

The World Really is Different: Realizing that Change is Okay

By [Joseph B. Altonji](#) on November 18, 2016

A few weeks ago, while facilitating an All-Lawyer retreat, I had an interesting ah-hah moment. This was an unusual retreat. In the course of our consulting work we facilitate and attend a lot of client retreats, but most of them are partner-only events. Most firms either don't regularly include the associates at their retreats, or if they do the retreats tend to be more social rather than long working days, and thus less likely to include consultants. But this one was different – it was specifically designed to have an intergenerational conversation about the future of the business, the expectations of the lawyers about the practice and their own roles in it, and the leadership needed from everyone to assure a continued bright future. This conversation happens far less often than it should.

But what was that “ah-hah” moment? It's been awhile since I've facilitated an *all-lawyer* retreat, and I realized that this is the first one since we passed the eight-year mark on the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Eight classes have graduated law school since the financial collapse occurred and the “world changed.” While, of course, there are a few associates around with more than eight years of experience, to all intents and purposes basically *all* of the associates in practice today never practiced in the “good old days” of the pre-crisis legal industry.

There are, on the other hand, more than a few partners around who still yearn for easier times when law firms could raise rates every year at twice the rate of inflation, throw as many bodies at a problem as they could find, and take home more money each year as an expectation, if not a right. Most, though not all, have come to realize we're never going back, but the yearning remains. So law firms are now composed of lawyers who reminisce about the glory days of practicing law, and other lawyers who wonder what the heck those lawyers are talking about. “*The business of law isn't that way – and I doubt it ever will be.*” No “again” at the end of the sentence, as the young lawyers have no context for that.

The frame of reference for younger lawyers is fundamentally different than it is for most partners – and certainly for anyone over 50 (maybe 40) who learned to practice in a radically different environment. It's not just the economic environment though – everything else has changed too. Technology. Client expectations. Personal communications styles. You are ALWAYS on. Everything. We hear a lot from senior lawyers about their frustrations with those in the younger generations, but relatively few of them really take the time to sit down and talk with those younger lawyers – as the partners in the firm referenced above did. It's too bad – you learn a lot from this exercise.

One particular insight from the retreat is suggestive. It's not uncommon for senior lawyers to equate, consciously or not, being in the office with being available. But younger lawyers clearly view things differently. As one young female associate told the senior partners, “If you expect me to be available 24/7, that *has* to mean that a serious part of my availability cannot be in the office.” She's completely right, of course – there is a logical inconsistency implied by insisting that work is an office thing and you have to be available all the time.

The disconnects go farther, though. Young lawyers expect different things from their careers, and different things from the practice, than baby-boomers did. Today's young lawyers grow up professionally *knowing* that the clients are demanding, and *knowing* that the time something takes has little to do with its value. They would rather collaborate than not, and value instantaneous feedback over annual reviews. Adapting to traditional approaches to practice tends to run counter to natural instincts, and for whatever it is worth, they don't understand the mindset of the senior lawyers any better than those seniors understand them. There is much value in dialogue, and experience does, in fact, matter.

It won't be much longer before post-collapse law graduates start to enter partnerships, having never experienced the "good old days" for which today's senior partners still pine. Will this accelerate the trends in the profession making it easier to make changes? Will it help firms adapt more readily to rapidly changing client demands? It's impossible to know for sure, of course, but the profession today still carries a tremendous amount of historical baggage. As senior lawyers retire, a key barrier to industry change will be lessened. As that occurs, we can only expect that change will accelerate.