

Associate Hiring and Attrition: Insights on Recruiting, Retention, and the Legal Talent Market

On July 16th, the Managing Partner Forum hosted its monthly webinar in the series “The Law Firm of the Future.” This webinar, titled "Associate Hiring and Attrition: Insights on Recruiting, Retention, and the Legal Talent Market," explored law firm associate hiring and attrition trends, with the team from the NALP foundation sharing data-driven insights on why associates leave, hiring patterns, and strategies for improving retention and performance evaluation.

Panelists:

- [Fiona Trevelyan](#): President and CEO, [NALP Foundation](#) for Law Career Research and Education
- [Skip Horne](#): Vice President for Engagement, [NALP Foundation](#) for Law Career Research and Education
- [Jennifer C. Mandery](#): Vice President for Research, [NALP Foundation](#) for Law Career Research and Education

Moderators:

- [John Remsen Jr](#): President of [TheRemsenGroup](#) and President & CEO of Managing Partner Forum
- [Uri Gutfreund](#): Senior Vice President and Managing Principal at [Ames & Gough](#)

Key takeaways:

- Law firm associate hiring reached its highest level in 2024, with a notable trend of lateral and entry-level hiring rates converging, especially in larger firms.
- Attrition rates remain a significant challenge, particularly for smaller firms (100 or fewer attorneys), which experienced much higher average attrition compared to larger firms.
- The main reasons associates leave are pursuit of specific practice interests, career changes, and, for laterals, better compensation and work-life balance—contrary to the common belief that compensation is always the top factor.
- Retention strategies that focus on individualized professional development, strong alumni programs, and transparent performance evaluations are increasingly important for law firms aiming to attract and keep top talent.

Bringing On the Data!

The July webinar opened with findings from the NALP Foundation’s 2024 Attrition Study, which tracked thousands of associate hires and departures across 119 U.S. and Canadian law firms. The data captured firm size, geography, practice areas, and associate demographics.

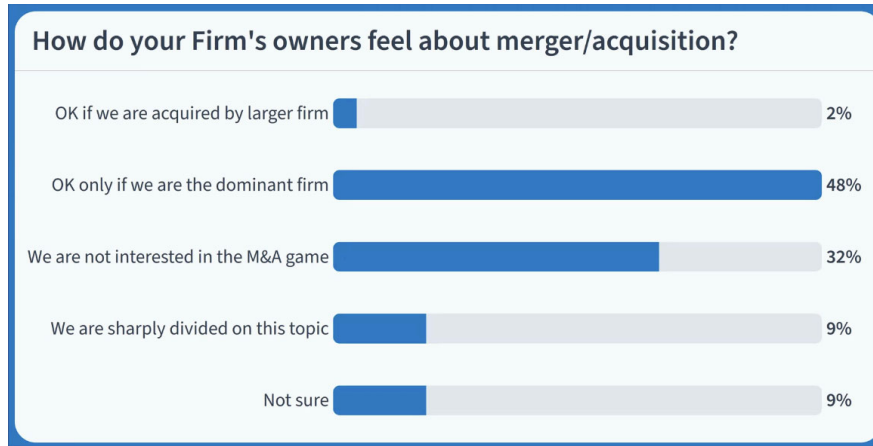
Panelists emphasized that recruiting and retaining talent remain top concerns. In a live poll, over 40% of firms identified these as their highest strategic priorities for 2025, well ahead of billing or business development.



Moderator John Remsen Jr. noted that hiring is “the issue of the moment” across firm sizes. While BigLaw often dominates the conversation, polling revealed that mid-sized firms are especially impacted. Two-thirds of attendees came from firms with 100 or fewer lawyers, including 31% from firms with 10-25 attorneys.



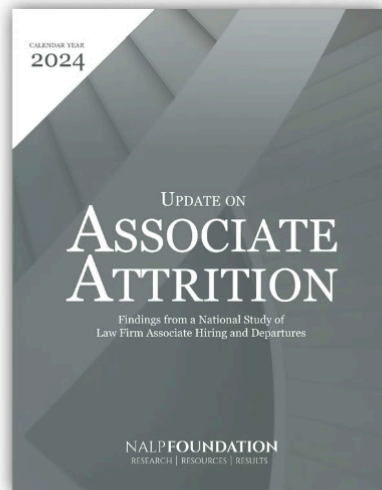
The audience was also asked about their firm’s openness to mergers or acquisitions. Nearly half said they’d consider it only if they were the dominant party, indicating most firms are focused on internal strategies for growth and retention.



These subjects remained front and center for the rest of the discussion: understanding how associate hiring patterns are changing, what’s driving early exits, and what firm leaders can do differently to build stronger pipelines along with more attractive workplaces.

Talent Recruiting and Retention

CY 2024 Attrition Study



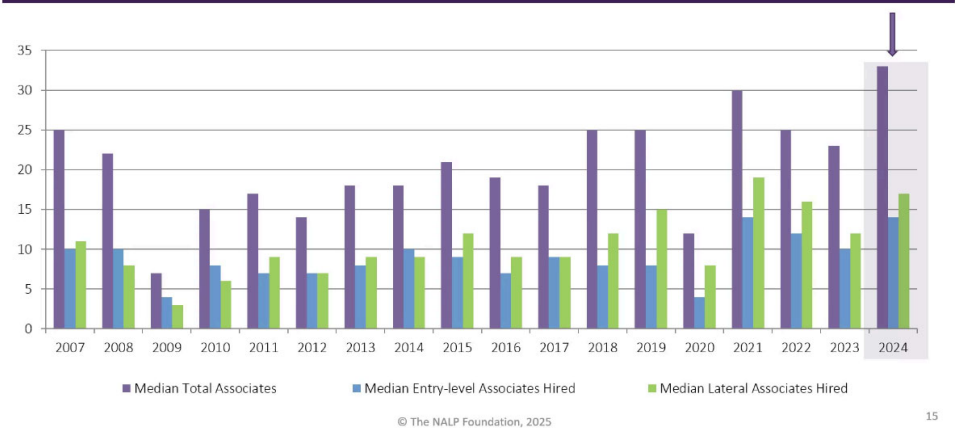
- Data collected from 119 law firms across the U.S. and Canada
 - 6,092 associate hires
 - 3,884 associate departures
- Empiric data aggregated; also segmented by firm size and demographic features
- New queries on:
 - Career-related shifts to education and government
 - Desire for remote or flexible work arrangements
- Ongoing queries:
 - Rehires
 - Virtual hires
 - Departure date tracking for each associate
 - Timing on when associates obtained their firm positions
 - Detailed data on associates’ departure reasons and their next professional destinations
 - Partnership aspirations
 - Outplacement and career coaching prior to departures
- **Full report was released April 24, 2025.**

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The NALP Foundation’s latest data reflects a year of record hiring. In 2024, participating firms reported 6,092 associate hires, the highest since tracking began in 2007. Entry-level hiring nearly matched lateral rates, signaling increased investment in early-career talent. This narrowing gap suggests a shift in firm strategy away from quick-fix lateral solutions and toward building homegrown talent.

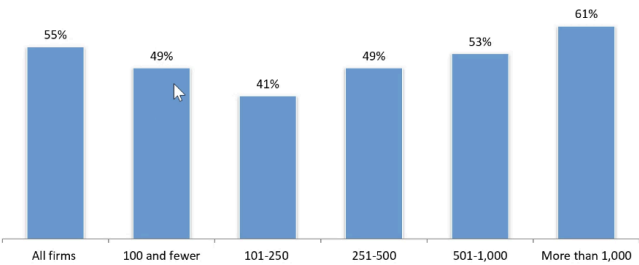
Associate Hiring 2007-2024



The report, based on submissions from 119 firms, examined hiring and departure patterns across a variety of metrics. As Jennifer Mandery stated, this granularity helps firms benchmark against similar peers: “It’s not just what’s happening across the industry; it’s what’s happening in firms like yours.”

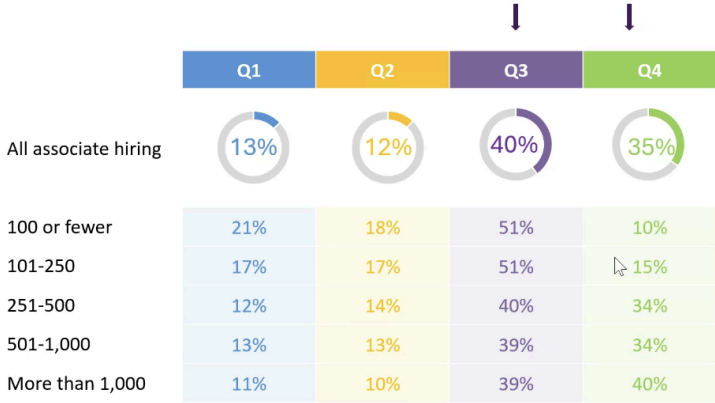
Entry-level hiring varied widely by firm size. In firms with 100 or fewer attorneys, it accounted for just under half of new hires, compared to 60% at firms with more than 1,000 lawyers.

2024 Entry-Level Hires: Percent of Total 2024 Associate Hiring



Hiring was heavily concentrated late in the year: nearly 75% of associates were hired in Q3 and Q4, compared to just 10% in Q1. Smaller firms were more likely to hire earlier, suggesting differences in workflow cycles and capacity planning. Panelists highlighted that compressed hiring timelines can strain onboarding and development, especially in firms without formal training programs.

2024 Associate Hiring by Quarter

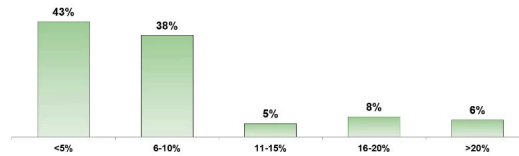


Another recent trend is the reappearance of “boomerang” associates. Nearly half of firms reported rehiring a former associate; 15% did so in 2024 alone. These returning lawyers made up 11% of all hires. For firms, boomerangs offer a known quantity: lawyers who can often hit the ground running with minimal onboarding. An MPF poll showed most attendees underestimated this prevalence.

2024 Rehires as a Percent of Total 2024 Associate Hiring



REGISTRANT QUESTION
What percentage of participating firms reported hiring at least one associate who both left and returned to their firm (a boomerang) within 2024?



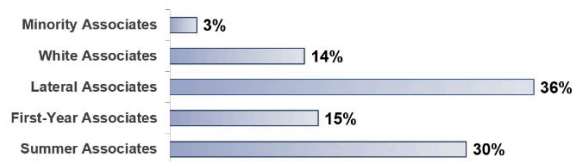
Smaller firms also saw higher attrition (31% on average) compared to 18% at larger firms.

Associate Attrition Rate Overall and by Firm Size 2007-2024

Year	Overall	100 or fewer attorneys	101-250 attorneys	251-500 attorneys	More than 500 attorneys
→ 2024	20%	31%	19%	17%	18%
2023	18%	19%	20%	16%	16%
2022	20%	16%	21%	21%	19%
2021	26%	27%	25%	24%	28%
2020	16%	15%	15%	17%	15%
2019	18%	15%	18%	19%	19%
2018	19%	15%	20%	20%	20%
2017	16%	16%	14%	18%	18%
2016	16%	15%	14%	18%	18%
2015	20%	20%	20%	21%	19%
2014	18%	17%	17%	19%	19%
2013	17%	17%	17%	16%	17%
2012	17%	13%	17%	18%	18%
2011	18%	15%	18%	20%	19%
2010	18%	19%	15%	19%	18%
2009	17%	16%	16%	19%	18%
2008	16%	16%	15%	17%	16%
2007	18%	17%	17%	18%	21%

When asked who stays the longest, attendees pointed to lateral and summer associates. NALP data showed stronger retention for entry-level hires and summer associates, while lateral hires and associates of color tended to leave sooner.

REGISTRANT QUESTION
Which three demographic cohorts tend to have longer tenures at law firms?



2024 Associate Attrition Rates: Demographic Cohorts and Regions

Overall
20%

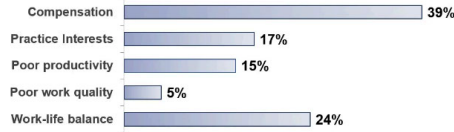
- Male – 22%
- Female – 20%
- Non-binary – 23%
- White – 19%
- Associates of Color – 24%
- Mid-Atlantic – 17%
- Midwest – 18%
- Northeast – 23%
- Southeast – 20%
- West/Rocky Mountain – 24%

Hiring volume alone isn't enough. The panel emphasized that retention requires purposeful integration, development, and support.

Why Associates Leave

The panel next examined the disconnect between why firms believe associates leave and what the data shows. Before the session, attendees were asked to identify the top reason associates depart. Most chose compensation, work-life balance, or shifting practice interests.

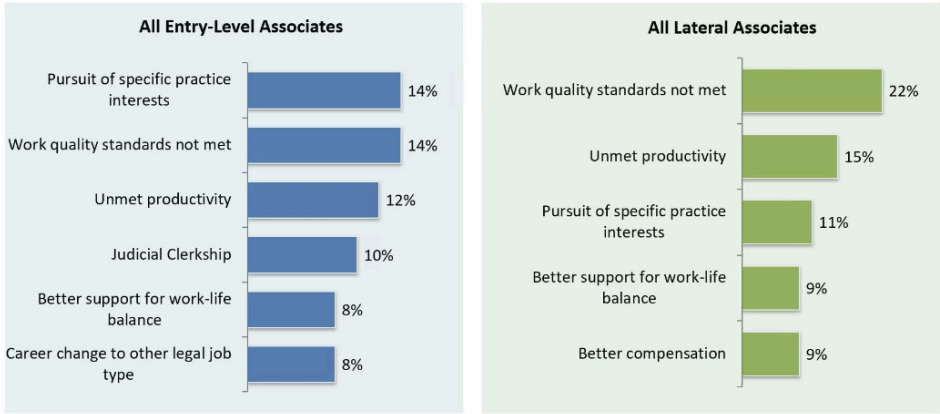
REGISTRANT QUESTION
From the list below, what do you think are the top three reasons firms cited as the reasons for lateral associate departures?



But NALP’s 2024 data painted a different picture. Reasons varied by hire type:

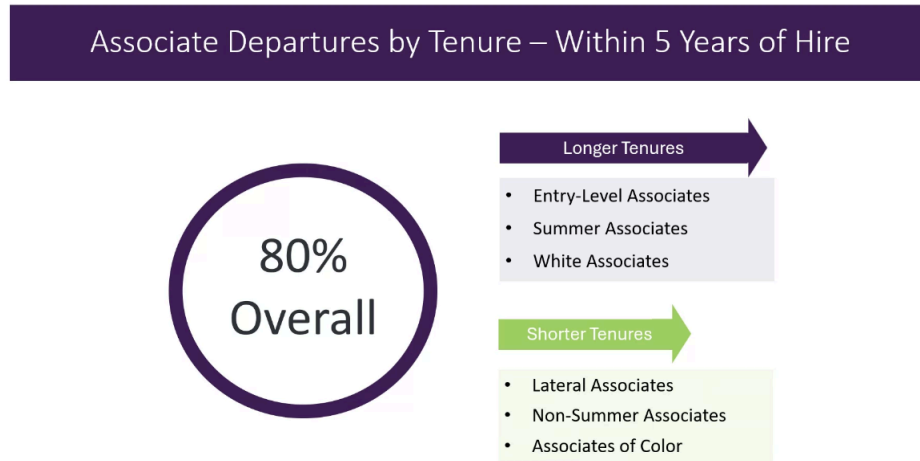
- **Entry-level associates** most often left for a different practice area, unmet expectations about work, or clerkships.
- **Lateral hires** more often departed due to misaligned productivity or performance concerns. Compensation and work-life balance were cited less frequently, just 9% each.

Attrition Study: 2024 Top Reasons for Departures



These findings challenge assumptions. While money plays a role, the data suggests that growth trajectory, performance alignment, and practice fit are often more decisive. Fiona Trevelyan emphasized that understanding associate attrition requires looking beyond surface-level factors. “We tend to think retention is about money, but more often, it’s about trajectory.”

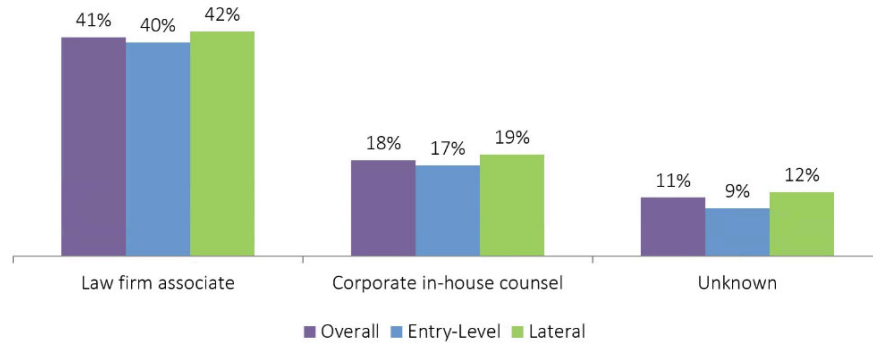
Timing has also shifted. In prior years, about 75% of associate departures occurred within five years. In 2023 and 2024, that figure rose to 80% within four years, which could have implications for integration and development strategies.



Thankfully, most associates aren't leaving the legal profession entirely. They're moving to other firms, often for better alignment with career goals or firm culture. In-house roles account for just under 20% of departures, and very few exited legal work altogether.

Among those going in-house, panelists pointed out that many are seeking greater schedule flexibility or clearer paths to advancement, issues that law firms can also address with the right systems. This lateral movement within the profession reinforces the need for firms to focus not just on recruiting but also on re-recruiting their existing talent, especially during the critical first few years.

2024 Departure Destinations



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Panelists emphasized that firms often don't realize an associate is unhappy until they're already walking out the door. Skip Horne cited weak feedback loops and underused performance reviews. "If a firm isn't using evaluations to spot disengagement early," he said, "they're going to find out when it's too late."

Effective evaluation systems are not just about measuring performance, they can act as early detection tools for disengagement, offering a window for meaningful course correction before an associate decides to leave.

Why Associates Stay

After reviewing why associates leave, the panel turned to the factors that encourage them to stay. This part of the discussion focused on how firms can build environments where associates are not only satisfied, but committed for the long term.

NALP's 2023 "Stay Study" identified three consistent reasons associates remain at their firms:

- Fair, competitive compensation
- Sustainable work-life balance
- A clearly defined, individualized career path

These factors were echoed in webinar polling and discussion. While some attendees cited firm culture, panelists emphasized that retention usually stems from alignment across compensation, opportunity, and support.

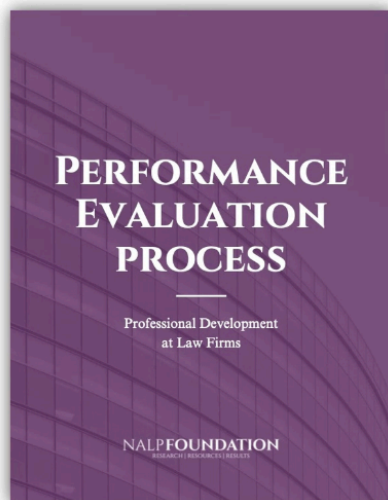
According to Skip, "It's not just about the paycheck. It's about whether that paycheck feels fair for what they're doing and where they're headed." Fiona added that many associates want

“bespoke career advising”, mentorship that responds to individual needs rather than rigid checklists.

Work-life balance remains a top concern. But, as the panel pointed out, balance doesn't always mean fewer hours. For some, it's about predictability or autonomy. Firms that recognize these variations are better positioned to retain top talent. Associates increasingly value autonomy over rigidity. Firms that can offer greater choice in schedule, workflow, or growth track may see longer tenure and stronger engagement in return.

To support growth, the NALP Foundation is conducting a new study on performance evaluation systems, looking at how firms assess associates, how data is used, and how evaluation practices differ across associate types.

New Study – Join Now!



TOPICS COVERED:

- Associate performance evaluation content
- Timing (annual, bi-annual, real-time)
- Mechanisms (external vendor/internally developed)
- Differentiation by cohort (seniority, summer associate, other)
- AI usage
- Data utilization (promotion, retention, intervention, other)
- Evaluator and associate training and completion

Data collection closes August 8, 2025

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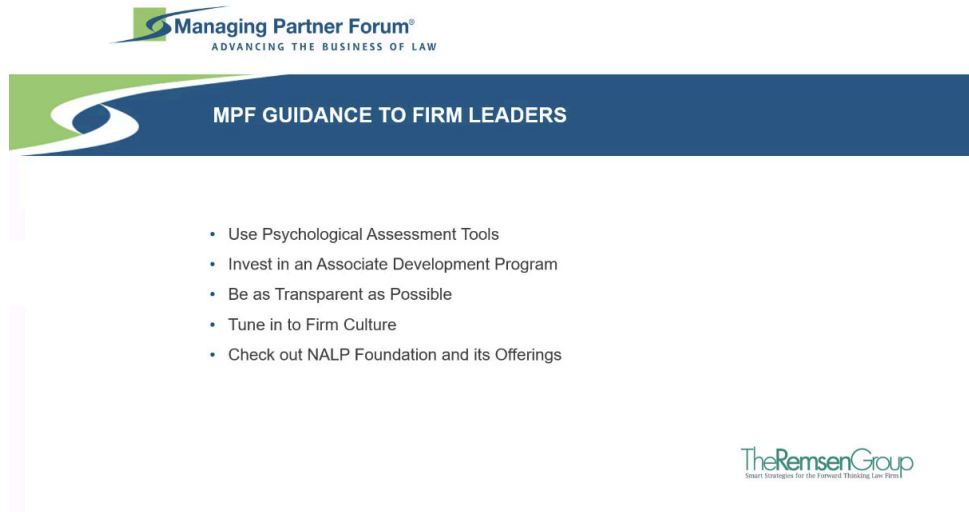
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The study also looks at evaluation timing, AI use, and whether associate feedback informs policy or development. Fiona explained that effective evaluations can evolve from “compliance-based” to “engagement-based”, tools that help retain lawyers by reinforcing their value and direction.

Ultimately, staying power has less to do with perks and is more about feeling seen, supported, and invested in, with clear signals that the firm is committed to the associate's future.

What's a Firm Leader To Do?

To close the session, the panel offered practical, high-level guidance for firm leaders grappling with hiring and attrition challenges. While no single solution fits all, the following recommendations provide some actionable starting points:



1. **Use psychological assessment tools** during hiring: not just to vet skills, but to better understand cultural fit and professional strengths.
2. **Invest in associate development programs** that include mentoring, feedback, and visible career progression.
3. **Be transparent** about expectations, performance metrics, and partnership paths.
4. **Engage with firm culture intentionally**, and communicate what your firm stands for; don't default to generic values.
5. Leverage the **NALP Foundation's resources**, including benchmarking data, upcoming studies, and customized firm reports.

As John indicated, firms don't have to follow every trend, but they do need to define what works for their culture and act with purpose. "You don't have to be all things to all people," he said. "But you do need to be clear, consistent, and committed to the people you want to keep."
