

Gen Z Attorneys Are Here. Is The Legal Industry Ready?

By **Anna Sanders**

Law360 (March 15, 2023, 4:53 PM EDT) -- By the time Faith Jackson graduated from Harvard Law School last year, she had racked up an impressive resume. In between stints as a BigLaw summer associate, Jackson had been elected student body co-president, worked on the 2020 campaign trail and served as a combat medic for the National Guard.

Jackson had her pick of job offers. But she chose to become an associate at large regional firm Dinsmore & Shohl LLP in Kentucky — a decision Jackson said was partially driven by where her partner would be working. While attorneys from previous generations may have feared making a similar choice, Jackson said today's fledgling attorneys know that "prioritizing sustainability" can be the best career move.

"There is a stereotype that Gen Z is whiny and does not want to work. But I think people in Gen Z are actually making work more sustainable; it's quite the opposite of not wanting to work, as Gen Z is fighting against the culture of 'work in a big job two years, burn out, go elsewhere,'" Jackson told Law360 Pulse in an email. "I think we are prioritizing going to roles that interest us, in cities we want to live in, at firms that value us."

This thinking demonstrates a significant shift that's underway for the legal industry and how the youngest in its ranks approach their careers and practices, experts said. The eldest in Generation Z are now about 25, around the age of a first-year associate or law school student preparing to take the bar.

"They are going to, hopefully, vastly change the industry," said Brenda Pontiff, managing principal at law firm consultancy Partner Track Academy. "Law firms are going to have to adapt in a way they've never had to adapt before."

Who Is Gen Z?

Born in the late 1990s and early 2000s — roughly 1996 to 2012 — Gen Z is the first cohort to not remember a time before the internet. Their early lives were shaped by widespread adoption of the web and tools like the iPhone, as well as events such as the 2016 presidential election, the #MeToo movement and Black Lives Matter protests. The specter of climate change also looms large over their future.

"The horizon of our careers looks pretty unstable, so it's easy to take a lifelong career for granted," said Stefan Suazo, 24, a second-year student at Stanford Law School and co-president of the Stanford Law Association. "Between climate change, political instability, the instability of economies, markets and law firms being totally dependent on that, it's really hard and uncommon for Gen Z law students to plan and see themselves as partners in 20 years, because nobody knows if their city is going to be underwater in 20 years."

Gen Z is also generally the most racially and ethnically diverse generation — as well as the most educated, according to studies from Pew Research Center and others. They were under 12 years old when America elected its first Black president, and no more than 18 when the U.S. Supreme Court codified same-sex marriage into law.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic, which has only continued to mold Gen Z's perspective and entry

into the workplace.

"They've seen millennials and their parents work super hard to get the 'American Dream,' only to see it fall through their fingertips in a matter of months," said Tiffany Atkins, an Elon University School of Law professor who teaches Gen Z students. "They've also seen the inequities in our country."

Many law firms and other employers are already "trying to unravel the mystery of Gen Z," according to Eliza Stoker, executive director for the associate practice group at legal recruiter Major Lindsey & Africa. The generation has become a "hot topic" among Stoker's law firm clients, as well as internally within the recruiting outfit.

"That's because we are seeing something different from Gen Z," Stoker said.

What makes this next generation of attorneys unique is their empathy for others, skepticism of authority, and willingness to prioritize their own well-being, experts say. Gen Z doesn't care as much about wealth or following the partner track, and they're likely to place more emphasis on workplace accommodations, social programs and other aspects of a job. They're also judicious about whom they work for and for how long.

"For Gen Z it's life-work balance, it's not work-life balance," Atkins said. "They are looking for places where their lives are what they prioritize, not the work."

Some key tenets of BigLaw culture may be incompatible with this perspective. Long hours, aggressive billable requirements, predictable bonus structures, strict hierarchies and the power resting largely with white, older law leaders may be difficult for Gen Z to reconcile.

"They do demand more accountability, especially with climate change," said Aditi Thakur, 27, a third-year law student at Columbia Law School and president of its student senate. "We are more aware of how the law has inherent power differences."

Gen Zers are guided by the recognition that "purposefulness in work may be even more important than money and success," said legal consultant Peter Zeughauser of the Zeughauser Group.

"Most of the people who joined BigLaw in the past aspired for the brass ring and to become an equity partner, so they did their time," he said. "For Gen Z, the brass ring is less attractive."

That's somewhat driven by the societal and economic instability Gen Z continues to experience, not to mention their exposure to everyday suffering and violence in the form of world events, school shootings and more. This generation is acutely aware that life is short and that circumstances can change quickly, according to experts.

But growing up in a time where everything is on-demand — from job listings to movies — means Gen Zers also don't always operate from a scarcity mindset like the millennials who struggled through the Great Recession. So when a workplace isn't working for them, they aren't as afraid to quit, which can make retention efforts difficult.

"A law firm will be skeptical about helping them along the way if they think they're just going to leave anyway," Pontiff said.

Unafraid to Speak Up

Gen Z is unafraid to make asks of their employers, from supplies to policy changes, according to Josephine Bahn, a millennial and the youngest chair ever for the American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division.

Bahn recalled the horror of some of her colleagues when she told them she had asked Cozen O'Connor for a standing desk when she started as an associate there. But the firm ended up giving her two — one for her home office — no questions asked.

"The culture in older generations is to kind of hide any need or concern and to just figure it out," Bahn said.

This helps explain the misconception among more senior attorneys that Gen Z is "entitled," according to Laura Graham, director of legal analysis, writing and research at Wake Forest University School of Law.

"Gen Z is less afraid to speak up about things than prior generations," said Graham, who works with Gen Z students. "Law firms may have to confront issues head-on in a way that they maybe haven't before."

That includes addressing long-standing concerns in the legal industry, including a lack of diversity at the highest ranks. But experts said the firms that make internal changes to attract Gen Z employees will still need to get used to shorter commitments from them.

Opting Out of the Grind

In the past, recent grads would normally seek out top-20 law firms, and that still holds some appeal for the youngest attorneys.

"As a first-gen law student, first-gen American, the stability that comes with the tradition and structures of a BigLaw firm is really attractive," said Stanford Law student Suazo, who plans to go into corporate law.

But in general, Gen Z seems more interested in working at midsize regional firms and boutiques that have less of a "grind," according to Stoker of Major Lindsey & Africa. This disinterest in the "traditional" BigLaw legal career path "can be quite disruptive" to an industry built on the grueling work of young associates, Stoker said.

Of course, there are still scores of eager young attorneys who apply for BigLaw jobs in big cities every year. But experts said many only do so to pay off student loans, get BigLaw training and land a prestigious employer for their resume before moving to a smaller outfit or in-house role after one or two years.

But many law students will still forgo BigLaw entirely for less intense and smaller markets, and few express interest in making partner, according to Suazo and Thakur.

Thakur said she will work at Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP when she graduates, but admits she's "not sure" how long she'll stay at the firm.

"I don't know if I'll be burnt out," she said, adding, "It's supposedly less toxic than the other firms."

Bahn said another attorney in her family worked at a large, lockstep firm for six months before looking for a new job and eventually leaving for an in-house position after just a year and a half.

"It is completely demoralizing to be beholden to a number and have that be a validation on your success or failure as a lawyer," Bahn said. "Gen Z associates, millennial associates are realizing that the practice of law and what we signed up for was to help people."

At Cozen O'Connor, Bahn's compensation isn't tied to billable hours. And before she took the job, Bahn told the firm she wanted to be able to eat dinner with her two small children every night.

"Gone are the days of younger, newer associates, being available at beck and call for every partner," Bahn said.

Of course, that also presents a problem.

"If you have high billable requirements and that's how your firm functions, what can you actually do about that?" Stoker said.

How Employers Can Adapt

In some ways, the coronavirus pandemic gave law firms and other employers a head start in

preparing for Gen Z. Many embraced remote technology and flexible work, as well as boosting their diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

"But I don't necessarily think the culture of law firms has shifted enough," said Atkins of Elon University School of Law.

Some law firm leaders are still reluctant to allow attorneys flexible working opportunities, even when they themselves aren't going into the office as much these days, according to Gera Vaz of SB2 Consultants, which works with law firms.

"Concentrating on approaches and programs that create connectivity with the firm is more important than just dictating how many days a week someone comes in," said Vaz, who has also worked in human resources and operations at three law firms.

Work flexibility also creates new opportunities for parents, caregivers, people with disabilities and others who may not be able to work a traditional 9-to-5 schedule from the office.

"I would not be surprised if firms rethink parental leave and hours requirements as Gen Zers enter their parent eras," said Jackson, the recent Harvard Law grad, noting that she loves seeing younger attorneys at Dinsmore help organize support systems "for people with unique needs, so that more incredible attorneys can work in this field for the long run."

Creating a sense of belonging is critical for law firms and employers who want to better accommodate and prepare for this generation, according to experts. Gen Z typically wants employers to have an internal emphasis on diversity and other social causes, as well as to have their own voices heard when it comes to decisions impacting the practice, such as which clients the firm represents.

"Before, it was more, 'I don't want to rep Philip Morris.' Now, it's, 'I don't want to represent oil companies,'" Suazo said.

Zeughauser noted that "the stress of our times is the energy behind this change."

"It is going to become more pronounced and more challenging for BigLaw," he said. "But because firms are under other economic stress, too, they can't make too much economic sacrifice to accommodate the underlying search for meaning in work that is driving Gen Z."

Still, there are other ways for law firms and employers to bridge the divide between what various generations want from their workplaces. For instance, relaxing dress codes may seem like a small thing, but Gen Z job candidates could see that as an indication of internal culture, according to Suazo.

"If I'm not going to court, why do I have to wear a tie?" he said. "It's purely to satisfy an older partner's vision of what a lawyer should look like ... and that's going to change anyway, just in terms of skin color [and] sexual orientation."

Experts who have worked with younger attorneys said law firms should also invest in more frequent but informal mentoring and training.

Recruiting and onboarding should also be more personalized, experts said. This could be as simple as asking applicants and new hires for their pronouns, or setting up informal lunches and emphasizing opportunities for pro bono work and service.

"You'll get the hours if you show a Gen Zer that they matter to the firm," Atkins said.

Jackson said law firms should invest as much in retention as recruitment, "especially when it comes to diverse talent that may not have as many built-in social networks in a firm." While she noted that she personally has "great" mentors at her firm, Jackson said she'd like to see the industry do more recruiting from **historically Black colleges and universities** "and connect those students with people at the firm who can be their advocates."

Experts said law firms should also create a "go-between" for young associates and older attorneys

and conduct quick, anonymous "pulse surveys" to get a better sense of what lawyers at different levels of the organization think of their job.

"This then enables law firms to have meaningful conversations and put in place interventions early," said Vaz of SB2 Consultants.

Firms might also consider adopting more equitable and transparent pay practices.

"If how frequently they share grades with one another in law school is any indication of how they will share their salaries/bonuses in firms, leaders should begin practicing equitable pay practices now to attract and retain equity-minded Gen Zers," Atkins said.

Practicing With a Purpose

While law firm leaders acknowledge that every generation may want many of the same things at work — like mentorship and interesting opportunities — they're also actively trying to attract and retain young attorneys who are less interested in long-term career tracks, money and clout.

"Gen Z attorneys tend to be more purpose-driven than other generations," Michael Nguyen, director of lawyer talent acquisition at Davis Wright Tremaine LLP, said through a spokesperson. "Money and success are not their biggest motivators; they want to feel they are contributing to something worthwhile."

Jackson noted that Dinsmore's flexibility has allowed her to bring in new kinds of clients, "even as a first-year," and assist two Black business owners in protecting their intellectual property, something she said she's passionate about.

"Gen Z lawyers want a career where they can make a difference; they want the opportunity to work on pro bono projects and to be part of a community," said Kimberly Craver, chief human resources officer at Reed Smith LLP.

That might explain why Gen Z attorneys are particularly engaged with Reed Smith's diversity, equity and inclusion program, Craver said.

And while the firm's Gen Z attorneys are eager to participate in non-billable work, "they do want assurances that their efforts will be formally recognized and valued," Craver said. So the firm established billable hours credits for time spent on diversity programs, pro bono work, firmwide innovation and environmental, social and governance-related projects.

Davis Wright also provides a billable credit for diversity, equity and inclusion work, and firm-sponsored hours can be used for volunteering, according to Nguyen. Attorneys can dedicate up to 8% of their billable hours to pro bono work, with even more time permitted upon approval. And Davis Wright has pro bono partnerships with in-house legal departments.

"It's not enough just to do great work for clients," Rachel Kleiner, director of legal recruiting at Proskauer Rose LLP, said through a spokesperson. "People want to know that they're working in a place where the ideals of their employer are aligned with the ones that they hold closest to them. At Proskauer, we focus a lot on this and how our work and our role in society goes 'beyond law.'"

What's Working So Far

There are myriad other ways that BigLaw firms are already working to accommodate Gen Z, experts said.

For instance, Reed Smith is moving to digitize, automate and streamline many of the firm's work processes "with this generation in mind," according to Craver. One initiative is working on an online onboarding process for new attorneys and staff.

Proskauer also emphasizes communication and "regular dialogue" to help accommodate Gen Z and younger attorneys, according to Kleiner.

Building a stronger connection between Gen Z attorneys and their employers could also help their career development.

"We have seen candidates in this generation, on the junior associate side, moving from job to job, often within a year, if something does not sit well with them. This is challenging for the firms, of course, but it's also bad for the candidate's careers," Nguyen said. "If an associate jumps every 12-18 months, they have not had consistent training and workload, so that by year five, they are not likely where a fifth-year should be."

The coronavirus pandemic has made bridging the divide between generations even trickier as traditional mentorship and training opportunities dwindled during remote work.

Because of this, Reed Smith launched an intensive, three-year "Associate Advantage" program in October and is planning a new learning management system for attorneys and staff, according to Craver. The firm has also beefed up its wellness initiatives with monthly programming.

Davis Wright's own recent expansion of wellness benefits "has been particularly welcomed by Gen Z," according to Deverie Hart, the firm's senior manager of lawyer talent acquisition.

"Gen Z lawyers are ... in general, more concerned about addressing stress, anxiety and depression," Hart said through a spokesperson.

Health benefits are one reason why Reed Smith encourages Gen Z lawyers "to focus on the totality of the job and the firm" when trying to recruit them, Craver said, noting that they work to align "firm values" with those held by young attorneys.

Of course, not all law firms are willing to discuss the coming changes in the workforce. Representatives from eight BigLaw firms declined to speak with Law360 about how they would accommodate Gen Z or didn't respond to inquiries altogether.

WilmerHale spokesperson Molly Nunes went further, telling Law360 in an email, "We don't think it's helpful to generalize about the generations — one size doesn't fit all — and certainly would never want to offend anyone."

But despite potential growing pains, there are still hopeful signs in store for the legal industry and its stewards.

Last year, when Bahn's billable hours were higher than normal, her department chair at Cozen O'Connor called to ask if she was OK.

"The focus on mental health and decompression at some of the firms has been necessary," Bahn said.

And clients could ultimately benefit as the new generation practices law for the first time.

"How do we solve clients' problems?" said Pontiff of Partner Track Academy. "This generation, more so than the others, will grasp that philosophy and attitude because they're so technology-oriented and they want to do things fast and efficient. They see things that others can't see."

--Editing by Alanna Weissman.