SurePoint®

2025

Partner Perspectives

What Law Firm Leaders Need to Know About Satisfaction, Advancement, and Firm Culture

Image by Acirelavt from @pixabay

Table of Contents

Introduction

To better understand how law firms are changing, SurePoint Technologies conducted its inaugural **Partner Satisfaction Survey**, gathering insights from more than 400 partners across a wide range of firms, from top Am Law 200 practices to mid-sized firms. The survey explored compensation satisfaction, preparation for partnership, transparency of advancement paths, and perceptions of firm culture.

The findings reveal that the legal industry is in the midst of significant structural change, shaped by evolving partnership models and shifting expectations among attorneys at every level. One of the most notable trends is the rapid expansion of the non-equity partner (NEP) tier. Once a relatively small segment, non-equity partners now make up a substantial portion of leadership in firms of all sizes, particularly outside the highest-grossing firms.

This transformation is reshaping how law firms attract, retain, and compensate talent while also raising broader questions about culture, career advancement, and succession planning. Although the non-equity partner role is often positioned as a prestigious milestone that offers higher billing rates and greater responsibilities, the reality is more nuanced. For some, it represents a step toward equity partnership. For others, it becomes a static position with limited influence, unclear advancement paths, and compensation that does not always align with contributions.

The growing prominence of non-equity partners is also influencing how clients and attorneys evaluate firms. Corporate legal departments under pressure to maximize value are beginning to examine distinctions between equity and non-equity partners. Meanwhile, younger attorneys are increasingly focused on work-life balance and career expectations—factors that directly affect the appeal and retention of non-equity partners.

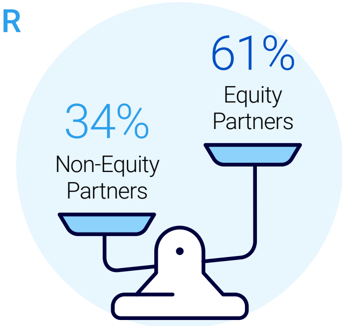
This white paper presents the survey's key findings and provides a broader context on how the evolving partnership structure is reshaping the legal industry.

Notably, the results reveal significant disparities in satisfaction and expectations between equity and non-equity partners, as well as between attorneys at different types of firms. For mid-sized firms, adopting the non-equity model presents unique challenges in retaining talent, particularly when compensation does not offer a meaningful advancement from senior associate roles. Meanwhile, dissatisfaction around unclear promotion criteria and limited participation in firm governance continues to fuel frustration within the non-equity tier.

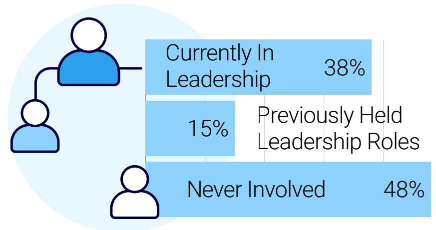
This white paper presents the survey's key findings and provides a broader context on how the evolving partnership structure is reshaping the legal industry. As firms navigate these challenges, understanding the expectations, frustrations, and aspirations of their partners—particularly those in the non-equity tier—will be essential to fostering sustainable growth, maintaining firm culture, and meeting client demands in an increasingly competitive environment.

Survey Respondent Demographics

PARTNER TIER



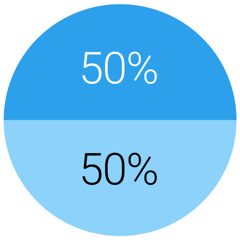
FIRM LEADERSHIP INVOLVEMENT



AM LAW 200 AFFILIATION

Employed at Am Law 200 Firm

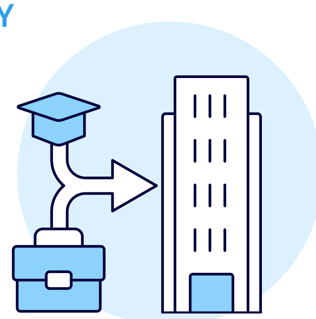
Not Employed at Am Law 200 Firm



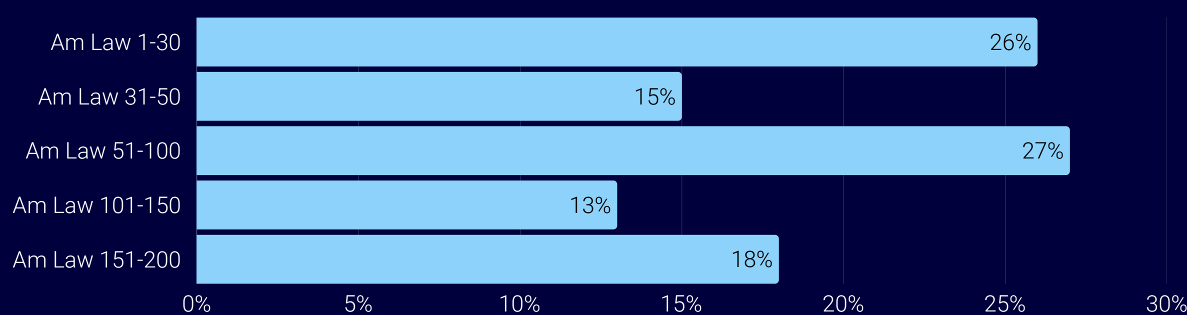
CAREER PATHWAY

16%
Joined Current Firm Out of Law School

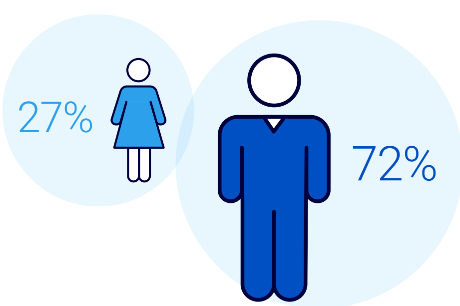
84%
Joined Current Firm After Gaining Experience Elsewhere



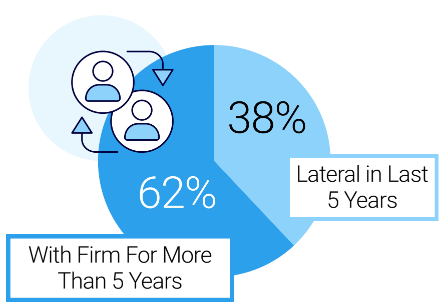
FIRM RANKING TIER Am Law 200 Only



GENDER IDENTITY



RECENT LATERAL MOVEMENT



Executive Summary

The traditional law firm partnership model is being reshaped, and nowhere is that clearer than in the data from SurePoint's first-ever **Partner Satisfaction Survey**, powered by Leopard Solutions. Capturing the experiences of 407 partners across Am Law 200 and mid-sized firms, the survey reveals widespread frustration among non-equity partners (NEPs) over unclear promotion paths, limited influence, and compensation that often fails to keep pace with expectations. Nearly a quarter of respondents described the path to equity as "not clear at all," while 33% said their compensation does not reflect their contributions. Tellingly, 38% of NEPs reported earning only slightly more than senior associates, underscoring the structural tension between title, workload, and reward.

These findings mirror a broader market shift. The NEP tier is not only expanding but increasingly defining the partnership experience. Once a secondary model, non-equity partnership has now become the norm across most major firms. According to Bloomberg Law and The American Lawyer, 87 of the 100 largest U.S. firms by gross revenue now have NEPs, and 70 have expanded their NEP ranks since 2021. At the current pace, NEPs are expected to outnumber equity partners at top-grossing firms, a trend accelerating across Big Law.

This transformation is both structural and strategic. Firms like **Kirkland & Ellis** have shown how leveraging the partner title, without offering equity, can be a powerful recruitment and retention tool. As Yale Professor John Morley noted in Bloomberg Law, "Kirkland & Ellis is the 800-pound gorilla that is breaking everybody else's business model." The firm's NEP tier, now exceeding 900 attorneys, has played a central role in driving its exceptional financial results.

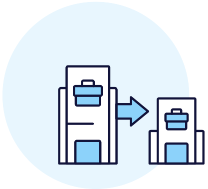
Yet the sustainability of this model is in question. SurePoint's survey highlights how NEPs often occupy ambiguous career positions: **49% reported receiving no formal training upon promotion**, and **77% said only equity partners hold voting power in firm governance**.

Meanwhile, client demands are reshaping firm economics. **Corporate legal departments are prioritizing value, driving work to smaller, more agile firms and increasing reliance on Alternative Fee Arrangements (AFAs).** Firms that respond with transparent pricing and clear career paths for NEPs are better positioned to capture market share, while those that fail to adapt risk losing mid-career talent to competitors offering greater clarity and flexibility.

Compensation pressures add to the challenge. Law.com reports senior associate salaries now regularly exceed $575,000, including bonuses. In some cases, top associates out-earn NEPs, creating frustration and attrition risks. SurePoint's survey reflects this same dynamic: more than one-third of NEPs said their pay is tied too heavily to originations, while many noted that bonus structures disproportionately favor equity partners.

In this context, law firm leaders must rethink partnership structures. The expansion of the NEP tier offers both opportunity and risk: a powerful growth engine when managed with transparency and fairness, or a destabilizing force when career paths, compensation, and governance remain opaque. As SurePoint's survey underscores, the non-equity partner experience is at a crossroads, and how firms respond will shape the future of Big Law.

Corporate legal departments are prioritizing value, driving two major trends:



Shifting work to smaller, more agile firms

Growing reliance on Alternative Fee Arrangements (AFAs)

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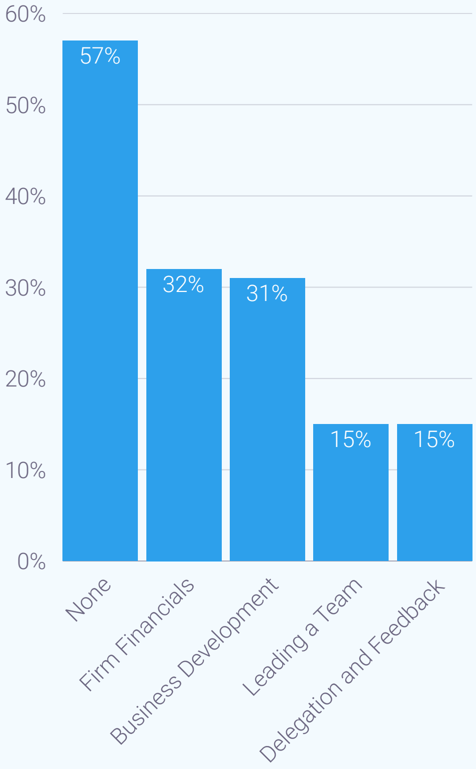
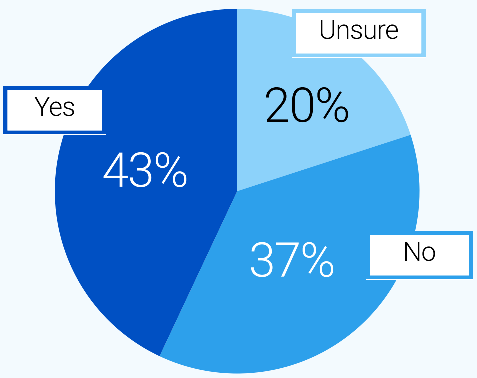
All Partners

The survey results reveal a significant gap in formal training for new law firm partners. A majority—**57%** of respondents—reported receiving no formal instruction in any of the key areas listed, suggesting that many firms promote individuals to partner-level roles without structured onboarding or support. Among those who did receive training, the most common areas were firm financials (**32%**) and business development (**31%**), reflecting some prioritization of financial and client-facing competencies. However, these numbers still represent fewer than one in three new partners, indicating inconsistent investment in critical business skills. Training in leadership and team management was even more limited, with only about **15%** reporting guidance in delegation, feedback, or leading a team. This lack of preparation may hinder partners' effectiveness as managers and mentors. A handful of respondents noted prior experience, such as having run their own firm or joining laterally as a partner, which may have substituted for formal instruction. Overall, the data highlights a broader issue in law firm professional development: new partners are often expected to succeed without the foundational training that supports leadership, business growth, and operational fluency.

Formal Training Received Upon Becoming Partner



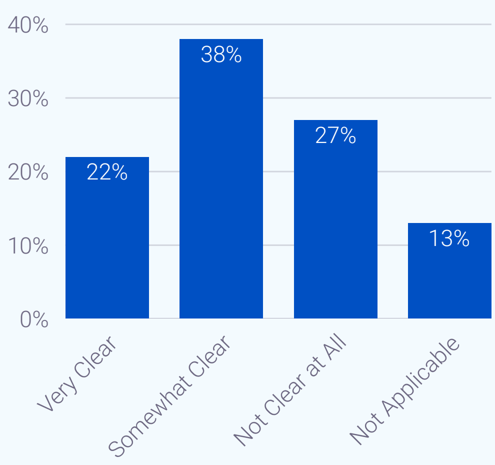
Do Clients Know Your Partnership Status?



Client awareness of partner tier status appears to be inconsistent across firms. Roughly **43%** of respondents said their clients are aware of their tier designation, while **37%** reported that clients are not, and **20%** were unsure.

This variation suggests that partner tiers are not uniformly communicated or emphasized in client relationships. The notable percentage of respondents who are uncertain further indicates a lack of clarity around whether this information is shared intentionally, perceived implicitly, or considered relevant by clients at all. These findings suggest that while tier distinctions may carry weight internally, their external visibility and impact may be limited or inconsistently understood.

Transparency of Non-Equity to Equity Progression



Clarity around the path from non-equity to equity partnership is uneven across firms. While **22%** of respondents said the path is very clear, **38%** described it as somewhat clear, and **27%** reported that it is not clear at all. Additionally, **13%** indicated the question was not applicable to their situation.

These figures suggest that although some firms make an effort to outline the criteria and expectations for equity promotion, a significant portion still lack transparency in this area. The fact that only about one in five respondents sees the path as very clear underscores the ongoing need for firms to better define and communicate advancement frameworks—both to support professional development and to foster trust in leadership.

Partnership Structures, Power & Progression

BEYOND EQUITY & NON-EQUITY
Alternative Partnership Tracks

"Everyone is 'equity' but not real equity until full equity. I selected non-equity because I am not full equity. It's a game."

"There are three partner designations:

1. Office Partners (entry-level)
2. Non-Proprietary/ National Partners
3. and Equity Partners."

"It is a unitary partnership in which most partners have fractional equity shares."

"Special Counsel get profit share."

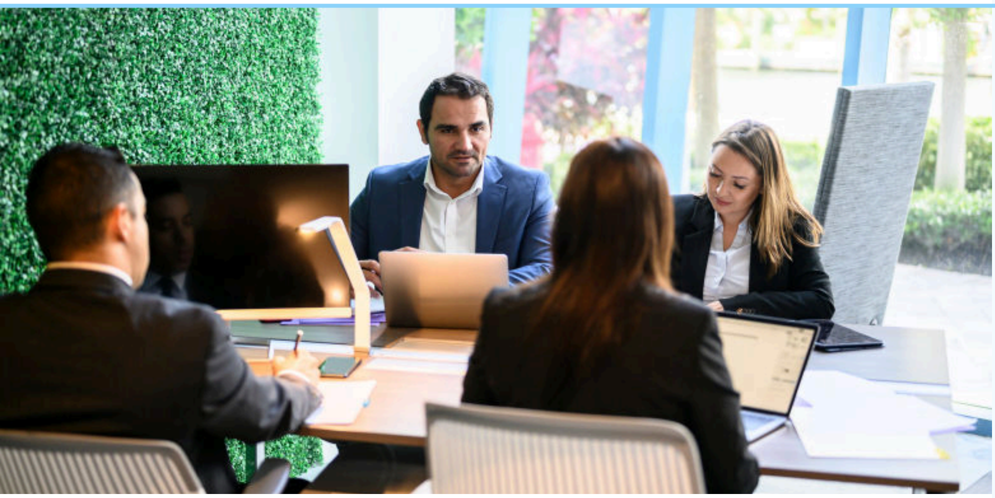
Power & Priorities in Partnership

67%

said income generation is very or extremely important in determining or maintaining partner status

79%

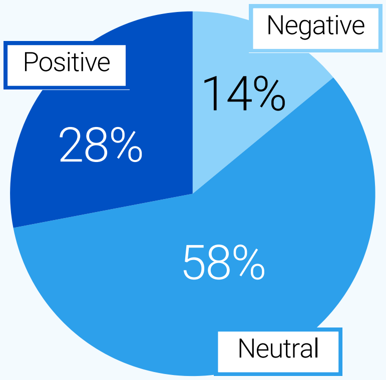
said only equity partners have voting power at their firm



Impact of Non-Equity Tier Expansion and Support for the Tier Differentiation

The impact of the expanding non-equity partner tier on firm culture appears to be largely neutral. **58%** of respondents said the effect has been neither positive nor negative, while **28%** viewed it as a positive development and **14%** saw it as negative. This suggests that, for many firms, the growth of the non-equity tier has been relatively uncontroversial or has yet to significantly alter day-to-day dynamics. However, the fact that nearly one-third of respondents viewed the change as having either a positive or negative impact indicates that experiences vary and may depend on how the tier is implemented and perceived internally.

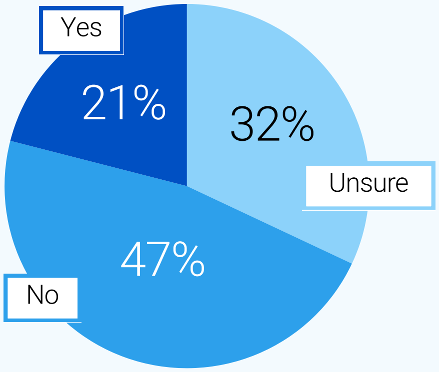
How has the expansion of the non-equity tier affected your firm culture?



When asked about the potential introduction of two distinct non-equity partner tiers—such as an "apprenticeship" and a "permanent" track—opinions were mixed but leaned skeptical. About **47%** of respondents opposed the idea, while only **21%** expressed support. Nearly **32%** were unsure, reflecting a lack of consensus and perhaps uncertainty about how such a structure would function in practice. These responses suggest that while firms are grappling with how to define and manage non-equity roles, there may be hesitancy to further complicate the partner structure without a clear strategic rationale.

Would you support the creation of two non-equity partner tiers?

(eg. apprenticeship and permanent)



Thoughts on partnership experience, career goals, or your firm's strategy.

"Do not find closed compensation systems motivational for many partners."

"AI will blow up in Big Law model faster than most think."

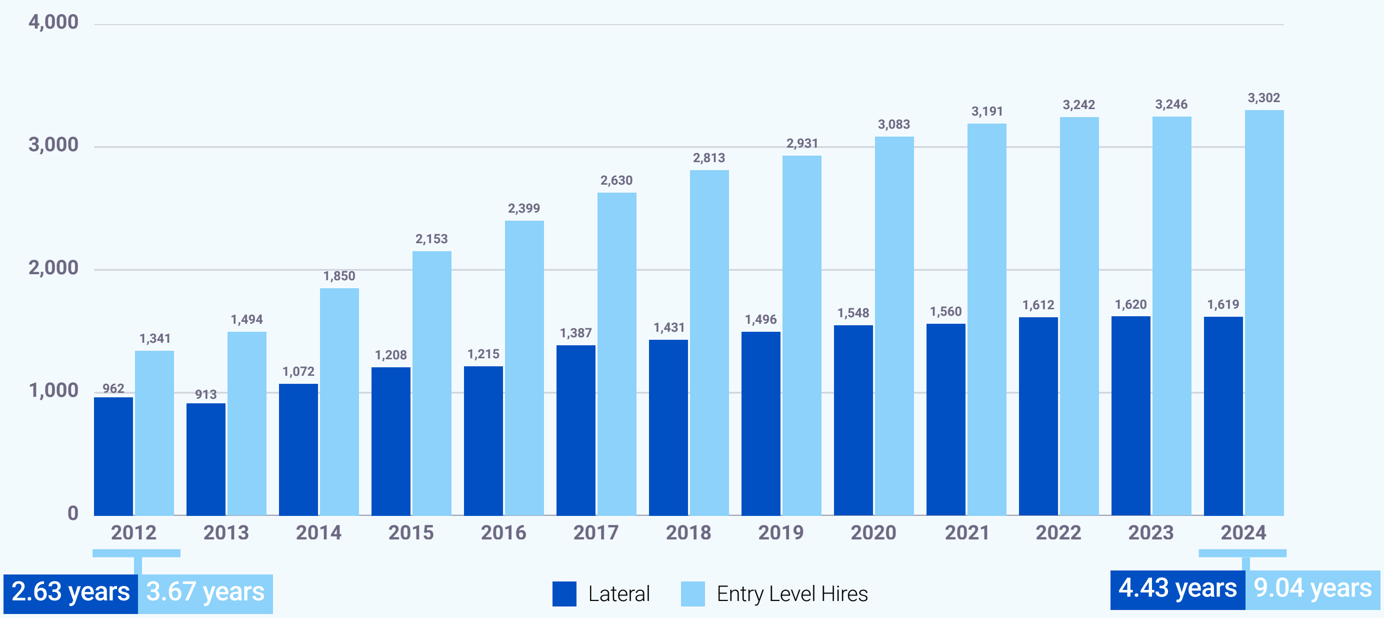
"Having done a market check, partners with moderately successful practices at the firm are very underpaid... the culture is good, but compensation and management are pushing people out."

"I am leaving my firm after eight years in large part to greed... The path to equity has more to do with favoritism than merit."

"As a non-equity partner... you feel disenfranchised. You have very little to say in anything."

"I wish I never went into law... The longer you're at a firm, the more you're stuck there."

Am Law 200: Promotion to **Partner** by Days



Over the past decade, the path from an attorney's hire date to their promotion to partner at Am Law 200 firms has shifted significantly. In 2012, entry-level associates made partner only about a year later than lateral hires, measured from the day each was hired by the firm. By the end of 2024, however, that gap has steadily widened to 4.6 years. Notably, the timeline for lateral hires to reach partnership has also increased by 1.8 years.

SurePoint

Non-Equity Partners

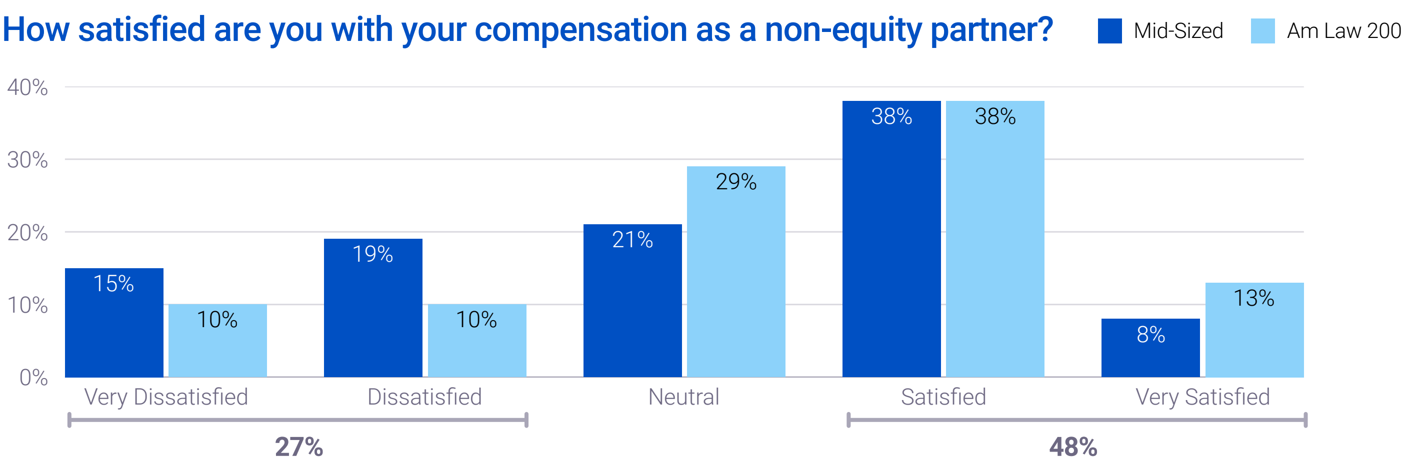
Satisfaction with compensation among non-equity partners is mixed, though it leans slightly positive. Nearly 48% of respondents reported being either **satisfied** or **very satisfied** with their pay, while about 27% expressed some level of dissatisfaction. A quarter of respondents remained neutral. These results suggest that while many non-equity partners feel fairly compensated, a significant portion do not—pointing to potential issues around pay transparency, perceived value, or expectations tied to the partner title. The relatively high neutral response may also indicate uncertainty about how their compensation compares within the firm or the broader market.

Respondents ranked the following factors based on their impact on compensation.

1. Originations
2. Billable Hours / Billed Production
3. Client Relationship Management
4. Profitability Metrics
5. Firm Leadership Roles
6. Firm Contributions (Committee, Mentorship, etc)
7. Client Service Collaboration
8. Pro Bono and Community Work

Non-Equity Partner Compensation Satisfaction

How satisfied are you with your compensation as a non-equity partner?



Sentiment around being named a non-equity partner varies widely, though many view it as a career progression rather than a final destination. The most common response—selected by 42% of participants—was that non-equity partnership is seen as a **stepping stone toward equity**, suggesting that for many, the title represents a transitional phase rather than a permanent role. About 17% said it was their **intended career destination** and that they're content with it, while smaller percentages cited specific advantages such as **avoiding management responsibilities** (8%) or not **having to commit capital** (4%).

On the other hand, 13% of respondents felt **they aren't viewed in the same light as equity partners,** and 6% reported feeling **slighted by their lack of influence or ownership**. Another 10% selected "Other," offering nuanced perspectives ranging from semi-retirement or structural firm limitations to personal circumstances or frustrations with a promised path to equity that failed to materialize.

Together, these responses reveal a layered and sometimes conflicting set of experiences: while many see non-equity partnership as a positive or pragmatic step, others experience it as a source of frustration, inequality, or stalled advancement. This complexity underscores the need for firms to be transparent about the role's purpose and potential—and to ensure that expectations and realities are closely aligned.

Tale of two NEPs

Mid-Sized

- **56%** say pay **does not reflect their contributions**
- **52%** earn **the same or slightly more than senior associates** while 17% earn less
- **43%** receive **reduced or no performance bonuses tied to origination**

Am Law 200

- Almost **33%** say their compensation does **not reflect their contributions**
- Nearly **38%** of non-equity partners earn **only slightly more** than senior associates; **48%** report **significantly higher pay**
- Just **24%** receive origination-based bonuses at the same level as equity partners

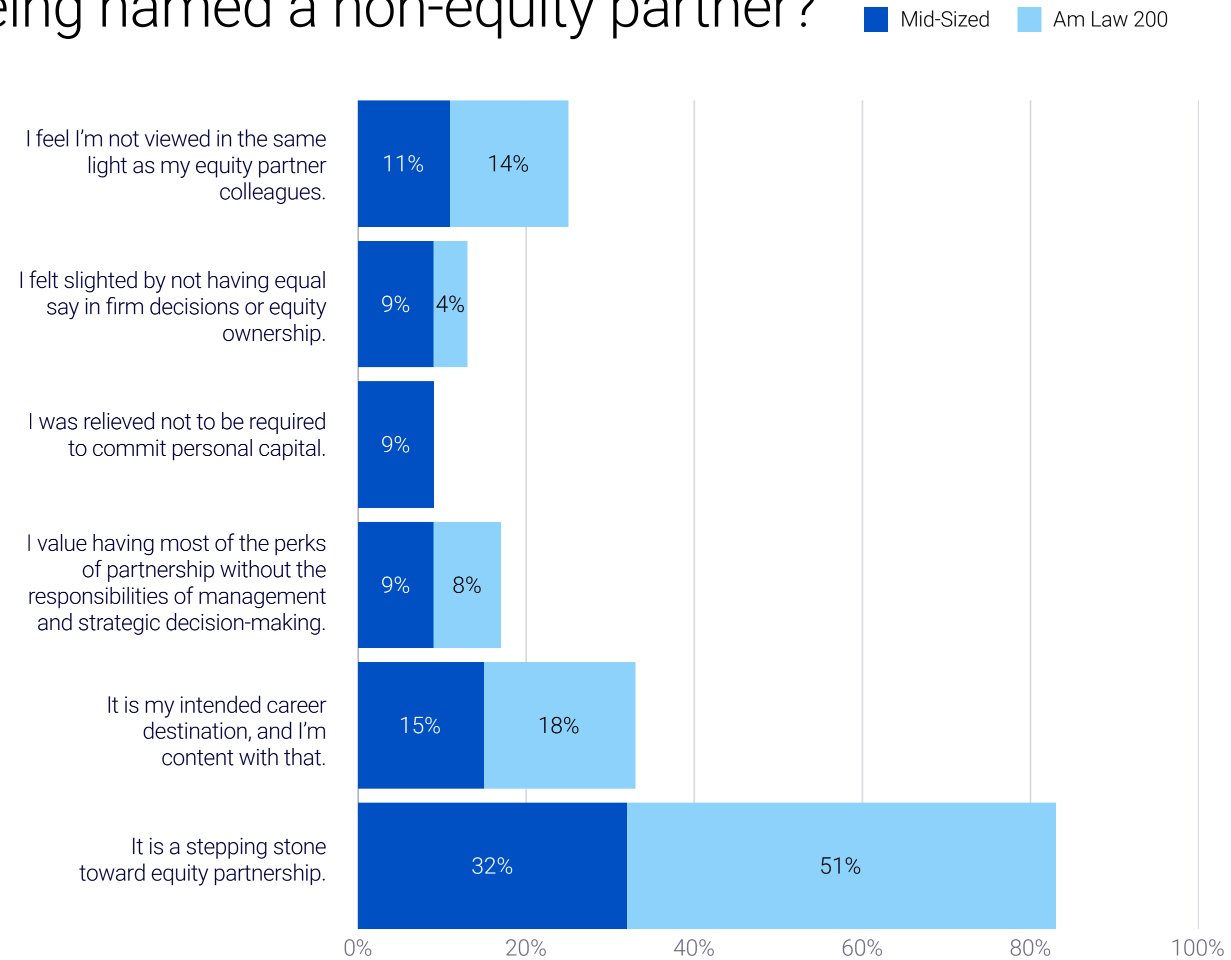
Representative Voices

"The most boring and unrewarding job I ever had."

"Its all politics... you work your ass off for nothing and don't get paid, while those who work part-time and get credits shared prosper."

"I am leaving my firm after eight years largely due to greed... Despite pay increases, I remain woefully underpaid because the firm believes it can get away with it – and they are mostly right."

Which statement best reflects your sentiment about being named a non-equity partner?



Representative Sentiments

"When I joined, I was told I would make equity in a year – then the firm reneged. My origination is greater than many equity partners. I've been treated fairly on compensation, but feel slighted nonetheless."

"It was meant to be a stepping stone, but this has not ended up being a reality."

"It was a demotion from equity partner."

The Non-Equity Role: A Stepping Stone or Stopping Point?

Changing Metrics, Unclear Advancement:

"Everyone is Equity. Just not full equity. It's difficult to become full equity and the metrics keep changing. Goal posts move."

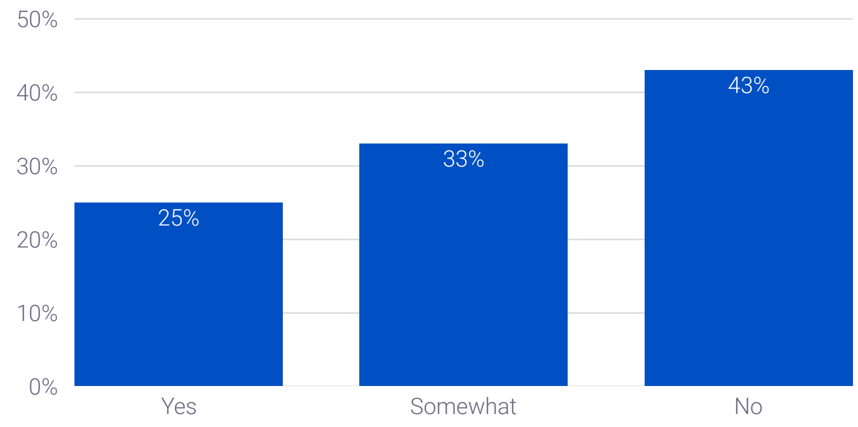
Perceived Value and Role Definition:

"Glorified associate without a bonus plan." "Undervalued."

Perception of Non-Equity as Long Term:	**29%** of Am Law 200 and **33%** of mid-sized firm respondents view non-equity as a long-term role.
Mobility to Equity is Limited:	Just **20%** of Am Law 200 and **32%** of mid-sized firm respondents report seeing colleagues successfully move from non-equity to equity
Tenure Before Advancing or Leaving:	**68%** of Am Law 200 non-equity partners remain in the role for 4+ years **83%** of mid-sized firm non-equity partners stay 4+ years or indefinitely with 35% remaining indefinitely.

Involvement of non-equity partners in firm decision-making appears limited overall. While about 25% of respondents said they do have **meaningful involvement**, a larger share—43%—reported that they do **not**. Another 33% indicated they are **somewhat** involved, suggesting that while some non-equity partners may have a seat at the table, their influence is often partial or informal. The fact that nearly three-quarters of respondents either lack decision-making power or are only somewhat involved highlights a common structural divide between equity and non-equity roles. This gap may contribute to feelings of exclusion or diminished status among non-equity partners and reinforces the importance of clear communication about governance rights and expectations tied to the partner title.

Do non-equity partners have **meaningful involvement** in firm decision-making?



Top Frustrations of Non-Equity Partners

"Being required to bill as much as an associate, but with so much more non-billable work."

"It's all politics. People succeed by others sharing origination credit with them even though they don't originate anything. If you work with greedy originators, you work your ass off for nothing and don't get paid."

"A path to equity is unclear and outright subjective."

"Managing the firm's expectation that the equity partner will begin to transfer client relationships as one approaches non-equity status, yet compensation is tied to personal billings. It makes no sense."

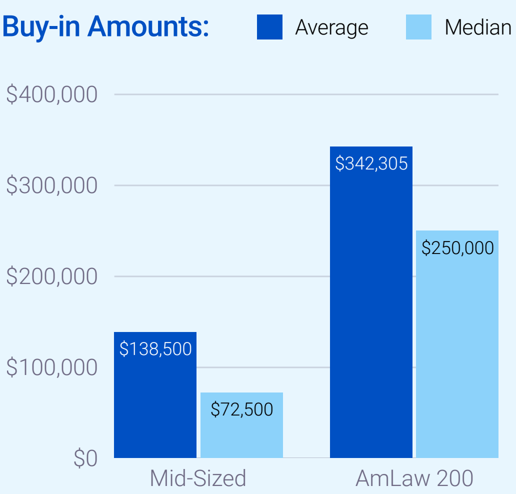
"Black box compensation."

"What the elevation to non-equity partner has shown me is that... I make less than senior associates in 'primary' markets despite supervising them and generating more revenue."

Equity Partners

Across all survey respondents, contributions toward partnership buy-ins varied widely, typically ranging from around **$10,000 to $400,000**, with some outliers on both ends. Many partners reported contributions between **$25,000 and $100,000**, while a notable number indicated amounts closer to **$300,000 or higher**. A few described alternative arrangements such as payments spread over several years, borrowing funds from banks, or formulas that combine upfront payments with reductions in fee participation. Some respondents cited amounts in foreign currency or preferred not to disclose specifics. Overall, buy-in expectations appear significant but flexible, reflecting the diversity of financial models across firms of different sizes.

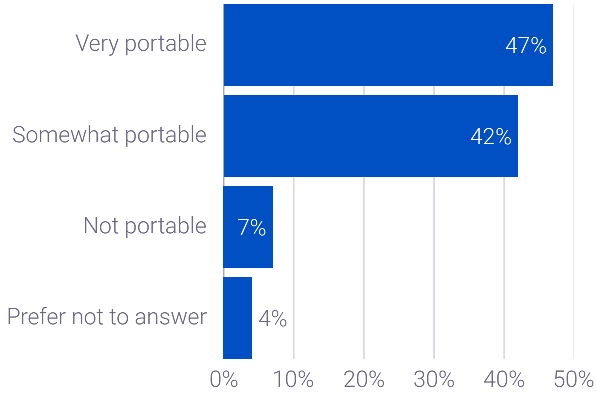
Approximately how much capital did you contribute to buy into the partnership?



Among Am Law 200 respondents, partnership buy-in contributions tend to be significantly higher and more complex than those seen in mid-sized firms. Many reported amounts in the **$250,000 to $600,000** range, with several exceeding **$1 million**, including figures as high as **$1.6 million**. In addition to fixed dollar contributions, some partners noted **percentage-based models**, such as **30–40% of base or distributable income,** or **profit-share structures** deducted from draws over time. A few respondents emphasized the evolving nature of the contribution, with one stating it had grown to over seven figures. While some provided precise numbers, others referenced flexible or confidential arrangements, further indicating that buy-in models in the Am Law 200 are not only substantial but often tailored to firm-specific compensation systems. Overall, the data reflects the high financial stakes and complex equity structures typical of large, top-tier firms.

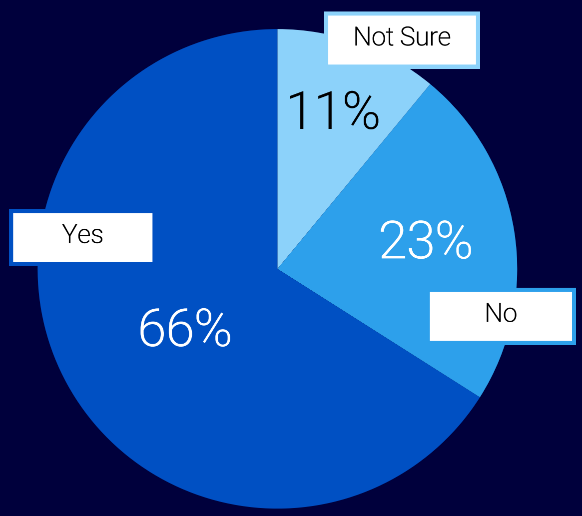
Most respondents consider their book of business to be portable to some degree, with nearly 47% describing it as **very portable** and another 42% as **somewhat portable**. Only a small fraction—about 7%—said their book is **not portable**, and an even smaller group opted not to answer. These responses suggest that the majority of equity partners feel confident in their ability to retain and move client relationships if needed, reflecting strong personal ties to clients or practice areas less dependent on firm-specific infrastructure. The relatively high perceived portability may also signal a degree of leverage or mobility within the lateral market for these partners.

How would you describe the portability of your book of business?



Unbilled Contributions

Does your firm recognize unbilled contributions?
(eg. mentoring, recruiting, DEI efforts)



Average number of unbilled hours (estimated)**:**
256

EXAMPLES

- Firm management & committee leadership
- Business development & client acquisition
- Mentoring & associate training
- Recruiting & hiring
- Speaking engagements & CLE teaching
- Pro bono legal work
- Writing articles & thought leadership
- Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) efforts
- Bar association & community board service
- Practice group & office leadership

2025 Financial Outlook

CAPITAL CALLS

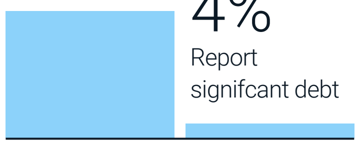
7%

Believe their firm will initiate a capital call in 2025

FIRM DEBT LOAD

33%

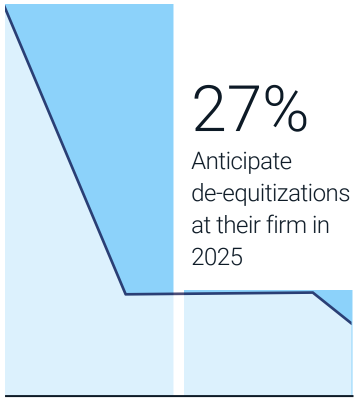
Say their firm carries manageable third-party debt



4%

Report signifcant debt

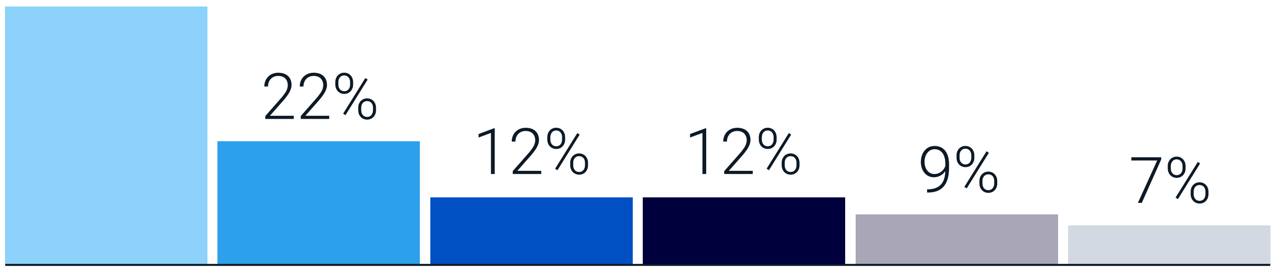
PARTNER DE-EQUITIZATION



27%

Anticipate de-equitizations at their firm in 2025

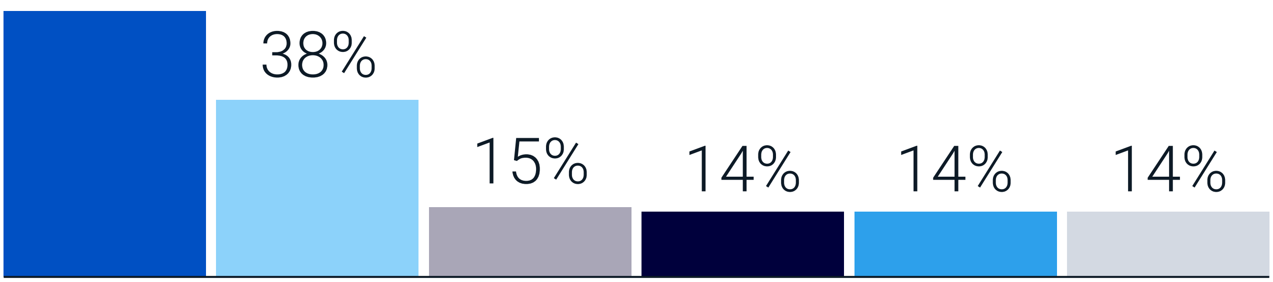
PRACTICE AREAS FACING THE GREATEST FINANCIAL HEADWINDS



2025 Firm Growth Outlook

LATERAL HIRING HOTSPOTS

Practice areas likely to see lateral growth in 2025



KEY INSIGHTS FROM WEBINAR AUDIENCE Q&A

The Evolving Role of Non-Equity Partners

Laura Leopard
Founder and General Manager of Leopard Solutions
SurePoint Technologies

Bryan O'Leary
Market Analyst
Major, Lindsey & Africa

Sarah Van Steenburg
Managing Director of Partner Recruiting
Major, Lindsey & Africa

The webinar audience raised thought-provoking questions that underscored key tensions within the modern law firm partnership model, particularly regarding non-equity partners and the lateral movement of talent.

A recurring theme was the "psychological value" of the partner title, as highlighted by Bruce MacEwen of Adam Smith, Esq., who remarked, **"If you're a non-equity partner, no matter what your compensation, no matter what you're doing, there's always this thought in your head that you're not quite good enough."** This sentiment resonates widely, reflecting the underlying dissatisfaction among non-equity partners who may feel excluded from firm governance or strategic decision-making.

The Q&A also revealed insights into lateral movement patterns. Survey data indicates that many partners move laterally to secure equity status, sometimes opting for less profitable firms if it means gaining the equity title and a greater sense of belonging. As one panelist noted, **"They're definitely moving somewhere else where the grass is greener, and they feel more valued. If it's to a firm with lesser financials but they get that equity title and they feel more at home, then yes, that's a great trade for them."**

There is also a generational shift at play. Gen X and younger generations increasingly see themselves as free agents, with loyalty to the firm diminishing. Homegrown attorneys, in contrast, may suffer in terms of compensation and recognition simply because they have not gone to market to assert their true value. “We’ve seen people who are homegrown, whose comp is not where it should be, because they never did leave the firm,” shared one attendee.

PANELISTS' PARTING INSIGHTS

As the conversation closed, panelists shared forward-looking reflections underscoring both the risks and opportunities facing law firms amid ongoing market shifts.

"This is a moment for innovation," observed Sarah, pointing to the data as a signal that firms are entering uncharted territory. With heightened tensions, evolving client expectations, and existential challenges reshaping the legal landscape, she emphasized that firms willing to think differently—especially by forging deeper client relationships—can not only adapt but lead. **“We’re in the beginning innings. I’m curious to see what innovations firms will take to address these bigger issues,”** she noted.

The pace of change was another common thread. As one panelist remarked, **“Since COVID, it feels like we’ve lived multiple years in every single year.”** In this environment, the need for agility is paramount. Firms must remain nimble and reactive to shifting conditions, while still staying aligned with long-term goals. Those that strike that balance are best positioned for success.

Talent strategy also emerged as a critical concern. Bryan cautioned firms to keep people at the center of their decision-making, especially as Gen Z enters the workforce with different expectations. **“The firms that acknowledge those changes and evolve their business accordingly will be the ones attracting and retaining the next generation of talent,”** he said.

Finally, Laura flagged a potential pitfall tied to structural change, particularly around non-equity partnership tiers. **“Not everybody’s Kirkland,”** she warned, highlighting dissatisfaction levels among non-equity partners, especially at mid-sized firms. The message: firms considering adding or expanding non-equity tracks must proceed with caution, ensuring clarity, fairness, and a defined path for advancement. **“There’s a danger in everyone jumping on that bandwagon without thinking through the best way to implement it,”** she concluded.

The consensus: Those firms that embrace thoughtful innovation, prioritize people, and approach change with intention will be best positioned to thrive in an uncertain legal marketplace.

CRACKS IN THE PARTNERSHIP MODEL: AMBIGUITY, BOTTLENECKS, AND THE FIGHT TO BELONG

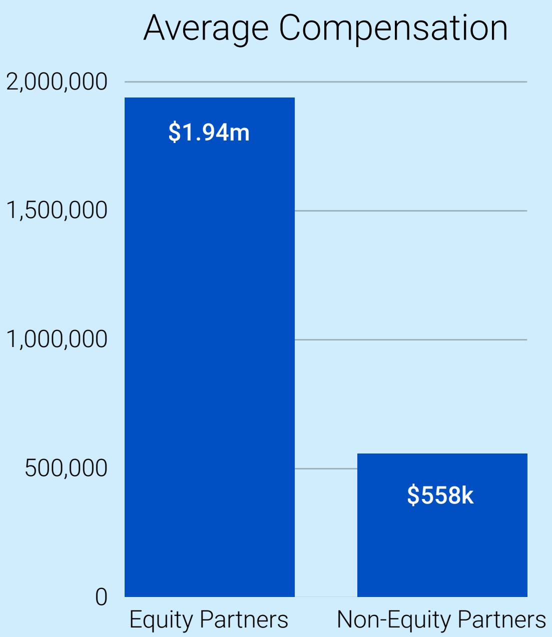
Another key issue raised was the classification ambiguity surrounding non-equity partners. Recent lawsuits have exposed the legal risks when firms designate individuals as "partners" in title but treat them as employees in practice—issuing W-2s instead of K-1s. **"It is kind of a shell game,"** one participant observed. **"They're called a partner to the world, they charge the partner rates, yet they're not really considered that partner by the firm."**

The conversation also explored the structural dynamics within firms, including how retiring partners increasingly retain their client books rather than passing them to the next generation. This "downstream" movement of senior partners to non-equity roles extends their careers but can obstruct advancement opportunities for others. As noted, this trend, along with diminished knowledge transfer, contributes to the elongation of the path to partnership.

Finally, the dialogue reinforced that firms need innovative retention strategies beyond compensation. Work-life balance, clear advancement pathways, and authentic inclusion in firm leadership emerged as crucial factors. **"It's all about that appreciation,"** emphasized one speaker, underscoring that firms overly focused on financial incentives risk missing broader cultural and generational shifts.

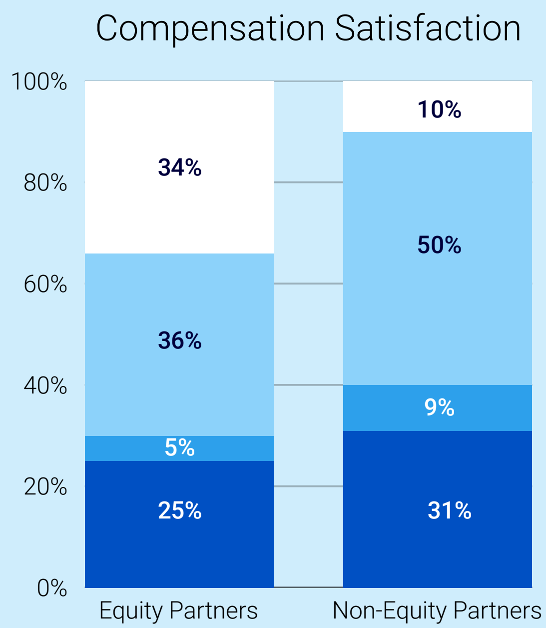
In sum, the audience questions reflected growing scrutiny of the non-equity tier, lateral movement trends, generational expectations, and the necessity for firms to evolve talent management practices to retain top performers and maintain competitive positioning.

In addition to these findings, **Major, Lindsey & Africa's 2024 Partner Compensation Survey** provides one of the most comprehensive looks at compensation and satisfaction across the law firm landscape. Conducted biannually, the survey tracks how partner pay and originations vary across equity status, practice area, geography, and demographic groups. With billing rates at historic highs and firms reporting record profits, the findings highlight both the opportunities and tensions created by widening compensation disparities.



Source: Major, Lindsey and Africa

Non-equity partners receive about ⅔ less in compensation than their equity members



Source: Major, Lindsey and Africa

Not surprisingly, they aren't happy

Very Satisfied
Neutral
Satisfied
Dissatisfied

Conclusion

As law firms look ahead in 2025 and beyond, the financial and structural outlook reflects a cautious optimism. While only a small percentage of equity partners anticipate capital calls or report significant firm debt, a notable **27% foresee partner de-equitizations**, suggesting a quiet recalibration of firm economics and partnership dynamics.

Practice areas such as **corporate and real estate** are viewed as both vulnerable and ripe for lateral movement, signaling ongoing volatility in demand and talent acquisition. Meanwhile, **litigation emerges as a clear focal point for lateral growth**, with 57% of firms targeting it for expansion.

Despite this outward growth, internal sentiment tells a more strained story. Many partners—particularly those in non-equity roles—report feelings of **disenfranchisement, unclear advancement paths, and compensation dissatisfaction.** The persistence of **closed compensation systems,** favoritism over merit, and perceived stagnation in career progression are pushing talented attorneys to reconsider their futures within traditional firm structures.

"AI will blow up the Big Law model faster than most think."

This discontent is further magnified by rising associate compensation and the looming disruption of AI. As one respondent starkly put it, "AI will blow up the Big Law model faster than most think." The legal industry is reaching an inflection point, where firms that fail to address **transparency, fair compensation, and evolving career expectations** risk not just talent loss, but cultural erosion.

To remain competitive and sustainable, firms must rethink the partner experience—balancing financial prudence with the need for clear advancement paths, inclusive governance, and adaptable business models. The future will favor those firms that not only attract talent, but also **inspire loyalty through fairness, clarity, and a compelling shared vision.**

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Holly Luhr Design

Contact:

sales@leopardsolutions.com

800.718.8553

leopardsolutions.com | surepoint.com