review, and how those criteria link to promotion, reward and development opportunities.

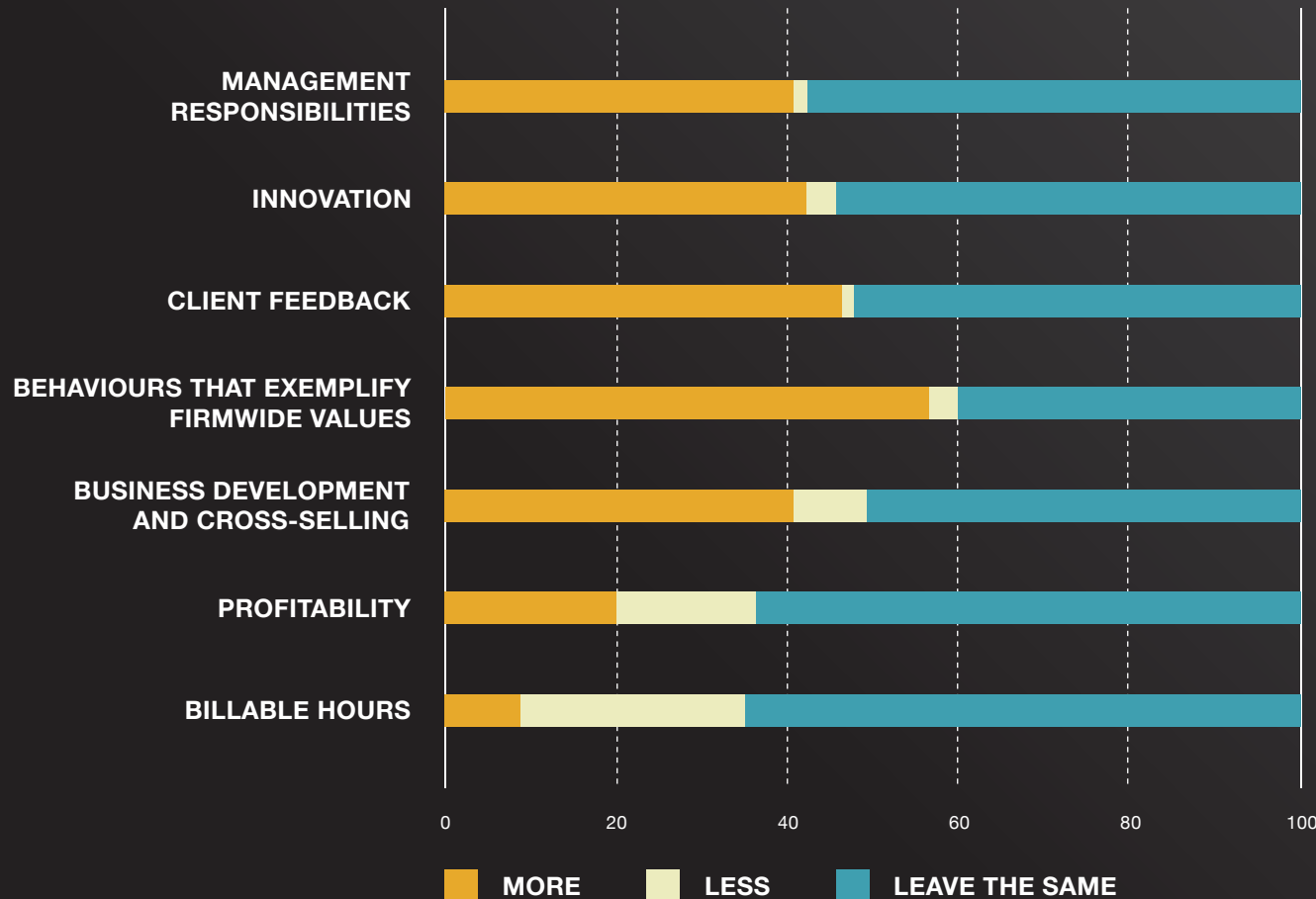
61% of respondents think that their contribution to their firm is **measured fairly**

23% of respondents **do not know** how their contribution is evaluated

15% of respondents think that their contribution is measured **unfairly**

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR CONTRIBUTION TO BE MEASURED?



The data reveals a nuanced landscape regarding associates' preferences for how their contributions are measured within law firms. While most respondents favour maintaining the current emphasis on billable hours and profitability, there is a notable appetite for increased recognition in areas such as exemplifying firmwide values and client feedback.

This suggests that associates are seeking a more holistic approach to performance evaluation that extends beyond traditional financial metrics to encompass broader contributions to firm culture, client relationships, and organisational growth.

Further analysis indicates that these preferences are shaped by size. Larger firms tend to have more respondents advocating for recognition of non-billable and teamwork-related contributions.

PRIDE IS DRIVEN BY MATTERS AND CLIENTS

Most associates feel proud of their work regularly, with client feedback and successful matters being key drivers. For younger associates, particularly those aged 20 to 29, pride often stems from significant “firsts”, such as their first big case or first client win.

These recent achievements are mentioned frequently, reflecting how pride can build steadily as younger lawyers gain confidence and experience. By contrast, older associates aged 40 and above tend to connect pride with mentoring others and maintaining long-term client relationships.

“ I really feel like I’m making a difference to my clients as well as contributing to the growth of the department. Having constant feedback from my supervisor and seniors allows me to constantly refine my work and be proud of my output.

I feel proud of my work often, but mainly when a case comes to an end. ”

“



**Simon
Marshall**

Associates gain a real sense of reward from both supervisor and client feedback. Closing deals, helping vulnerable clients and working on difficult cases are key milestones and motivators. With client demands and targets to meet, it can be tempting to move on to the next matter; however, managers should be made aware and systems put in place to capture and celebrate significant moments, particularly in light of associates wanting their contributions to be measured more on client feedback.”

HYBRID WORKING POLICIES MUST BE CONSISTENT

On average, associates rate hybrid working policies as 8.2 out of 10. However, when associates were asked to elaborate on their responses, key themes emerged.

Associates consistently highlight that policies are especially effective when built on flexibility and a foundation of trust, enabling individuals to adapt their working arrangements to their personal circumstances. However, the most common source of frustration is inconsistent policy application/use – whether between teams, managers, or departments — which can undermine trust and limit the positive impact of otherwise well-designed policies.

“My line manager understands the need to balance the firm’s expectations and the need to retain the talent that isn’t based that close to the office.”

“The policy is 50% attendance with no rationale, but enforcement is missing. It works for me but there is no team spirit in my office.”

“It’s generally very fair, but there is some inconsistency across the firm and across offices.”

The lived experience of hybrid working varies across firm size and demographic groups. At the largest firms, the concept of “anchor days” is common, but enforcement and flexibility can fluctuate significantly by team. Among smaller firms, there is a broader spectrum, from highly flexible approaches that empower associates to determine their own split between office and home, to those with rigidly worded policies that are nonetheless loosely applied in practice.

Leaders should test whether associates in different offices or practice groups would give broadly the same description of how hybrid working operates in practice, or whether local custom has effectively created several different policies under the same banner. Flexibility in where people work is only one dimension of an inclusive culture. As we see on the next page, questions of identity and ‘fitting in’ continue to shape associates’ day-to-day experience.



**Simon
Marshall**

“These nuanced perspectives point to the need for hybrid working policies that combine clarity and fairness in application, ensuring that flexibility is equitably experienced across all parts of the firm.”

NOT EVERYONE CAN BE THEIR AUTHENTIC SELVES AT WORK

“

“I’ve had to hide my family aspirations and suppress core values to fit in.”

“

“A culture of extroverts seems to be expected.”

“

“Most people have a classic life outside of work (marriage, kids, etc.) and I’m not comfortable talking about my life when it doesn’t fit that mould.”

“

“I am 100% my authentic self and valued for that.”

“

“I was very honest about who I am, and my refusal to hide that! They accepted me with open arms.”

A notable minority of law firm associates express that they have had to suppress their identity, or provide nuanced comments that highlight the complexity of workplace inclusion. Fifteen percent of associates state that they cannot be their authentic selves at work. For top 50 firms, this rises to 19%. Associates at firms outside the top 100 are more likely to say that they haven’t had to suppress their authentic selves.

Associates of all ages acknowledge feeling pressure to conform. Their comments frequently mention the need to “act more seriously”, “hide personal life”, or fit the mould of the traditional lawyer.

At the same time, however, associates also describe a growing range of visible initiatives and programmes aimed at recognising and supporting difference across their firms.

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**Simon
Marshall**

“Comments from across the demographic spectrum include references to hiding neurodiversity, introversion or social background, underscoring that experiences of inclusion remain far from universal.”

EFFORTS TO CELEBRATE DIFFERENCE ARE BEING NOTICED

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“There has been a big push on diversity within the firm. I can see it over the last 12 months, not only in the types of people we are hiring but their varied backgrounds.” -Top 50 firm

“The firm is always growing and evolving on its stance on diversity and inclusion and strives to be the most inclusive firm that it can be. The senior leadership team are constantly seeking and implementing feedback from the staff to make it as inclusive and diverse as it can be.” -Top 200 firm

“The general messaging and the funding has changed due to the pressure from the current administration. It’s unfortunate.” -Top 10 firm

“We have dozens of EDI initiatives and lots of noise around it. Whether it translates to something meaningful, I am unsure. Focus is on protected characteristics more than general ability to be oneself and psychological safety. Feedback is not welcomed and rarely sought.” -Top 100 firm

“My firm pays lip service to diversity.” -Top 50 firm

”

Law firms are increasingly sophisticated in their approach to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Some staff caution that inclusion initiatives are being rolled back, remain superficial, or are too limited in scope.

The most common developments include the creation of new committees and working groups, more visible and formalised policies, targeted recruitment or promotion of underrepresented groups, and an increase in training and awareness events.

Despite these steps forward, some scepticism remains – particularly among older or longer-tenured staff.

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**Simon
Marshall**

“Law firms must go beyond surface-level policy and create environments where professionals feel valued for their differences, see visible pathways for progression, and experience fairness and respect in daily interactions. Regular check-ins, sponsorship opportunities, and focused investment in the growth of diverse teams transform D&I efforts from aspiration into lived experience.”

INORGANIC GROWTH IS VIEWED WITH SCEPTICISM

Notably negative net promoter scores for both M&A (-66.1) and private equity (-59.6) reveal a deep scepticism among associates about the strategic value these investment routes bring to the legal sector.

While private equity is perceived slightly less unfavourably, the overall sentiment suggests that transactional growth models are failing to inspire confidence at the associate level. This disconnect between leadership's pursuit of deal-driven strategies and associates' perceptions of their benefit could erode alignment, morale, and long-term engagement.

For leadership undertaking these growth strategies, the findings highlight an urgent need to reassess how these initiatives are communicated, justified, and integrated into the firm's broader success narrative, ensuring that associates see tangible value rather than abstract financial engineering.

Bringing associates on your growth journey

There is much to be done to help associates embrace change. When communicating external investment or inorganic growth, leadership should:

Reframe the narrative of transactional growth.

Clearly articulate how your chosen strategy contributes to better outcomes for your associates. Financial firepower and synergies may directly improve their lived experience, including career development and secondment opportunities, higher quality client relationships and innovation investment.

Engage associates in strategic dialogue.

Create forums or workshops where associates can voice concerns, ask questions, and explore alternative growth models. This approach can reduce scepticism and foster buy-in. Remember to track sentiment over time to assess whether your efforts are shifting perceptions.

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO? STICKINESS IS LIMITED

Law firm associates display notable openness to career mobility, with 49% saying they may consider attending an interview with another firm if approached by a headhunter. Twenty eight percent of respondents state that they would be likely or very likely to go to an interview if headhunted, and a further 21% remain unsure.

This signals a considerable potential for movement, even among those not actively job-searching, underscoring the importance for firms to focus on engagement and retention strategies. Mobility trends are strongly influenced by firm size and level of experience. Associates at top 50 firms are the most likely to consider leaving, with 54% showing openness to a move compared to 43% at firms outside the top 100.

The likelihood is even higher among those early in their careers; 58% of associates with one to five years' tenure would attend an interview elsewhere if approached.

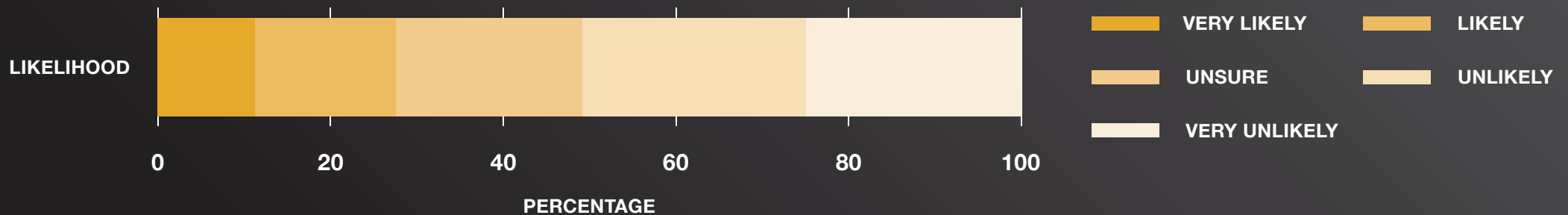
49% of associates would consider an interview with another firm if called by a headhunter

54% Associates from top 50 firms are more likely to jump ship (54% vs 43% at firms outside the top 100)

58% of 1-to-5-year-tenure associates would attend an interview with another firm

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO? STICKINESS IS LIMITED

LIKELIHOOD TO TALK TO A HEAD HUNTER



49% of associates may consider an interview with another firm if called by a headhunter.



**Simon
Marshall**

“The motivating factors for moves are rarely about joining a bigger firm. Associates instead cite the desire for improved work-life balance, enhanced culture and management, greater flexibility or remote working options, and higher pay or better benefits. In fact, several comments express a preference for the distinctive culture and flexibility found in smaller or mid-sized firms, and some reveal a wariness of the pressure and culture typical of the largest firms.”

THE PATH TO PARTNERSHIP WILL NOT BE THE MOST TRODDEN

THERE IS ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT WITH REGARDS TO COMMUNICATING CAREER PATHWAYS.

6.8/10

Associates gave an average score of **6.8 out of 10** when asked how clearly their firm sets out **career pathways and supports different career options**

There is room for improvement in how law firms communicate career pathways. On average, associates rate their firms 6.8 out of 10 for clearly outlining career progression options and supporting diverse career paths.

Only 43% of associates wish to pursue partnership at their current firm – importantly, however, very few associates express a desire to leave the profession entirely.

Firms should act to improve transparency and have regular conversations around career pathways. They should make clear that options beyond traditional partnership – such as legal director positions or alternative roles – are valued and achievable.

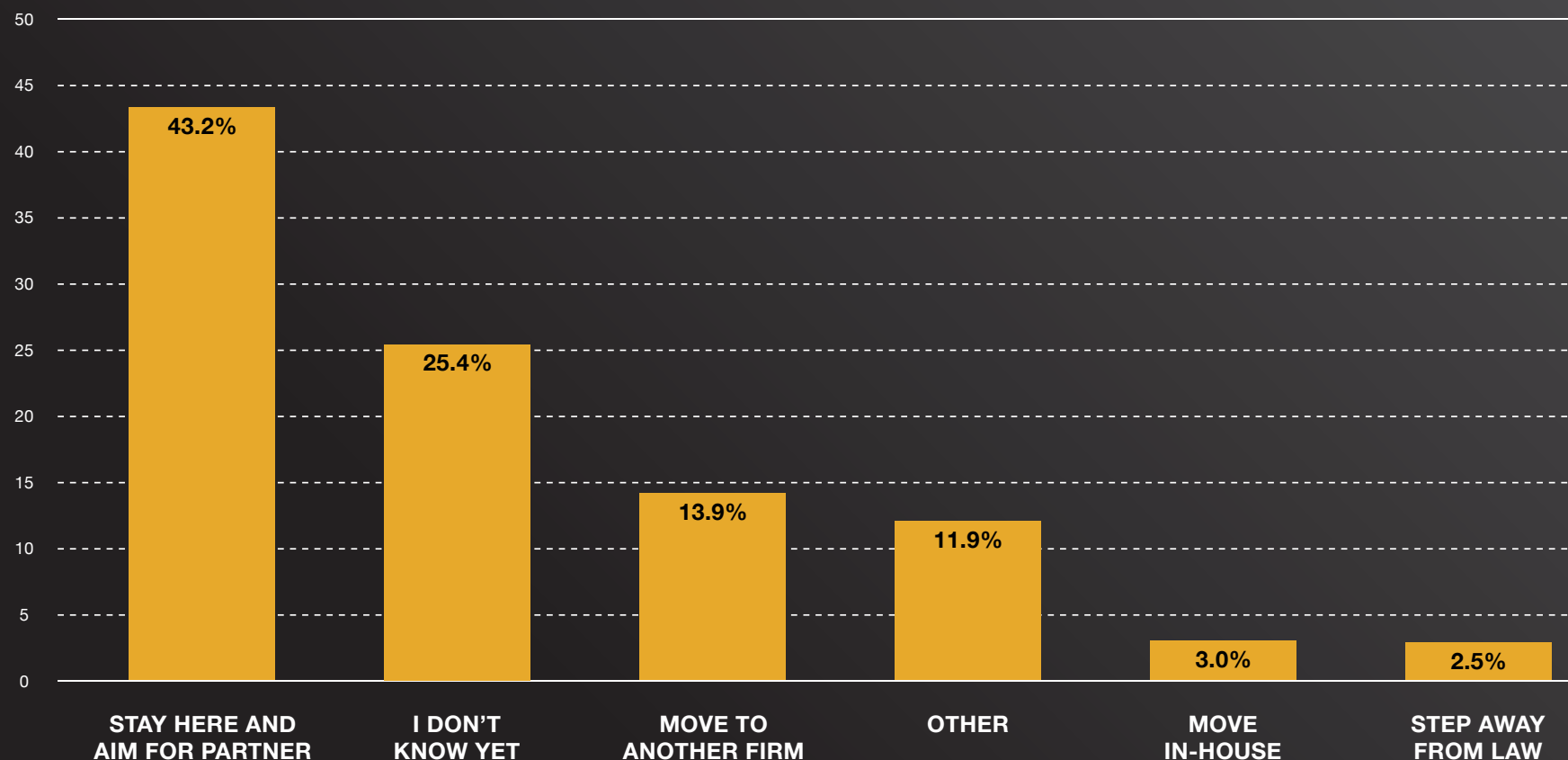
25%

of associates have not had a conversation in the last six months about their **future and progress**

Only 43% of associates want to aim for partnership at their current firm, underscoring a vital opportunity to expand and clarify alternative career paths within law.

THE PATH TO PARTNERSHIP WILL NOT BE THE MOST TRODDEN

WHAT CAREER PATH ARE YOU MOST SERIOUSLY CONSIDERING?



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FIRMS

This first edition of the Associate Survey paints a nuanced picture. On many measures, associates describe their firms in positive terms: cultures they experience as inclusive and collaborative, trusted leaders, and work they are proud to put their name to. At the same time, the data show clear fault lines – in psychological safety, pay satisfaction, perceptions of fairness in performance measurement, and the consistency with which hybrid working is applied.

For leadership teams, the message is less about wholesale reinvention and more about closing these gaps. Associates want clarity about how their contribution is judged, visible support when they speak up, and recognition for behaviours that strengthen client relationships and firm culture as well as for billable output. They are also signalling that careers cannot be understood only through the lens of partnership. A sizeable minority are open to moves elsewhere, and many are looking for progression routes that allow them to grow without leaving.

The findings are best read as an invitation to inquiry rather than a final verdict. Each firm will have its own story behind the numbers.

The real value lies in using this benchmark to ask better questions:

- ✓ Where does our culture genuinely support belonging, and where does it fray?
- ✓ How confident are we that associates understand what is expected of them, and see those expectations being applied fairly?
- ✓ Are our policies – from hybrid working to inclusion initiatives – experienced consistently in practice, or do they depend too heavily on individual partners or teams?

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FIRMS

METHODOLOGY

We approached the top 200 firms by headcount to provide a confidential forum to share their views — not only on their personal motivators and career aspirations, but also on how they feel about their remuneration, work/life balance, firm culture, leadership, progression opportunities, and even the competition.

Data was gathered in such a way that we can ensure the source without identifying the owner, meaning each firm can be given its own verified scores. Initial responses were gathered from September to October 2025.

But this is just the start of your journey. We will continue to encourage firms to take part over the coming year, taking time to develop the Associate Survey to become the industry standard and offering firms the chance to compare their data to their peers and the market.

Our survey can offer you a clear and honest reflection of the mood within your organisation and the wider market.

[Click here](#) to find out more and get your firm involved to help:

- ✓ Translate data into action
- ✓ Understand whether your people-led initiatives are resulting in a happier and more committed workforce
- ✓ Help you to retain talent
- ✓ Outline specific points to improve
- ✓ Pinpoint how your culture is defined, lived and breathed



Simon Marshall
TBD Marketing

INTRODUCING THE TRUTH: THE PARTNER EDITION

Law firms often rely on **internal surveys** to benchmark progress from year to year but an internal survey can only ever tell part of the story: it gives you no sense of how you compare with the rest of the market.

That's why we have launched **The Truth**. Independent, UK-wide annual surveys that are designed to sit alongside whatever your own firm already does internally and to provide a more candid picture of what life as a partner or associate actually feels like, today.

We want to hear what is working well and what, if you are honest, you have had enough of; whether you can realistically see yourself doing this for the next five or ten years, and whether, if you were starting again, you would still regard your career path as a sensible choice or an expensive mistake. **The partner survey is running from now to the end of January**, with a free top-level findings report to follow in the spring once we have analysed the data.

Your insights and experience will show us the patterns that can help shape a more realistic, sustainable understanding of what partnership means in the modern legal world.

Please lend us your voice and complete the survey at
<https://www.tbdmarketing.co.uk/law-firm-partner-survey>




SCAN ME

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