



**Informing Progress - Shaping the Future**

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# **Career Progression in the Legal Sector: Evolution or Revolution?**

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Why does someone become a lawyer? A simple question, albeit one without a corresponding simple answer – and one that can yield very different answers depending on which generation the question is addressed to or perhaps to each individual law student. Before trying to understand how opportunities for career progression have changed, it is worth considering the overarching factor which tend to drive people to want to become lawyers, what exactly their expectations tend to be in wanting to enter the sector and how has this tended to change over time.

For many people (particularly those without prior familial connections to the profession), they may draw inspiration from how the law is portrayed in popular media. Traditionally (certainly insofar as lawyers are concerned anyway!), it was regarded as a noble profession, a laudable vocation, the opportunity to fight for justice along the lines of Atticus Finch in 'To Kill a Mockingbird'. There has always been a societal fascination with the role of lawyers and the complex roles they hold, such as the famous reference by Shakespeare in Henry VI by Dick the Butcher: 'let's kill all the lawyers'. Whilst the sentiment is often used to decry lawyers, ironically the underlying theme of the statement was that it was a means for a political tyrant to eliminate freedom. Arguably, you could say that lawyers have never been more important using this metric in the complicated world we are currently living in!

For younger generations, inspiration may more readily lie in the depiction of the effortlessly cool Harvey Specter from the TV show 'Suits' in the fast paced world of corporate law. There has also been a significant shift in the traditionally male dominated world of the legal profession in that, in recent years, it has tended to become more progressive with a much-improved gender balance: for instance, in Ireland in 2014, 54% of practising solicitors were women, making it the first jurisdiction in the world to achieve a female majority of legal professionals.

However, rather than suggest that the profession does not have a darker undertone, unfortunately, the notion of the ambulance chasing solicitor has become more prevalent with examples of rogue solicitors like Saul Goodman in TV shows such as 'Better Call Saul' unfortunately reflecting the fact that the profession isn't always as virtuous as it might wish to be – reflected in scandals such as that involving the likes of so-called 'rogue solicitors' in Ireland such as Michael Lynn or Thomsa Byrne. At a time when regulation has never been more stringent for the legal sector, younger solicitors have arguably never had the benefit of such increased governance designed to ensure ethical compliance.

Ultimately, when considering the question of career progression within the legal sector, it could be said that there can be somewhat of a central dilemma between the aspirational nature of lawyers with the more pragmatic realities that the practice of law can present. In other words, career progression can be reframed as a balancing act between the type of curated career and work environment a solicitor might wish to cultivate whilst still being able to achieve the desired financial package – and how best to reconcile those various objectives at a time when young lawyers have potentially never had the luxury of so much choice in how they map out their careers.

Indeed, whilst people may be influenced by a variety of different factors in seeking to enter the profession, there are typically some common experiences once they qualify as lawyers which can transcend the financial rewards when assessing career options: specifically, the high pressure stakes of the profession have also contributed to lawyers (and, in particular, junior lawyers) complaining of significant stress in terms of their workload, pressurised deadlines, fee billing expectations and the demands of clients. A survey undertaken by the Law Society of Ireland and LawCare suggested that up to 70% of lawyers will experience burnout in their career. In a world that has seen a definitive shift towards wellness, promotion of positive mental health and the prioritisation of an effective work-life balance, this has presented the legal sector with an undoubted challenge. How do law firms maintain margin at a time of rising costs, significant inflation and pressure on fees whilst ensuring that they have a strong pipeline of talent coming through and a well-defined succession strategy?

The traditional route to success within a law firm was relatively clear-cut: work hard as a young lawyer, gain experience assisting colleagues, bill your fees and grow your personal brand in the hope of achieving partnership and the perceived riches that should flow thereafter whilst leading a notionally idyllic life. For many lawyers, in particular since the pandemic, the reality has become very different as junior lawyers struggle to align career aspirations and personal priorities as they seek better work-life balance, more control over their future and improved financial stability. The Law Society of Ireland and LawCare have suggested lawyers now seek out more well defined boundaries in their professional duties, seeking to prioritise time management and are increasingly advised to seek professional support where needed.

A recent survey by LexisNexis found that associates believe that partners suffer from a lack of work-life balance with 71% choosing work-life balance as their top priority from their career. 72% of senior legal leaders surveyed regarded today's associates as being less loyal but it may be that those associates are simply not as invested in the traditional pathway to partnership. The sector has

generally seen rising salaries below the partner tier in recent years and the availability of more diverse types of non-partner roles within firms such as 'Of Counsel'. Some of these trends have been in response to the flow of legal talent to 'in house' legal counsel roles where their aspirations may be perceived as being more readily achievable.

Demand has also undoubtedly increased with career paths to magic circle firms in the UK now increasingly available to Irish lawyers whilst there have been a number of new entrants to the Irish legal market from UK and US firms that have significantly increased competition for talent. Ireland's role as a strategic legal hub post-Brexit has undoubtedly been a factor in the growth in the Irish legal sector. These various factors have contributed to an increased amount of movement within the legal sector in the face of significantly greater opportunities for lawyers.

There are accordingly a variety of push and pull factors at play in the legal market; for instance, younger lawyers are increasingly seeking more specialised career planning to tailor the trajectory of their future legal career paths. Equally, young lawyers will be mindful of accessibility of quality, affordable housing, particularly in high-demand, high-cost locations. This is particularly the case for Dublin and London where young lawyers are seeking salary levels commensurate to the desired standard of living; by way of example, Ireland is ranked as the second most expensive country in the EU with house prices between 38% and 42% higher than the average according to Euronews. The legal sector is accordingly in a dynamic state of flux with less stability, presenting both increased challenges and opportunities for law firms.

In response, law firms have undoubtedly had to become more innovative in rolling out new models in an effort to improve retention rates and respond to the type of curated careers that junior lawyers now crave; law firms are not always known for being particularly agile in dealing with change but one such example has been Slaughter & May which has piloted a 'switch on/switch off' programme that allows associates to reduce part of their annual billable hour requirement in exchange for reduced compensation. Given the increasingly globalised nature of the law firms operating in Ireland, international secondments have now become an attractive option for many young Irish lawyers.

Law firms are faced with the prospect of trying to align their career offerings to a generation that places greater importance in values such as ensuring effective policies on diversity, ESG / sustainability with a particular focus on how firms are managing their impact on issues such as carbon emissions and waste management. Firms are also having to contemplate dedicated coaching / mentorship initiatives to appeal to staff as they seek to develop a supportive, collaborative environment with an inclusive culture. Young lawyers will typically want to know from prospective employers what competitive compensation packages are available, the extent of flexible work arrangements that the firm is prepared to offer and a defined path with clear metrics for professional advancement. Young lawyers will also want to know what investment their prospective employers have made in technology with a particular focus on AI and how this will help to manage their workloads. Given the competitive nature of the legal market, it is fair to say that, for many firms, the effectiveness of their talent retention strategy will help to dictate how well law firms can provide a continuous, responsive service to their clients.

Of course, the increased focus of law firms on AI also has the potential to negatively impact the competition for legal talent with greater reflection upon resourcing strategies, often driven by pressure on budgets and the desire to fully harness the rapid advances in AI and technology. The sector is grappling with the prospect of a recalibration as to how the traditional role of the law firm is understood in terms of the billable hour model; the necessity for significant teams of junior lawyers for research / discovery projects becomes less pronounced as routine tasks can increasingly become

automated. The challenge instead for junior lawyers will be to embrace efficiency, technology proficiency and to be 'AI-literate' so that they can add value by focusing upon more meaningful, strategic work in the new legal landscape.

Whilst women make up 52% of the legal profession in Ireland, firms are still facing challenges in terms of ensuring a more aligned gender balance at partner level where women hold only 34% of partner roles in the top seven firms. Irish Legal News has highlighted a startling gender pay gap of up to 61% that still persists in some top Irish firms and Irish law firms can expect prospective candidates to enquire as to what strategies are being pursued in order to improve any gender imbalances. Ireland had been due to transpose the EU Pay Transparency Directive into national law by 7<sup>th</sup> June 2026, this has been delayed and will now come into effect on a phased basis; nonetheless, the direction of travel is clear in that Irish law firms will have to start to move towards including mandatory salary ranges in advertisements for positions, there will be bans on asking for pay history and there will be enhanced reporting on pay gaps for employers. Irish law firms will accordingly have to ensure that their recruitment strategies are tailored more carefully going forward so as to comply with these new legislative requirements in order to recruit the most suitable candidates.

In conclusion, whilst it may seem that loyalty has become an outdated concept in the legal sector, the reality is that competitive pressures are forcing law firms to become more innovative, strategic and agile in how they try to win the 'war for talent'. If law firms believe that this is solely about financial considerations, that would be a fundamental misconception. Whilst that is an important factor in the overall package when seeking to recruit the best candidate, the most successful recruitment strategies will be much wider in scope, embracing a value proposition, providing a tailored career path with a focus upon mentorship, offering flexible work practices and promoting an inclusive, collaborative culture that will allow the candidate the opportunity to grow and develop whilst maintaining a work-life balance. It is not an easy task but it is increasingly a critical one for those firms who wish to maintain market position, let alone expand and, ultimately, increase profitability. In many ways, those firms that form a cohesive, effective, two-way partnership with their staff will arguably be best served, in keeping with a positive, progressive workplace culture: such partnerships rely on character and reputation on both sides and, as the famed investor Warren Buffet commented, whilst employment contracts can define certain terms, they can never replace integrity. Where both law firms and their staff feel that they are invested in a mutually rewarding partnership, career progression should flow more readily. The challenge, as ever, for firms will be to continue to invest and drive those partnerships to mutual benefit.

*Michael Murphy, Partner Holmes Law and member of the FOIL Ireland Executive Committee.*

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