

Starting salaries are £180,000 – but do young lawyers believe the hours, stress and burnout are worth it?

Jane Croft Sat 27 Jul 2024 *The Guardian*

[...] City law firms have hit the headlines in recent months for a series of eye-watering pay rises given to newly qualified lawyers – but less attention has been paid to the Faustian bargain many lawyers strike, enduring intense stress and punishing hours in exchange for their generous pay.

Last month Quinn Emanuel, a global law firm became the latest to increase salaries for newly qualified lawyers employed in London: its starting rate rose to £180,000, matching other elite US firms operating here. UK “magic circle” firms including Linklaters and Clifford Chance have also upped salaries for this group, to £150,000, which is still a lot less than the partners in these firms, who typically take home £2m or more a year. There is a huge pay disparity between City law firms and areas such as criminal legal aid: this work is also emotionally draining and requires long hours, but in this field trainee solicitors’ pay will be little more than £21,000 a year.

There are signs that increased pressures in all areas of law have led to large numbers of professionals suffering burnout, stress and mental illness. One contributing factor is that technology has also removed work-life boundaries, making lawyers available 24/7 for clients. However, staff wellbeing has also risen up the corporate agenda in recent years as employers started to become concerned. The new Labour government has said it wants to introduce a “right to switch off”, which would allow UK employees to disconnect outside working hours and not be contacted by their employer.

The death in September last year of Vanessa Ford – a partner at City law firm Pinsent Masons who had been working long hours on a deal involving Everton football club – has prompted widespread discussion in the profession about corporate culture. [...] LawCare, a legal mental health charity, says it saw a 14% rise in people requesting mental health support last year, with a significant number saying they had suffered workplace bullying. The charity found that legal professionals were at high risk of burnout, with 69% claiming they had experienced mental ill-health, and one in five reporting having been bullied, harassed or discriminated against at work. [...]

One key issue is that most lawyers are still judged largely on how many hours they bill clients, which affects the firm’s overall revenue. Associate lawyers at big firms who have been qualified for a few years are generally expected to bill between 1,900 and 2,200 hours a year. Some associates at US law firms bill more than 2,400 hours a year, working sometimes from 9am until midnight six days a week. A survey last year found 12-hour average working days at a number of London law firms.

Laura Empson, professor at London’s Bayes Business School, says: “The likelihood of becoming a partner is very slim and so they compete against other members of their cohort. They don’t need partners telling them to work late; they will do it themselves as they want to be noticed and visible. By the time they become partners they do not know any other way of working.” {...]

Some City law firms have tried to alleviate stress by offering wellness initiatives ranging from private healthcare, gym membership and employee assistance helplines to yoga classes and bring your dog to work days. Many employers also have doctors and physiotherapists available on site.

Younger, gen Z lawyers are now starting to question the long-hours culture, with some even shunning the traditional career path, whereby they are expected to strive to make partner. And the drive towards a better work-life balance is being seen across the City, not just in law.

Lawyers will now go to law firms and say, ‘I will do two or three years and then go and do something else in law with a better work-life balance.’ Gen Z don’t want to work like this. There is also likely to be change due to artificial intelligence, where technology will do many of the tasks currently undertaken by junior lawyers, meaning fewer of them will be needed.”

“The incoming generation has different expectations,” adds Rimmer. “Quite a lot of them do not want to be a partner. This puts pressure on senior people in law firms to manage expectations based on existing working practices. [...]