

LEGAL TALENT REPORT 2025/26: THE RETURN OF THE SELECTIVE JOBSEEKER

WHAT'S MOTIVATING LAWYERS TO MOVE —
AND WHAT'S KEEPING THEM ENGAGED



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Matching the right lawyers, with the right law firms

At Realm, we have a deep-seated belief that happy people drive successful businesses. Our job is to help firms like yours attract, recruit and retain them.

As legal talent consultants and practice area specialists, we work with law firms across the UK to build teams that are not only technically strong but culturally aligned, strategically placed, and motivated to stay for the long haul. Because when you hire the right lawyers, your firm grows more sustainably, performs more profitably and delivers better outcomes for your clients.

This report is designed to give you insight into what lawyers really want in 2025 and beyond, and how you can position your firm to stand out in a competitive market.

10
years of business

540+
happy law firms

1,200+
lawyers placed

A note from **Our Managing Director**



Last year's report painted a picture of caution in the legal talent market – settling salaries (at least for those who didn't move), steady flexibility expectations, and most lawyers opting to stay put.

This year, while the changes aren't dramatic, the dial is starting to move.

More lawyers describe themselves as active jobseekers, and that's despite continued economic uncertainty. What we're seeing is the early signs of a hesitant recovery, a subtle but important shift that could signal the start of a more fluid and confident market.

That's not to say we're out of the woods. Pay growth is still slow, and while flexibility remains a baseline expectation, it's no longer a differentiator.

What's becoming increasingly clear is that firms who win – in both retention and attraction – are those with a clearly defined Employer Value Proposition and high levels of employee engagement.

That's why, this year, we've evolved the report.

You'll find salary data across regions and practice areas, new resources to help you benchmark pay and shape your EVP, and, for the first time, a dedicated section on employee engagement, because feeling connected to work, purpose and people is more critical than ever.

At Realm, our mission is to match the right lawyers with the right law firms, and that means helping you understand what lawyers really want. If you'd like tailored insight or support on how to stand out in today's legal talent market, get in touch. We're here to help.

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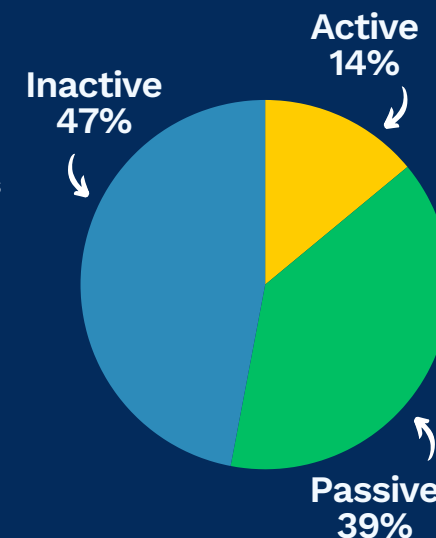
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THE STATE OF THE MARKET: SIGNS OF A HESITANT RECOVERY

This year's survey data suggests the legal talent market is beginning to shift, albeit cautiously.

- 14% of lawyers describe themselves as actively looking for a new opportunity
- 39% are passive jobseekers, open to the right opportunity but not actively searching
- 47% say they are not looking at all and are settled in their current roles



Active Jobseeker

Someone who is interested in finding a new job and has been taking proactive steps to do so.

Passive Jobseeker

Someone who might move jobs if the right opportunity presented itself, but will not take proactive steps towards moving.

Inactive Jobseeker

Someone who is not looking for opportunities or interested in moving at all.

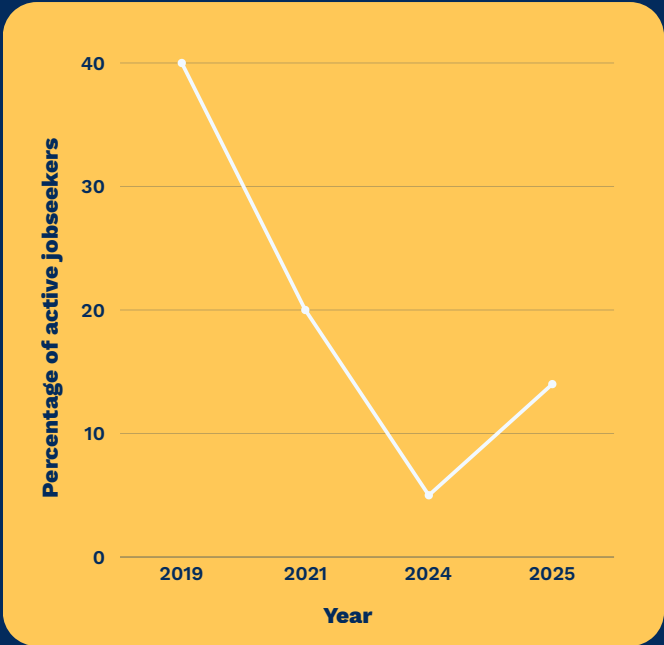
While nearly half of the legal profession remains inactive, the proportion of active jobseekers has risen slightly and is the **highest Realm has recorded since before the pandemic**. It marks a change from the static conditions of last year's report and hints at a slow return to mobility in the market.

“It’s not a dramatic shift - we’re calling it a hesitant recovery - but it could mark the beginning of a more fluid market.”



Duane Cormell
Managing Director

The Evolving State of the Market



The reasons behind this movement may be cyclical. A disproportionate number of lawyers changed jobs between late 2020 and early 2022, and with average tenure in the profession sitting at around 4.5 years, it’s likely that those individuals are now

beginning to consider their next move. At the same time, the profession has remained relatively resilient in the face of wider economic uncertainty, creating conditions where some lawyers feel safe enough to explore new opportunities.

What This Means For Law Firms

A perspective from Kelly Reid,
Associate Director



★ 270 private client lawyers placed

“While the market isn’t moving at pace, the increase in active and passive jobseekers signals that we’re heading into a period of greater movement and that presents both opportunities and challenges for law firms.

Due to the average tenure of lawyers, if you hired heavily between 2020 and 2022, now’s the time to re-engage those individuals. **Have they progressed in the way you promised? Do they feel valued, heard, and supported?** If not, they may soon become part of that 13% who are actively looking to move or join the growing cohort who are passively open to change.

On the flipside, as more lawyers become active or passive on the jobs market, it might become less

challenging for law firms to find the people they are looking for.

Across most practice areas, there is a relative skills shortage, with more opportunities available than there are qualified candidates. But as the market becomes more buoyant, there is a real opportunity for you to attract great talent - especially if your firm has a **clear and compelling EVP** and is prepared to move decisively when the right lawyer comes along.

Ultimately, firms that are proactive about both retention and attraction will be best placed to thrive in this new phase of the market. Those who wait until movement picks up significantly may find they’re already too late.”

💡 Action Point for Law Firms

1. Check in with your joiners, especially those from 2020- 2022

Review their progression, engagement, and development. Re-onboard where needed and have open conversations about what’s next for them, before another firm does.

2. Review and refine your EVP

Make sure it will keep people you’ve got and draw in the new lawyers you want to hire. This will make it easier to tap into the 36% of lawyers who could have their interest piqued by the right opportunity.

WHY PEOPLE STAY: WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

This year’s survey confirms that the core reasons lawyers stay in their current roles are practical, personal, and largely consistent with previous years. **Here’s how the top factors break down:**



While pay took the top spot in 2024, this year, flexibility has come out on top - reinforcing the idea that working arrangements remain a critical part of the legal profession’s post-COVID expectations. Pay and progression follow closely behind, suggesting lawyers are looking not just for balance, but for fair compensation and forward momentum.

What’s interesting is that while **sense of purpose** and **engagement** don’t score as highly as the top three, they remain a meaningful factor for over a third of respondents, suggesting their influence may be underreported in headline data.

These responses speak to belonging, recognition, and autonomy - all markers of a highly engaged workforce.

The free-text comments from respondents add depth to this picture.

“Support”

“Respected colleagues who I consider to be friends”

“Culture and management”

“Flexibility of working hours”

“I left my last job for lack of maternity policy. My current role allows me to work part time.”

What This Means For Law Firms

A perspective from Paula Pawlowska, Associate Director



★167 family lawyers placed

“What this year’s data shows us is that the basics still matter and they matter a lot.

but they’ll stop progressing, stop performing, and eventually stop staying.

Lawyers stay when they feel fairly paid, have the flexibility to balance work with life, and can see a clear path ahead of them. Those are the top three reasons we see time and again: pay, flexibility, and progression.

Firms that want to retain their top performers need to be proactive. It’s not enough to assume your team is happy because they haven’t moved on. Engagement is something you have to nurture, and that starts with regular, honest conversations about what people need to feel supported and fulfilled.

But just beneath the surface, engagement and workload are playing a big part too.

Get the foundations right and keep checking in and you’ll build a team that wants to stay.”

If someone feels overworked, undervalued, or disconnected from the purpose of their role, they might not leave straight away -

💡 Action Point for Law Firms

1. Conduct regular engagement and pulse surveys

Survey your team regularly on what’s working, what’s not, and what would make them even more engaged. Don’t wait until someone’s already got one foot out the door.

“Disengaged lawyers might not be actively leaving, but they’re also not thriving and that’s a problem too.”



Duane Cornell
Managing Director

WHY PEOPLE LEAVE: WHAT THE DATA TELLS US

This year’s findings confirm that while pay remains the biggest motivator for lawyers considering a move, it’s far from the only factor.

Here’s how the key motivators stack up:



Unsurprisingly, salary tops the list, with more than three-quarters of lawyers saying it would tempt them to move. But the second most common reason is a desire for a **healthier work-life balance**, highlighting the growing importance of wellbeing in legal career decisions

What’s also striking is that career progression, often assumed to be a major driver, came in last. This may indicate that many lawyers feel stuck or have given up on promised progression, or that other day-to-day pressures, like workload and stress are currently more pressing.

“There’s a perception that salaries are rising sharply across the board, but the reality is far more complex. If a firm can genuinely differentiate on pay and wellbeing, it’s a powerful combination.”



Duane Cornell
Managing Director

What lawyers say...

“““
‘I like my current role, it’s close to home, good profession, good salary, I’m not looking to move but the only thing that would make me move is if it was for money that was simply too good to ignore.’

“““
‘I’m comfortable in my current role as there is flexibility and I can openly express my views but know that there are better benefits elsewhere.’

“““
‘I’m more interested in work life balance and flexibility than ‘climbing the ladder’

What This Means For Law Firms

A perspective from Lucy Wickham,
Senior Consultant



★111 family lawyers placed

“This data really mirrors what I’m seeing in conversations with lawyers across Yorkshire. Yes, pay is important, especially now, but there’s a clear shift toward people prioritising how they feel day to day in their role.

For firms, this is an opportunity. If you can offer a role that improves someone’s quality of life, whether that’s through a better salary, better support, or better balance, you’ll attract the lawyers who might not even be looking... yet.

Work-life balance, manageable workloads, flexibility; these are no longer ‘nice-to-haves’. They’re key decision-making factors. What’s interesting is that progression came out lower than expected. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t matter, but rather that for many lawyers, it’s not the immediate concern, especially if other parts of the job feel unsustainable.

The most successful firms I work with are those that are proactively checking in with their people and being honest about what they can offer - before someone else does it for them.”

💡 Action Point for Law Firms

- 1. **Look at the full picture - not just pay.**
If you can’t compete on salary alone, can you offer better support, smarter workloads, or more flexibility? These are often the tipping points for lawyers considering a move.

SALARIES: A CRITICAL PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

Throughout this year’s research, one theme has remained consistent: salary still matters a lot.

Whether lawyers are staying, passively browsing, or actively looking, pay plays a central role in their decision-making:

61%

say pay and reward is one of the main reasons they’ve stayed in their current role

Fair pay is a baseline expectation, not a benefit.

While other factors like flexibility, progression and purpose shape the overall experience, salary remains one of the most tangible indicators of value. If it’s not fair, it becomes a problem – even if everything else is working.

Another key insight from this year’s survey is that many firms are reviewing pay annually, which is a good thing. But yearly reviews alone aren’t enough.

“There’s a lot of press around bumper NQ salaries, but that’s not the reality for most lawyers. If you can genuinely differentiate on pay – or even just be transparent and fair – you’re already ahead..”

77%

say a better financial package would tempt them to move

Without benchmarking externally, firms risk falling behind slowly and silently, only realising there’s an issue when a lawyer leaves for a better offer.

And for lawyers who aren’t motivated solely by money, fairness still matters. If someone feels underpaid in comparison to their peers, whether or not they’re actively jobseeking, it chips away at trust and engagement over time.

What This Means For Law Firms

By Duane Cormell,
Managing Director



“In my conversations with managing partners and heads of department, salary often comes up as something they’ll ‘look at next budget cycle’ or ‘keep under review’.

The problem is, the market doesn’t wait. If your pay isn’t competitive today, you’re already on the back foot, and you might not know it until you lose someone you thought was settled.

What I’d encourage every firm to do is treat salary as a living, breathing part of your people strategy, not a once-a-year box-tick.

That means:

- ✔ **Benchmarking externally** as well as reviewing internally. Internal parity is important, but it’s external competitiveness that will keep your lawyers.
- ✔ **Implementing quarterly reviews and a transparent progression** framework so the conversation around salary is an ongoing one
- ✔ **Linking pay to value** so that lawyers understand how their contribution is recognised and rewarded.
- ✔ **Being transparent** where possible – even if you’re not the highest payer, clarity builds trust.

The firms doing this best don’t just ‘keep up’ with the market, they set the pace. They know that salary is rarely the only reason someone stays or leaves, but it’s often the deal-breaker when all other things are equal.

If you’re serious about retention in 2025, salary strategy can’t sit on the back burner. It’s not just about avoiding departures; **it’s about making sure your best people never start looking in the first place.**”

💡 Action Point for Law Firms

- 1. Don’t just review, benchmark.**
Make sure your pay structures are aligned with what the market is actually offering, not what you think it’s offering.

[Download Realm’s 2025 Salary Guide for Law Firms to see how your firm compares across region, PQE level and practice area](#)

ENGAGEMENT: THE OVERLOOKED RETENTION RISK

New to this year's report is a section exploring a topic that's increasingly difficult for law firms to ignore: **employee engagement**.

While engagement didn't score as highly as pay or flexibility in the survey questions - just **36%** of lawyers said it was a key reason for staying, and **22%** said it would tempt them to move - the insight gathered from conversations and commentary tells a different story. ➔

"We need to be careful not to underplay the impact of engagement. A disengaged lawyer might not leave straight away - but they won't grow, they won't perform, and ultimately they won't be a profitable employee."



Duane Cornell
Managing Director

Low engagement may not always show up in attrition data, but its effects are still felt in lost productivity, stalled development, and quiet discontent.

Interestingly, many lawyers who described themselves as not looking to move still cited factors like support, respect, team culture, and flexibility as reasons they were happy. In other words, engagement may not be named outright - but it's often the hidden reason someone chooses to stay or starts thinking about leaving.

What lawyers say...

“““

'I'm happy, settled & really like/respect the people I work with but if pay doesn't increase a better financial package or less stress in the job could tempt me to move.'

“““

'I'm largely staying for the people but ultimately I work to fund my home life. I know I am good at my role so more financial rewards would be beneficial.'

“““

'I left my last firm due to low pay, I would only consider moving if the culture in my new place was not good, thankfully that isn't the case.'

What This Means For Law Firms

A perspective from Bill Szajna-Hopgood,
Associate Consultant



★ **57 private client
lawyers placed**

"What I see again and again when talking to private client and Court of Protection lawyers is that engagement is the glue - it's what keeps people in roles that aren't always easy.

Engaged lawyers are more resilient, more loyal, and more likely to go the extra mile. But engagement doesn't happen by accident, it's a product of good leadership, regular recognition, manageable workloads and a culture where people feel they belong.

The challenge is that by the time someone says they're disengaged, it's often too late. That's why firms need to be tracking this, not just assuming everyone's fine because no one's leaving.

The firms doing this well are the ones asking the right questions in one-to-ones, sending out quick pulse surveys, or even running full engagement diagnostics. They're not waiting for problems, they're designing the kind of culture people want to stay in."



Action Point for Law Firms

1. Measure engagement before it becomes a problem.

Even a short internal pulse survey can uncover where people are feeling disconnected - giving you the insight you need to act early.



➔ Download our Employee Engagement Guide to learn how to measure and improve engagement in your firm, with practical tools and insights you can implement straight away

A Closing Note From Duane Cormell

Managing Director



Final Thoughts

This year's report paints a picture of a legal talent market that's beginning to move again, slowly but surely.

We're calling it a hesitant recovery. After a period of stagnation and ongoing economic uncertainty following a short-lived post-COVID boom, we're finally seeing more lawyers becoming open to new opportunities. The percentage of active jobseekers is rising, and passive interest is strong, but many professionals are still cautious, and competition for talent remains high.

The insights in this report show that while pay and flexibility are still critical, they're no longer enough on their own. Lawyers are increasingly seeking balance, purpose, and a working environment where they feel genuinely supported.

Firms that can deliver on these fronts - through clear progression, fair pay, healthy workloads and strong engagement - will be best placed to attract and retain top talent in 2025 and beyond.

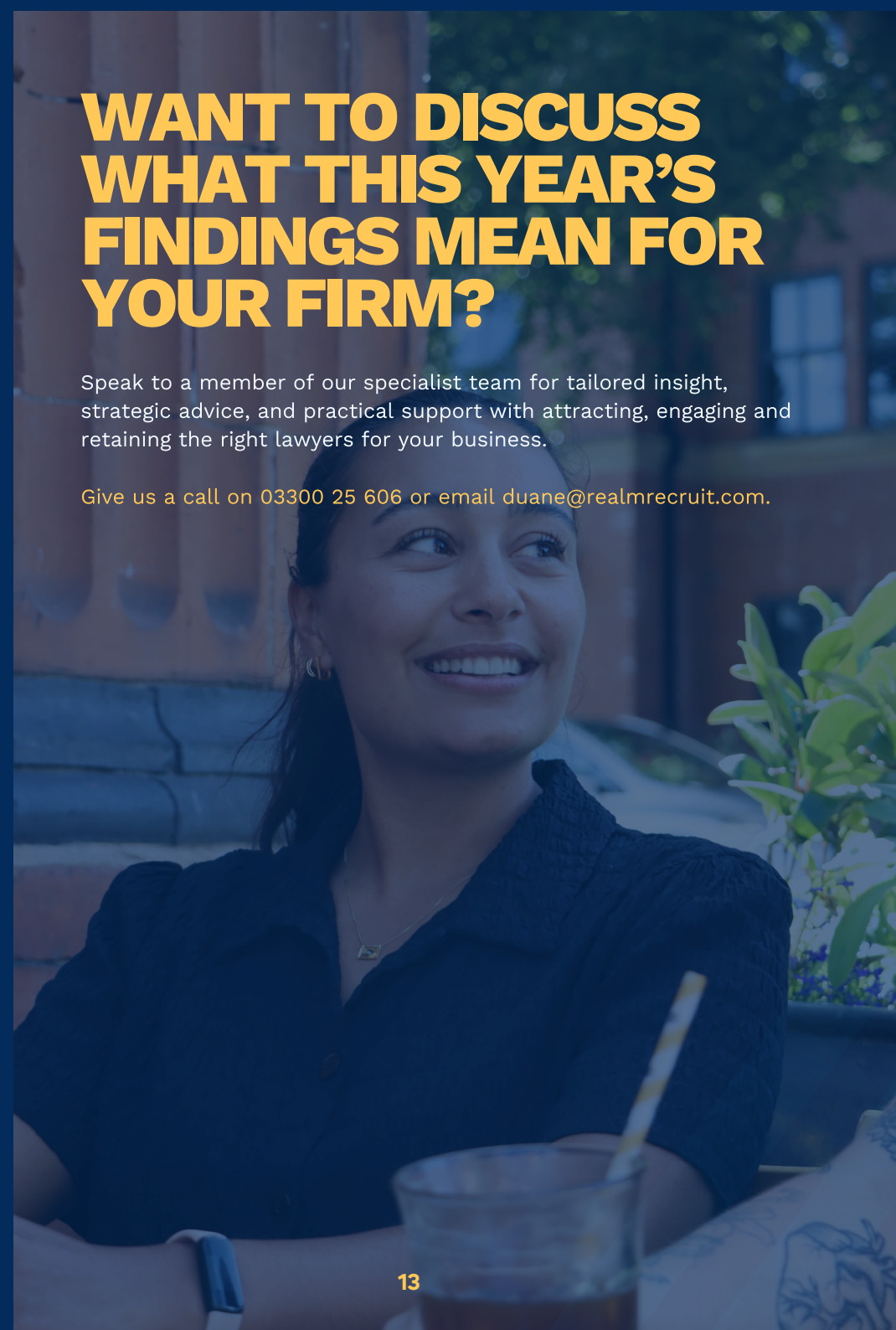
At Realm, we've always believed that happier lawyers build better law firms. That's why we go beyond recruitment - offering tailored insight, salary benchmarking, EVP consultancy and engagement support to help firms like yours grow sustainably.

So, whether you're looking to future-proof your people strategy, attract a specific type of lawyer, or simply sensecheck how you're doing against the rest of the market, we're here to help.

WANT TO DISCUSS WHAT THIS YEAR'S FINDINGS MEAN FOR YOUR FIRM?

Speak to a member of our specialist team for tailored insight, strategic advice, and practical support with attracting, engaging and retaining the right lawyers for your business.

Give us a call on 03300 25 606 or email duane@realmrecruit.com.





 03300 245 606

 HELLO@REALMRECRUIT.COM

 WWW.REALMRECRUIT.COM

