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LEGAL INSIGHTS · WEBINAR

Law School to Law Firm

Recruiting Trends, Retention and the Future of Legal Talent

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Executive Summary

1. **A decade-high pipeline**
   - Law school applications rose 18% in 2025 – the most since 2011 – and are up nearly 12% again in 2026, fueled by economic uncertainty and the AI revolution.

2. **Recruiting accelerated sharply**
   - Firms made 85% of next-summer offers before July in 2025, up from 34% the year before. Roughly one-third of law firms have abandoned on-campus interviewing entirely.

3. **Recruiting is broadening**
   - AmLaw 200 entry-level hiring is drawing from a wider range of schools – the T14 accounted for about half of those hires in 2015 and roughly a third in 2025

4. **Laterals outpace new grads**
   - Laterals were 51.4% of AmLaw 200 associate hires in 2025 – the sixth time in last eight years they outnumbered the entry-level class; 62.4% at midsize firms.

5. **Retention or prestige**
   - Entry-level associates from non-T14 schools are the most likely to stay at least three years - Firms must weigh the draw of top law schools against that longevity.

6. **AI is the new differentiator**
   - Hiring of lateral associates with AI specialties grew 106% year over year – firms pay for AI experience even as they expect it to reshape junior work.

THE PIPELINE

The talent funnel is the fullest in over a decade

76,840	65.1%	49,783	42,723	7,426
Law school applications	**Acceptance rate**	**First-year students enrolled**	**Law school graduates**	**Joined Am Law 200 firms**
+18.1% YoY – highest since 2011	Share of applicants with ≥1 offer	+10.8% YoY – largest class since 2012	+8% YoY – most since 2010	17.4% of all 2025 graduates

2026 momentum: applicants up **9.2%** and applications up **11.7%** vs. 2025; LSAT takers up 14.3% YoY. Both average LSAT scores and admitted-applicant counts hit five-year highs.

HOW RECRUITING IS CHANGING

Earlier, faster, and more competitive than ever

Cycles intensify

85%

of next-summer offers were made before July in 2025 – up from 34% in 2024. Firms now recruit 2L summer hires as early as October 1 of the 1L year.

Jumbo offers spread

~90%

of firms making multiyear "jumbo offers" attach a financial incentive. 10% of firms with a 1L program made at least one jumbo offer – often before a full semester of grades.

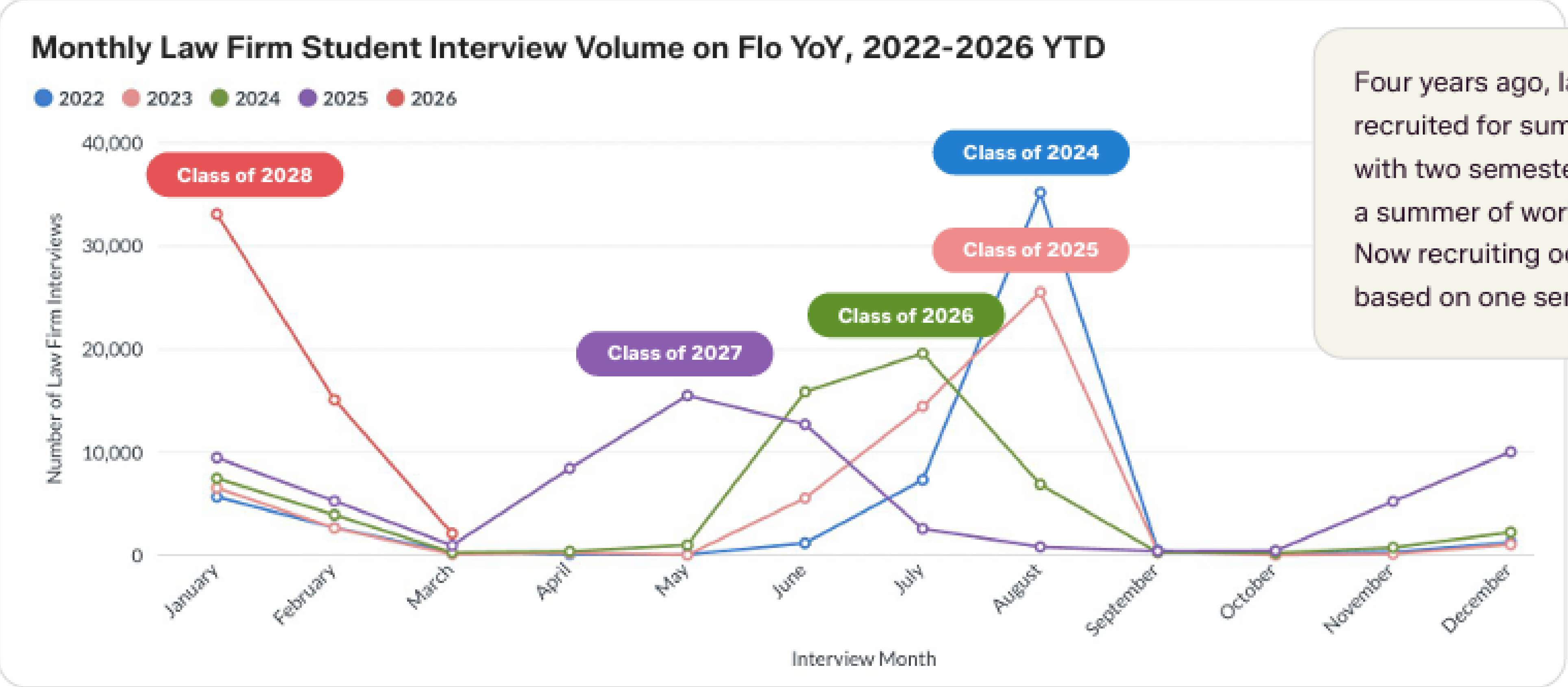
OCI in decline

~30%

of law firm offices no longer participate in on-campus interviewing at all. Offers originating from OCI fell 44% from 2024 to 2025.

Source: National Association for Law Placement (NALP), 2025 hiring cycle.

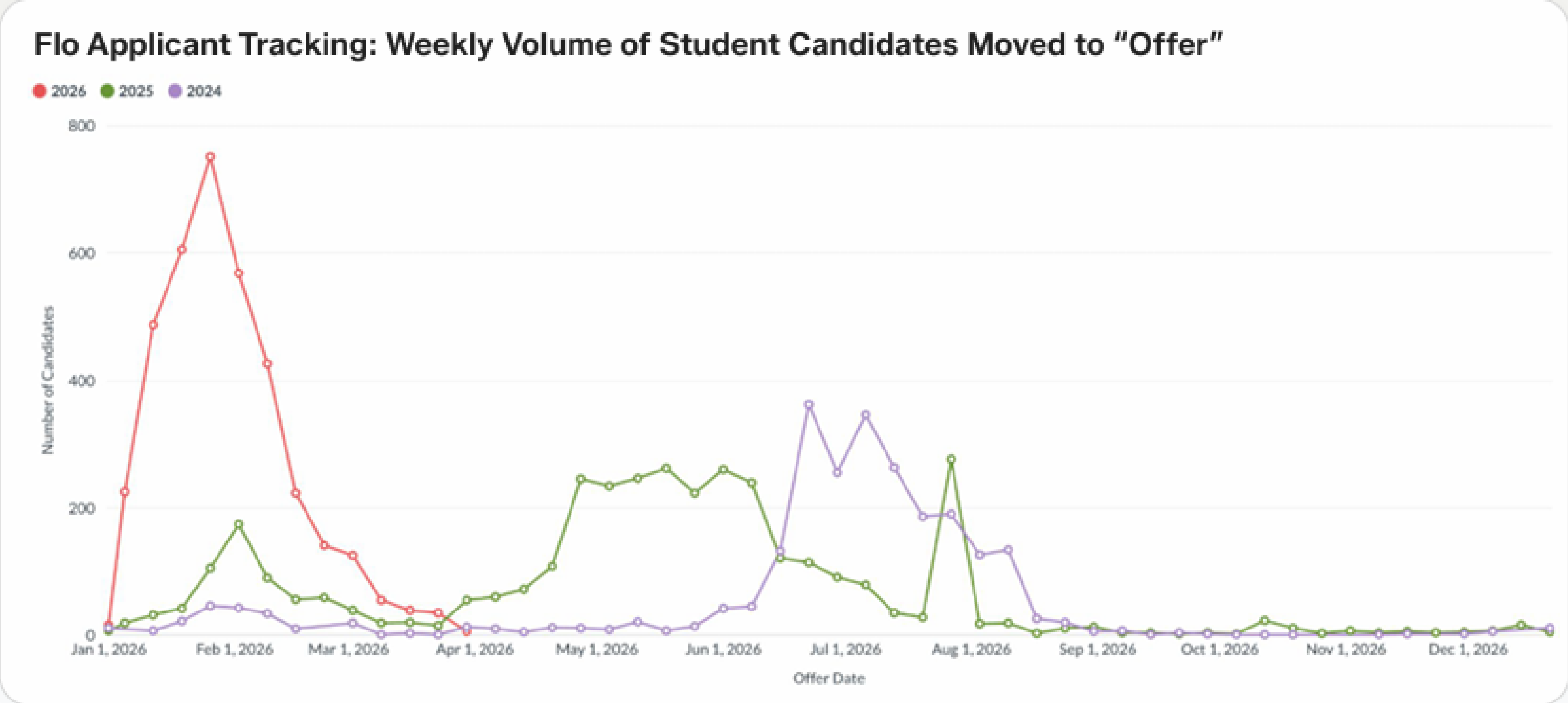
Summer associate recruitment requires committing to talent earlier than ever. Some firms are turning to 3Ls, clerks, and laterals instead.



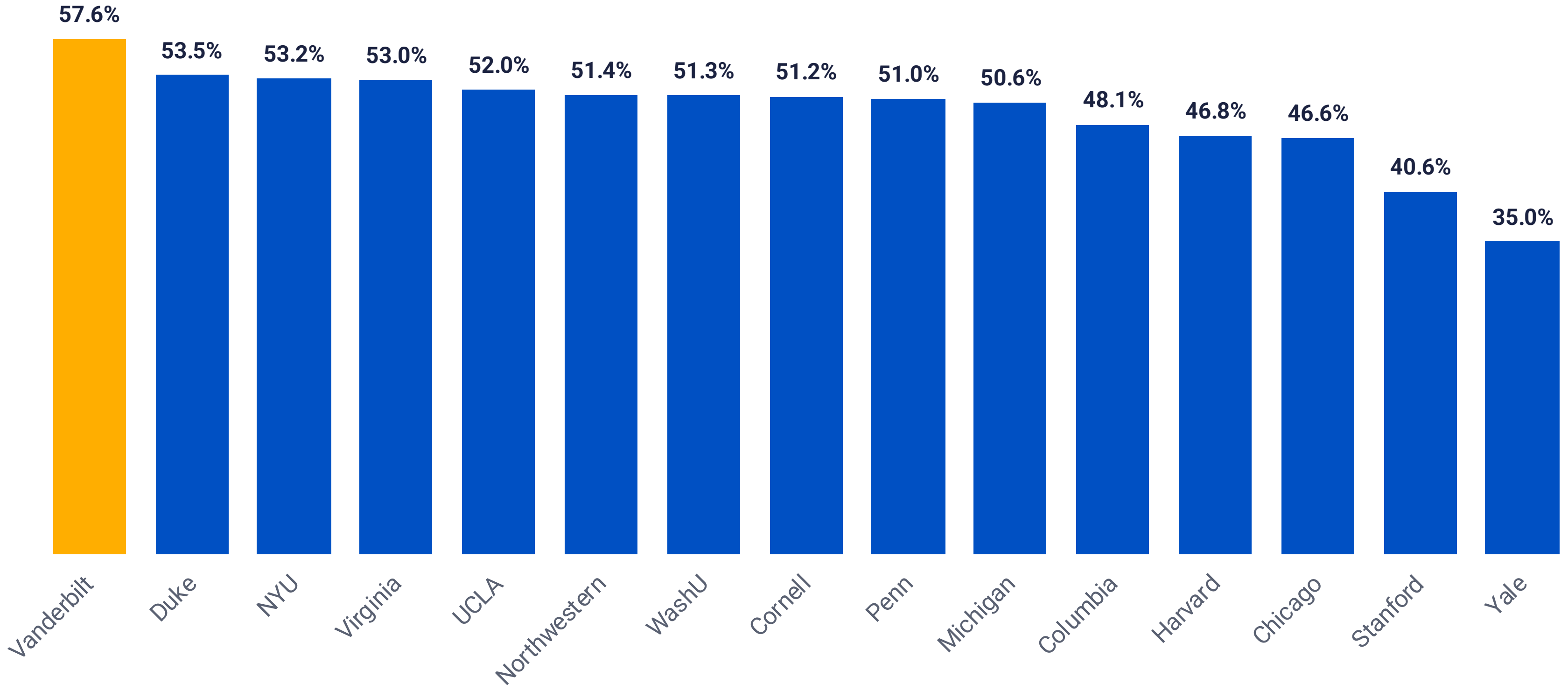
Four years ago, law students were recruited for summer positions with two semesters of grades and a summer of work experience. Now recruiting occurs in January, based on one semester of grades.

Early student recruiting is predicted to increase competition for laterals

Volume of students moved to "Offer" in Flo's ATS was **up 994% in January 2026** compared to Jan '25. Firms are predicting 1st year associate needs ~three years in advance and making summer hires with just one semester of grades.



Retention rates vary widely across the T14



Rank and retention diverge

The schools at the top of the U.S. News rankings don't lead on long-term retention. Across the T14, prestige and three-year staying power measure different things.

Cohort: Am Law 200 entry-level associates hired 2021–2023, tracked for 3-year retention. Bars show % staying ≥3 years.

THE BEST LONG-TERM BETS

Non-T14 entry-level hires show higher retention success

Non-T14 entry-level

53.78%

Highest success rate

Lateral hires

51.64%

Experienced, but costly to retain

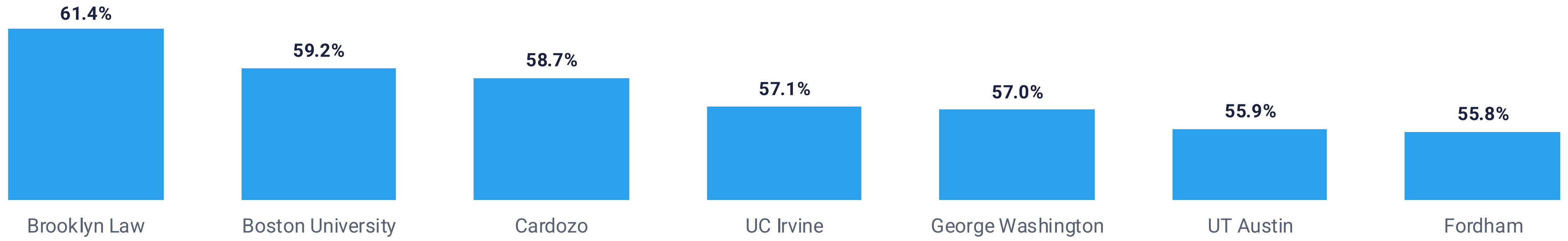
T14 entry-level

49.05%

Lowest – fewer than 1 in 2 stay

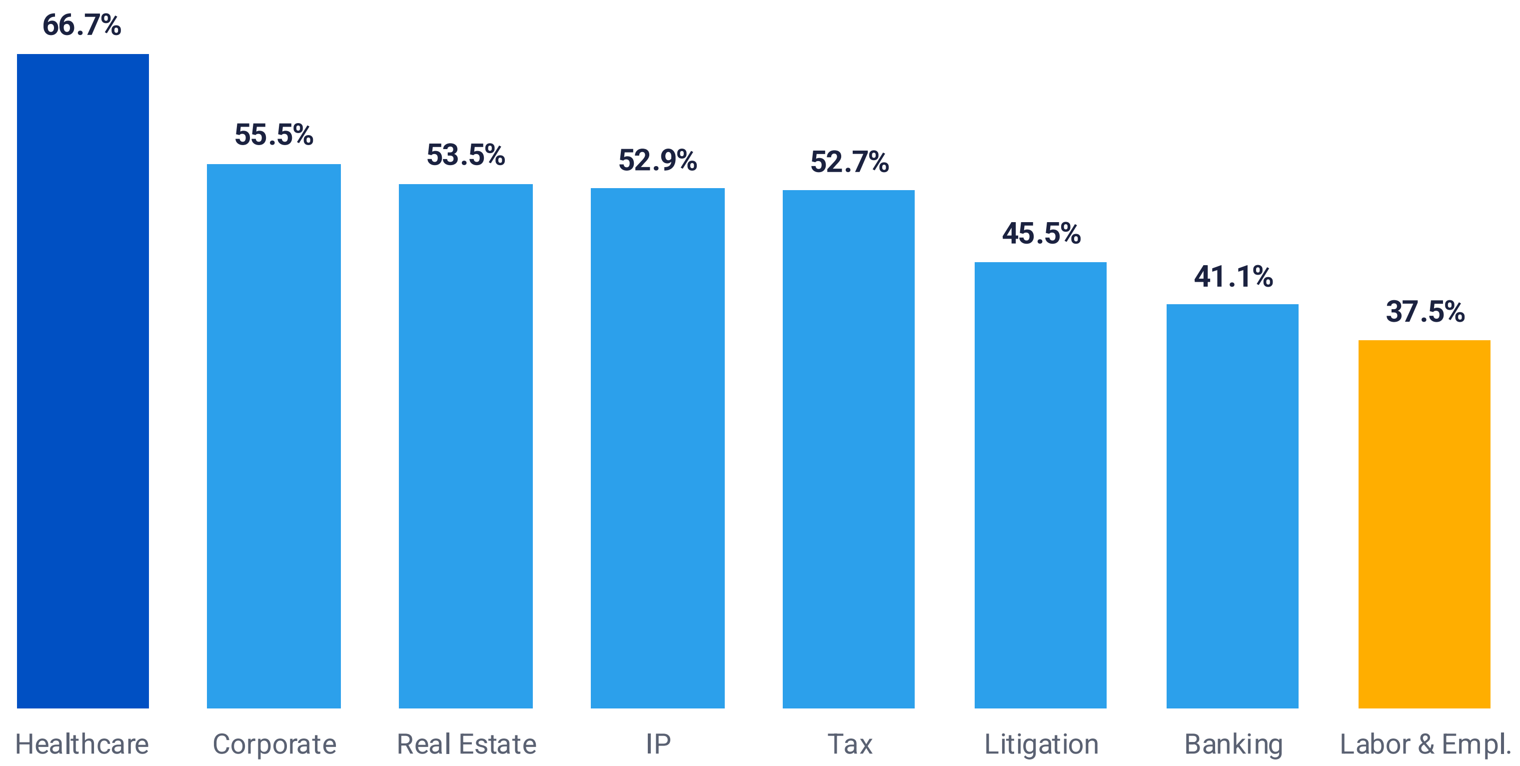
Average success rate, 2015–2022 cohorts (associates with a completed three-year window).

Leaders outside the T14 (150+ Am Law 200 hires)



PRACTICE AREAS

Retention varies widely by practice group



What the data shows

Litigation dominates
– 43.7% of new T14 assignments – yet retains below average.

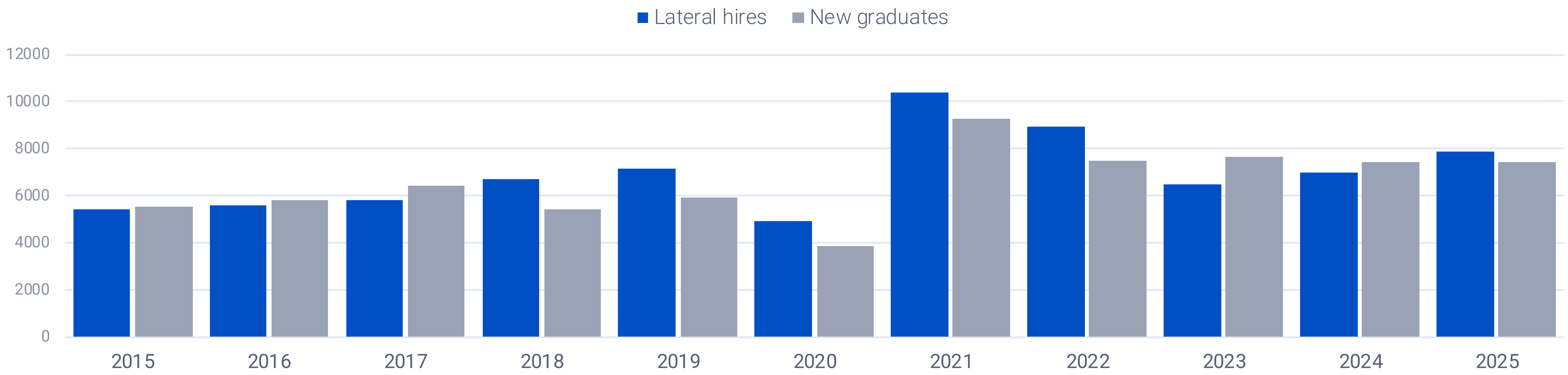
Healthcare retains best
with two-thirds of hires staying three years or more.

Labor & Employment is most volatile
– lowest for the 2021, 2022 and 2023 T14 cohorts alike.

Cohort: 2022 T14 graduates, practice areas with 20+ entry-level hires. Bars show % staying ≥3 years.

LATERALS VS. ENTRY-LEVEL

The market keeps tilting toward experience



Count of Am Law 200 associate hires by entry type, 2015–2025. Laterals (blue) outnumbered new graduates in 2021, 2022 and 2025.

51.4%

of 2025 Am Law 200 associate hires were laterals

Third time in five years they outnumbered new grads; lateral hiring rose 12.2% in 2025.

62.4%

Averaging 65.6% over five years – smaller firms lean on talent trained elsewhere.

The traditional partnership track is changing

In 2025, Am Law 200 firms promoted 50% more partners than 2024, most since 2022 – and increasingly, those partners arrived from somewhere else.

For decades the path was linear: join as a new associate, build a practice, make partner. **That model is fading.** Firms now build leadership pipelines from lawyers who arrive with portable business, specialized expertise, and established client relationships.

For associates, advancement is becoming less tied to a single employer – the path to partnership increasingly runs through movement, not tenure.

+52% promotions among attorneys who joined as laterals

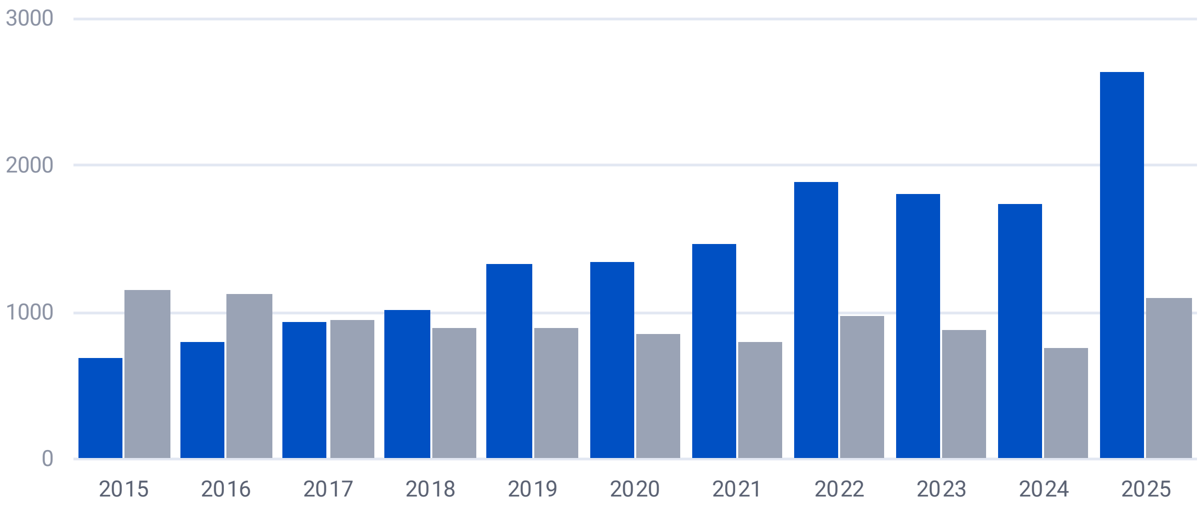
+46% promotions among attorneys who joined as entry-level associates

Year-over-year change in partner promotions, Am Law 200, 2024 → 2025.

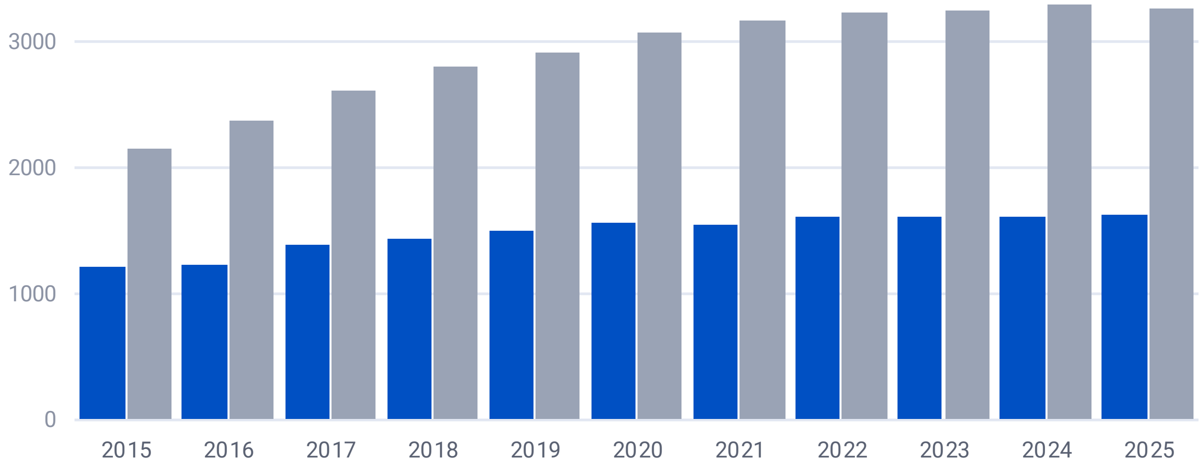
Laterals are promoted more often – and far faster

Lateral hires | New graduates

Number of promotions to partner



Average days to make partner



2025 was a record year for partner promotions – the first year-over-year increase since 2022. Lateral promotions jumped 52% and entry-level promotions 46% versus 2024. Yet the two paths diverge on speed: new graduates now wait roughly twice as long as laterals (about 3,270 vs. 1,630 days – nine years versus four and a half), and entry-level time-to-partner has climbed 52% over the past decade.

AI is reshaping how firms think about leverage

86%

of large firms expect to grow their associate ranks through 2027

Citi report

35%

but only this share plan to expand their first-year associate classes

Citi report

106%

year-over-year growth in lateral hiring of AI-specialty associates

SurePoint, 2025

Two-thirds of firms anticipate significant changes to the traditional lawyer-leverage model by 2035. AI hasn't slowed entry-level hiring yet – but firms increasingly pay for AI fluency today while preparing for a leaner junior pyramid tomorrow.

Leaders Are Honest About the Future, Which Offers Opportunities Despite the Change

52%

Work at firms that have eliminated roles due to technology.

More than half (52%) of the participants acknowledged that their firms have eliminated roles due to technology in general, and only 3% have eliminated roles specifically because of generative AI. However, several participants anticipate that generative AI will affect staffing in the near future, and many firms are streamlining their teams as job openings naturally occur.

Generative AI is Expected to Become Ubiquitous, But it is Still Developing

Sixty-three percent of the participating leaders work at firms that have officially adopted generative AI, with nearly half (42%) citing Microsoft Copilot alongside other well-known tools. Forty-four percent of the participants stated they could bill for work driven by generative AI,

63%

Work at firms that have officially adopted generative AI.

Legal Technology Provides Fundamental and Widespread Benefits

There was widespread appreciation for the advantages of legal technology. Ninety-four percent of participants said it helps increase revenue and improve client service, while 81% said it helps drive law firm growth and retain talent.

81%

Legal technology drives law firm growth and helps retain talent.

LOOKING AHEAD

How Law Schools Can Adapt

Practical responses to a faster, more competitive, AI-shaped market

RECOMMENDATIONS

Three actions law schools can take now

1

Engage before school starts

1Ls now navigate an aggressive recruiting gauntlet from day one. George Washington's online "Pre-1L" course builds classroom readiness and networking – a model for resume drafting, interview coaching, and recruitment know-how.

2

Introduce real work earlier

Students interview before knowing if they prefer Litigation or Corporate. BYU (Clark) runs immersive "academies" in trial, appellate, deals, and immigration work – and is shifting them to the first 1L semester starting in 2026.

3

Address bias in the system

Direct recruiting favors students with firm connections, elite credentials, and time to apply independently. Build support for first-generation graduates, students who work full-time, and other underrepresented groups.

Context: NALP retired its recruiting and timing guidelines in 2018 amid antitrust concerns, making voluntary slowdown unlikely.

WHAT TO WATCH

Students are pushing back on the pace

In early 2026, students from **18 law schools – including every member of this year's T14** – sent a letter to the American Bar Association asking it to review accelerated recruitment: to solicit input from students, schools, and employers, develop new recruiting policies, and weigh accreditation options tied to the first-year experience.

The ABA confirmed receipt to the Yale Daily News but, as of this writing, has taken no action.

The bottom line

Talent is abundant, but firms are more selective. Recruiting is happening earlier, AI is reshaping expectations, and retention – not prestige – is the truer measure of hiring success.

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