

Small Firm vs. Large Firm Associate Satisfaction: Is There a Difference?

By [LawVision](#) on September 8, 2015

Midlevel associates at large law firms are happier than they have been in more than a decade, according to American Lawyer's recent [Midlevel Associate Satisfaction Survey](#). In the current results, associates gave their firms an average score of 4.14 on a scale from 1 to 5. Last year's average score was 4.08 and that was the highest in over ten years.

After the survey's release I discussed the results with leaders of firms of various sizes. Their interpretations and concerns were very consistent and included the following, common refrain:

- *Are associates really that happy?*
- *It doesn't seem like that here.*
- *Are we doing something wrong?*

Concerns about retaining key associates abound at small, midsize and large law firms alike. My colleague, [Marcie Borgal Shunk](#), echoed this reality with the following commentary in the American Lawyer article cited above:

"The talent pool is decreasing," says Marcie Borgal Shunk, senior consultant at LawVision Group. Law firm concerns about associate retention are rising, she says, because of the high cost of training associates, from \$200,000 to \$400,000 each. The associate shortage is creating an incentive for firms to try to hold on to talent, because senior-level associates are among the most profitable lawyers at a firm.

So what's driving associate satisfaction in 2015? Interestingly, this year's overall satisfaction scores were strongly statistically correlated to four questions involving technology. Many of the firms at the bottom of the rankings scored low on technology, whereas firms with the highest satisfaction had the highest combined technology scores.

Gen X and Millennial lawyers thrive on technology. Unfortunately, walking desks, video phones and Wi-Fi hotspots aren't at the ready disposal for all firms. So where does that leave small and mid-size firms lacking the deep pockets and internal infrastructure available at the large firms included in the survey?

Obviously technology isn't the magic solution to associates' satisfaction. While baseline technology empowering Next Gen lawyers to work remotely is imperative, interesting work, the opportunity for advancement, meaningful feedback and training are critical. Those are areas where small firms can indeed "level the playing field." Implementing new technology is expensive. Changing associate advancement practices, feedback methods and training may not have a monetary cost, but the cultural and social capital required can be tremendous.

The key takeaway is to understand what drives associate satisfaction at your firm. Although the answers are not uniform, endeavoring to ask the right questions is a huge first step. One of my first blogs with LawVision Group, ["How to Increase Associate Retention: Four Simple Ways to Improve Associate Satisfaction,"](#) identified the 12 categories used by The American Lawyer Midlevel Associate Survey to measure associate satisfaction. It also highlights four things successful

law firms do to improve associate retention. Although the blog is nearly three years old, the relevance still holds today. Regardless of size, firms can utilize these tools to develop a baseline assessment of associate satisfaction and eliminate costly missteps.

Is there a difference between associate satisfaction at small and large firms? Yes and no. Universally, associates want to understand their future path and role within the firm. The traditional up or out model may be more rigidly enforced at large firms, but finding alternative roles for stellar talent without a book of business is equally challenging at small and mid-size firms.

Walking desks and video phones won't supplant career advancement and interesting work. Asking the right questions, regardless of firm size, is always the important first step.