

# Generation Y lawyers prioritise high-quality work and clients as job satisfaction rises

**While law firms are largely delivering when it comes to first-rate mandates, the 2015 Employee Satisfaction Report finds that bonuses and feedback are falling short. Dominic Carman reports**

**G**eneration Y is in the ascendant. Every law firm knows it. Stereotyped as having great expectations, being tech-savvy and sharing a strong sense of entitlement, Gen Y lawyers are either on the cusp of partnership or have that ambition fixed firmly in their sights.

But when gauging how satisfied they are with their firms, does reality match the stereotype?

In delivering some answers, the 2015 Legal Week Intelligence Employee Satisfaction Report – now in its 12th year – canvassed the views of Generation Y, questioning 2,076 fee earners in 16 UK, City and international firms.

The survey was, for the first time, conducted in association with leading employee survey company Best Companies Group. Respondents were asked to rate various aspects of their professional lives, both in importance and their current level of satisfaction.

When it comes to their expectations, great is the right word. Young business lawyers expect great work, with 98% indicating that this factor is important in determining whether they stay at their current firm. They also expect great clients (95%) and a great reputation for their practice area (94%). And in all of these criteria the respondents' expectations are largely met, with around 90% or more indicating that their firms are delivering.

"I'm not surprised because the access to quality

work and quality clients is the gold standard," says Robert Halton, Burges Salmon's chief people officer. "That's what people aspire to: you'd almost hope it was 100%, wouldn't you? They're not far off."

At Reed Smith, HR director Kevan Skelton agrees: "Someone who's working hard on something they don't find interesting will resent the hours or look to leave. The quality of work and quality of clients are paramount."

Among the participating firms, Allen & Overy, McDermott Will & Emery and Weil Gotshal & Manges stand out among the highest performers in client and work quality.

Two other key expectations, also judged as very important – work/life balance and being valued – provide a more nuanced picture. Judged as an important measure of satisfaction by 94% of respondents, work/life balance only meets these expectations for 63% of those surveyed.

Despite the deficit, the figure is still high compared to most careers and a slight improvement on previous surveys.

To mitigate the problem, expectations are managed assiduously. "We try to be very honest when we're hiring trainees," says Jonathan Bond, HR director at Pinsent Masons. "We don't oversell and find people are disappointed with their expectations. People accept that there will be intrusions outside of standard hours to respond to client demand."

Skelton adds: "You have to be clear at the outset about what the expectations are in terms of hours and how people can move upwards and achieve their ambitions. The key is to team long hours with interesting, engaging work."

Lawyers at Wedlake Bell enjoy "a good balance", argues Natalie King, head of HR. "There are pockets where a few individuals work ridiculous hours, as they would in a magic circle firm. But that's more the extreme – when there are peaks of work – rather than the norm."

Hugh Nineham, head of McDermott Will & Emery's London office, says: "The unspoken understanding we have with associates is that they will work extremely hard to meet client demands, but we don't have an environment in which we expect them to be in the office late into the evening when workloads don't require it."

Shoosmiths' director of HR, Louise Hadland, suggests: "The trick is to get away from old-fashioned notions of what work/life balance means.

## Top 10 most important criteria versus satisfaction

	Importance*	Satisfaction**
Quality of work	98	94
How much firm values its employees	98	70
Salary	97	61
Treatment by partners	97	83
Recognition/praise for good work	96	73
Quality of clients	95	93
Reputation of practice area	95	88
Work/life balance	93	63
Quality of feedback	92	64
Bonuses	86	33

\*Percentage of respondents who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' factor important

\*\*Percentage of respondents who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that they are satisfied.



There have been too many interpretations of it as an easy ride, not putting the hours in. Sitting in a chair for many hours a day is not one of the key things that we measure.”

Lawyers put huge amounts of effort into their work when they are happy, she adds, and this benefits clients. “But that’s about measuring output, value and contribution, not about how long somebody hangs around, or that they need to leave at three o’clock to watch their children in a school play or visit a parent in a care home. The things that life throws at us can be accommodated as well as working hard.”

To benchmark young lawyers in the survey, it is worth looking at other professionals as a comparator. In examining the Big Four accounting firms, **Vault** reports surprisingly high levels of dissatisfaction in the quality of work and in the work/life balance among young accountants.

Consulting company Options Group recently revealed significant dissatisfaction and ‘misery’ among brokers, asset managers and even investment bankers.

Many British teachers and doctors are also so miserable that they are abandoning their careers: 40% of teachers quit within five years of starting,

## Best Legal Employers

Burges Salmon  
 CMS Cameron McKenna  
 McDermott Will & Emery  
 Pinsent Masons  
 Reed Smith  
 RPC  
 Shoosmiths  
 Squire Patton Boggs  
 Trowers & Hamlins  
 Wedlake Bell

• *Qualification for the Best Legal Employer ranking is based on a combination of satisfaction scores, the quality of workplace benefits and the need to meet a minimum level of response for the data to be sufficiently representative. See pages 14-19 for law firm profiles.*

according to the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. Meanwhile, the NHS faces an exodus, according to the British Medical Association, with 30% of “overworked and intensely frustrated” GPs thinking of going part time and one in five trainees hoping to move abroad before 2020.

If many Generation Y professionals seem unhappy, young lawyers may be among the most satisfied with their lot. But the Generation X partners who manage them do come in for some criticism, according to the survey findings. Communication is often a fault line.

Website GenerationY.com opines: “Constant feedback, gratitude and relaying to someone that they are doing a good job are common characteristics of Generation Y.”

This is borne out by the survey. Employees rate feeling valued as one of the most important aspects of their workplace (98%), yet only 70% are satisfied with how valued they feel: one of the biggest gaps between what respondents say is important and their perceived satisfaction in practice.

Shoosmiths and Wedlake Bell are among the firms scoring highly for associates being treated well by partners.

“There’s a bit of a clash that we need to manage

## Survey: Employee Satisfaction Report



**‘They expect to go up the ranks quicker than in the past. They want things to move more quickly. They’re more open to change and different opportunities, and they’re maybe a little less loyal. It’s difficult’**

Natalie King, Wedlake Bell

between the attitudes of some Generation X leaders and the attitudes of Generation Y employees,” says Bond. “That manifests itself in attitudes towards authority. Twenty years ago, if someone was late for work they might try to avoid highlighting the fact as they might be embarrassed. Now, if someone’s late they might go to the most senior people and ask them what they’ve missed.”

Nineham adds: “There’s an increasing expectation by young lawyers that they are better informed about the strategy of the firm. When I was their age, law firms didn’t have such highly developed strategies, and as an associate you just sort of bashed on and continued to be loyal.”

### The power of praise

More specifically, feedback is an issue: 14% of respondents are dissatisfied with internal communication at their firms, while 13% highlight lack of recognition and praise for doing good work. “Praise in the moment: that’s what Generation Y wants,” says Halton. “So tell them how they’re doing. There is a generational issue. More senior people turn round and say ‘well I didn’t need to be told’.”

Skelton develops the point: “Some partners are very good, while others find it more challenging. It can be difficult to give feedback if you have a tough message to deliver.”

Communication and feedback need continual effort, he argues: “Where things go wrong is when people’s expectations are allowed to run unchecked — when someone thinks they’re on track (for a promotion, a big bonus or a pay rise) but the firm’s thinking: you’re struggling.”

When it comes to praise, Hadland says: “Generation Y or not, I don’t know anyone who doesn’t respond to a thank you or recognition of what they’ve done.” As a fundamental human need, she adds, “it takes so little to satisfy it”.

Although he sees it as only “a minor problem” at Pinsent Masons, Bond says: “I don’t think partners are as good as they should be at giving praise and recognition.

“In every salary review there is a script for partners delivering the message. We make sure that in the script there are the words ‘thank you for your contribution’.”

If remuneration shows more respondents being satisfied (61%) than dissatisfied (23%) then bonus schemes present the reverse picture: 38% dissatisfied versus 33% satisfied. This is the single biggest area of dissatisfaction overall.

Skelton is not surprised. “Bonuses should be meritocratic,” he says. “They should force you to choose people who perform well above those performing at a lower standard. Inherently, in the design of a bonus scheme, you will have more unhappiness: you pay some more than others, and some nothing at all.”

Shoosmiths does not have bonuses, as Hadland explains: “Because we seek to put the client at the

heart of what we do and we don’t want to drive any behaviour that will distract from that. We’ve never gone there. In my career I’ve never known a bonus system that’s satisfied anyone.”

After much consultation, Wedlake Bell is set to announce a new bonus scheme. “No one is happy with their bonus,” says King. “They’re not happy if they don’t get one; if they do get one, they’re not happy with the amount.

“Sometimes we have to say: ‘Unfortunately, this year you’re not going to get anything — these are the reasons why.’ Although slightly disappointed, they understand the reasons. That’s what we’re trying to get better at: delivering the message, regardless of the amount.”

### Fluid and flexible

The survey highlights a continued trend of lawyers seeking new pastures. While appetite for partnership remains strong retention is an issue, with 34% harbouring ambitions outside their firm: 13% aspire to move in-house, 10% want to move to a career outside law, 6% are aiming for partnership in another firm and 5% want to start their own practice.

“Lawyers at all levels are constantly being tempted by opportunities to move,” says Nineham. “For young lawyers, compensation can be a significant factor — by paying the market rate you reduce the extent to which money is a factor. But you also have to ensure that your associates believe in the longer-term proposition that you’re offering them: what’s the strategy and how successful are you at implementing it? They have to believe that this is somewhere that’s going to be good for their career.”

Bond summarises the position: “Fewer people now come in to law firms expecting to stay and go on to partnership — partly because they know only a small proportion can become partners, and partly because they don’t see a career in the same way. They see more of a portfolio career: a training contract and then maybe a two-year jump.

“There are good opportunities: in-house, freelance, setting up your own firm. Even 10 years ago it was a bigger shock if you resigned. It’s now a much more fluid model that both employers and employees have accepted.”

Perhaps the two words that best define Generation Y lawyers from the survey findings are fluid and flexible. Their career aspirations are increasingly fluid and their working patterns increasingly flexible. The challenge for law firms is to keep pace with expectations as they evolve.

As King confirms: “Generation Y: understanding their needs and trying to offer something that engages them so that they don’t feel they have to move elsewhere. They expect to go up the ranks quicker than in the past. They want things to move more quickly. They’re more open to change and different opportunities, and they’re maybe a little less loyal. It’s difficult.”