

Saxton Bampfylde

Partner Movements: Experiences and Reflections

A deep dive into the motivations, expectations, and the recruitment experiences of Partners, supplemented by data from Practice Analysis by The Lawyer

Partnering with

THE LAWYER



Contents

- 04** Methodology
- 06** Foreword
- 08** Overview: Partner movements October 2023 to September 2024
- 10** Deep dive: Motivations, expectations, and the recruitment experiences of Partners during Q3 2024
- 16** 'In their own words' - partner reflections on improvements that could be made to the recruitment and the onboarding processes at the new firm
- 20** Deep dive: The internal recruiter perspective
- 24** Featured interview on partner recruitment with Kate Ludlow, Partner and CEO Designate at Saxton Bampfylde
- 28** Contact details for further information

Methodology

In 2024, executive search firm Saxton Bampfylde became the sole sponsor of The Lawyer's Practice Analysis product. This report is the first in a series of reports, a collaboration between Saxton Bampfylde and The Lawyer taking a deep dive approach to examining the motivations, expectations and the recruitment experiences of lawyers who moved into a partner role in a new firm during Q3 2024.

Using data taken from our leading Practice Analysis product (supplemented with data supplied from ATLAS by Codex Edge) the first section of this report looks at partner movements that happened over this period across four key practice areas – Corporate, Banking and Finance, Disputes and Real Estate.

The second section of the report consists of 30 qualitative interviews conducted by Research Analysts at The Lawyer with Partners who had moved to a new firm during Q3 2024. These interviews covered three key areas: –

- The reasons for seeking a new opportunity and moving to a partner role in a new firm.
- The handling of the recruitment process, with an assessment of the level of information provided and levels of overall satisfaction with both the internal recruitment team and external recruiter.
- Identification of improvements that could be made to the recruitment process and the initial onboarding process at the new firm.

The third section of the report comprises a summary of interviews with the internal recruitment teams at three large law firms as identified by The Lawyer in our UK 200 Ranking. This deep dive investigates the hiring process at these firms in detail, covering topics such as what firms

look for when hiring Partners, how they measure success together with reflections on how the hiring process has evolved and changed over time.

The report concludes with an interview with Kate Ludlow, Partner and CEO Designate at Saxton Bampfylde, that provides her perspective on best practice in partner recruitment.



Foreword

“Perfection is the enemy of the perfectly adequate.”

The quote from the Breaking Bad universe’s favourite lawyer, Saul Goodman, goes beyond his cynical philosophy on legal practice. Unfortunately, it extends to the approach many adopt to partner recruitment, where ticking boxes is all too often seen as good enough.

In the competition for partner talent, finding the perfect match between candidate and firm is a mixture of art and science. It’s not just about qualifications and experience, or even financial reward. As a partner faced with the opportunity to make a move, the stakes are high. You need to find a place where your skills, values and ambitions intersect with a firm’s ethos and strategy.

And from the firm’s perspective, it’s about more than just filling a seat. It’s much more complex than that, involving the alignment of values, vision and ambitions. The right candidate can unlock new potential, bring new ideas and help the firm thrive in an increasingly dog-eat-dog market.

Get the fit wrong and the result can be a costly mix of tension, frustration and disengagement. Too often, firms make the mistake of treating partner recruitment as a purely transactional process. Actually, it’s a family affair.

Given the importance to both parties, it's perhaps surprising that so little research has been carried out into the drivers of successful partner recruitment.

In this report, we draw on Saxton Bampfylde's near 40 years in the search market, interviews with both Partners and firms, together with comprehensive data mined by The Lawyer using their Practice Analysis tool. Having distilled these learnings, we share some conclusions based on motivations and expectations of both law firms and Partners. Some of them are common sense; some are surprising. Hopefully, you will find all of them worthwhile.

Kate Ludlow

Partner and CEO Designate at Saxton Bampfylde



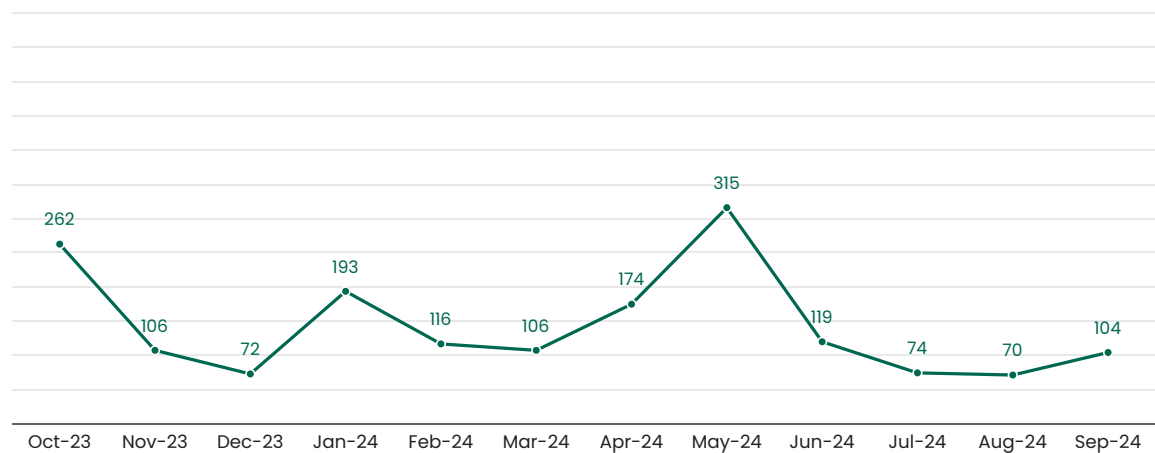
Overview

Partner movements October 2023 to September 2024

From October 2023 to September 2024, lateral partner moves, across the core practice areas of Corporate, Banking & Finance, Disputes and Real Estate totalled 1,711.

The start of 2024 was marked by a seasonal increase in levels of movement, ramping up during April 2024 and May 2024. The volume then reduced through June, July and August 2024.

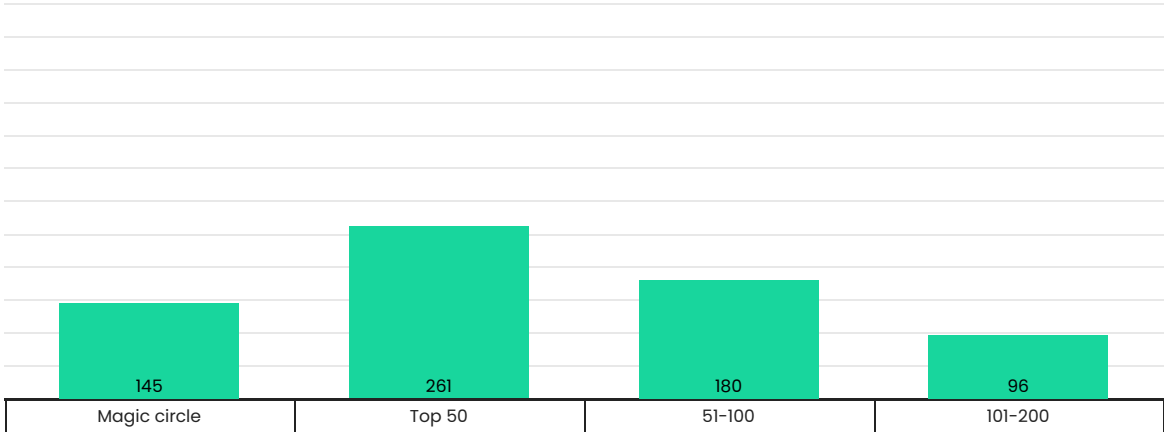
Partner movement data over time October 2023 to September 2024



Base: Partner movements over October 2023 to September 2024 1,711 in total. Includes anyone with the title of 'Partner' as at September 2024. Practice Analysis, The Lawyer. Practice areas covered include Banking & Finance, Corporate, Disputes and Real Estate. ATLAS by Codex Edge data.

Over this period, across these core practice areas, 'Top 50 firms' as classified by The Lawyer, saw a total of 261 partner movements. Within the top 51-100 classification, there were a total of 180 partner moves.

Partner movement data by law firm segment October 2023 to September 2024



Base: Total Partner movements over October 2023 to September 2024, 1,711 in total, based on the role taken in the new firm. Includes anyone with the title of 'Partner' as at September 2024. Practice Analysis, The Lawyer. Practice areas covered include Banking & Finance, Corporate, Disputes and Real Estate. ATLAS by Codex Edge data. Total movements data for 'Other firms' not shown on the chart comprises 1,029.



From October 2023 to September 2024, Corporate, Banking & Finance, Disputes and Real Estate moves totalled 1,711

Deep dive

Motivations, expectations, and the recruitment experiences of Partners during Q3 2024

What prompted the move to a new partner role?

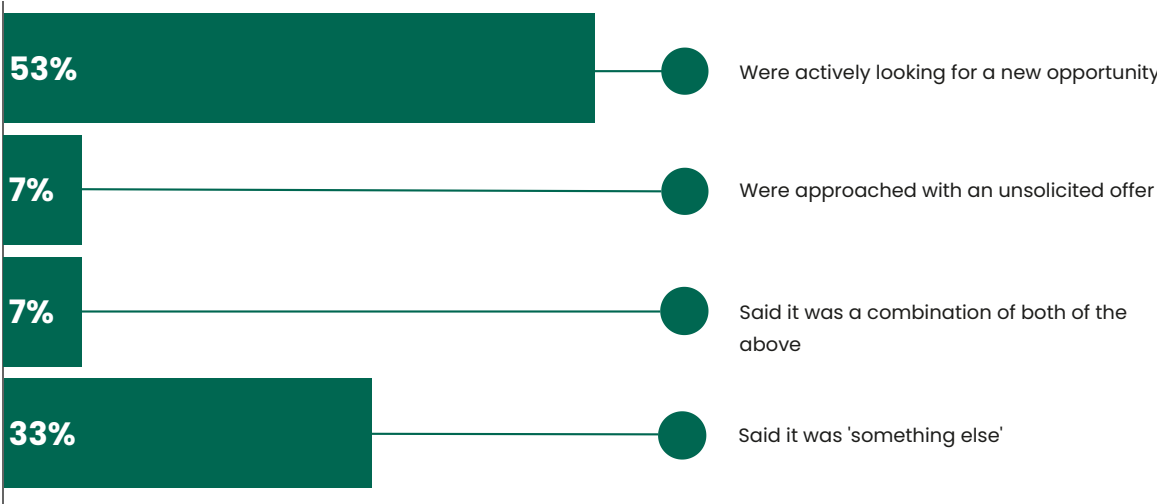
Over half of those we spoke to in Q3 2024 reported they were actively looking for a new opportunity. However, only a minority said they were approached with an unsolicited offer.

Many Partners moved because of a desire for a work environment that had better alignment with their own values (including culture, inclusivity, gender diversity, and better ethical treatment). Some moved due to dissatisfaction with the environment of their previous firm, while others felt they had experienced gender discrimination and noted a lack of diversity at their previous firm.

A further cohort of Partners was seeking more flexibility and autonomy, often due to family responsibilities or lifestyle preferences. Several interviewees noted that these qualities were not available in their previous roles, leading them to pursue opportunities that offered a better work-life balance.

For some, the decision to move was influenced by their ambitions, relocation for career growth (such as building a European practice), or joining firms with structures that better matched their professional goals.

What prompted Partners to move to a new role?



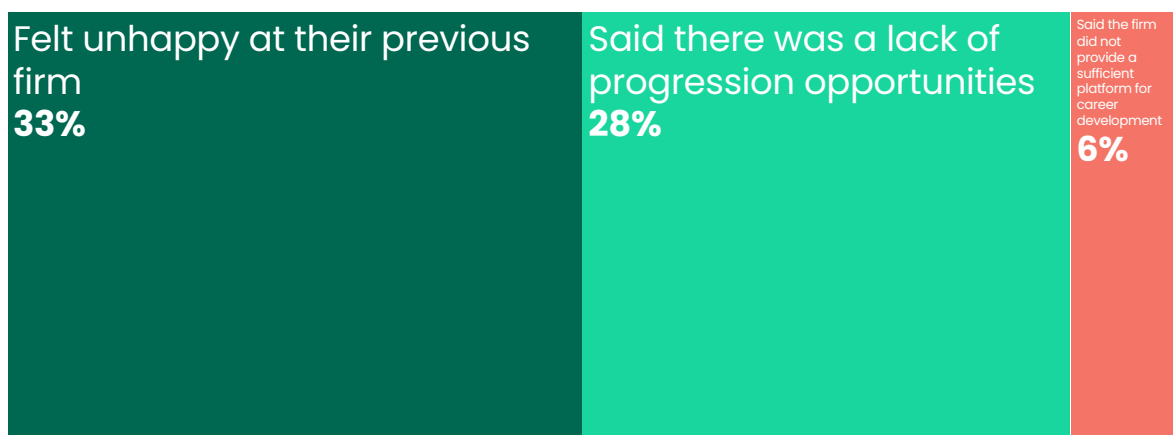
Base: 30 respondents, November 2024. Saxton Bampfylde partnering with The Lawyer.

What were the main reasons to look for new job opportunities?

33% of the Partners we spoke to said that they had looked for a new job opportunity because they felt unhappy at their previous firm. 28% indicated that there was a lack of progression opportunities, while a further 6% said their previous firm did not provide a sufficient platform for career development.

Many Partners expressed a desire for new challenges, a fresh career adventure, or a change in direction, especially in response to leadership shifts or changes. Another significant motivation to look for a new job was interviewees wanting to reduce very demanding workloads or long commutes to work. Others expressed dissatisfaction with limited career progression, and specifically among junior Partners a motivator was a perceived barrier to equity options at their previous firm.

Main reasons to look for new job opportunities



Base: 18 respondents, November 2024. Saxton Bampfylde partnering with The Lawyer. Routed question from the previous question for each of the following answers "I was actively looking for a new opportunity" and "A combination of both". 'Other responses' comprise 50%.

How was the recruitment process handled? Was the onboarding process satisfactory?

40% of those interviewed indicated that the recruitment process was driven principally by the law firm, with a further 37% saying that this was handled by an external search firm. In 7% of cases, a combination of both was used.

Overall satisfaction with the recruitment process among Partners was relatively high at 75%. The satisfaction levels with the external search firms involved and the destination law firms were also high at 75% and 86% respectively.

Satisfaction with elements of the recruitment process

Engagement with the law firm...



Engagement with the search firm...



The overall recruitment process...



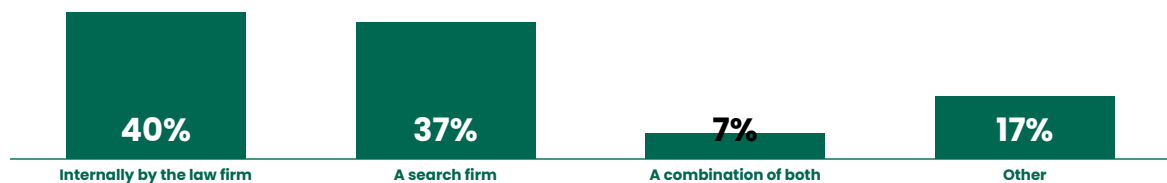
Base: 29 respondents (law firm), 12 (search firm), 28 (overall recruitment process), November 2024. Saxton Bampfylde partnering with The Lawyer. Measured on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not satisfied at all and 10 is extremely satisfied. % reported is measured on a top box score of 8,9 or 10.

All the Partners we spoke to said they were well informed during the recruitment process and felt they had made an informed decision about taking on the new role.

Many respondents highlighted positive experiences, such as strong onboarding support from their new firm and good alignment with firm strategy, which helped their adjustment when moving into the new role. The structured and collaborative environment in these firms had enhanced their sense of belonging and boosted their confidence in the initial stages of their new role.

However, our conversations also revealed some misgivings about the recruitment and onboarding processes. While many Partners felt positively about their experience, some wished the transition to their new firm had been swifter or that they had negotiated better terms. Some common frustrations included timing uncertainties during the recruitment process and complex paperwork, which made the process feel lengthy and stressful.

Who was the recruitment process principally handled by?



Base: 30 respondents, November 2024. Saxton Bampfylde partnering with The Lawyer.

There were also mixed experiences with onboarding, with Partners asking for a clearer understanding of next steps, better job descriptions, and much more information on operational systems, such as document management and accounting prior to accepting their new role. Some Partners found the onboarding process overwhelming due to a lack of overall structured guidance.

How well informed were Partners during the recruitment process?



100%

Said they were well-informed and could make an informed decision

Base: 27 respondents, November 2024. Saxton Bampfylde partnering with The Lawyer.



...our conversations also revealed some misgivings about the recruitment and onboarding processes

In their own words

Partner reflections on improvements that could be made to the recruitment and the onboarding processes at the new firm

For this section of the report, we spoke to a selection of Partners in detail about their experiences of the recruitment process, and of being onboarded to their new firm. The comments below provide an unfiltered selection of comments, both positive and negative.

All comments in this section of the report have been anonymised to protect confidentiality.

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently during the recruitment process?

"I just wish I made the move sooner. I am lucky to have joined a firm that has recruited a lot of lateral hires recently and therefore they were very organised and knew exactly how to get people over the line."

"I would perhaps have negotiated a little harder on the initial package, but in the scheme of things it was better to secure the move, as these opportunities do not come up very often at my level of experience."

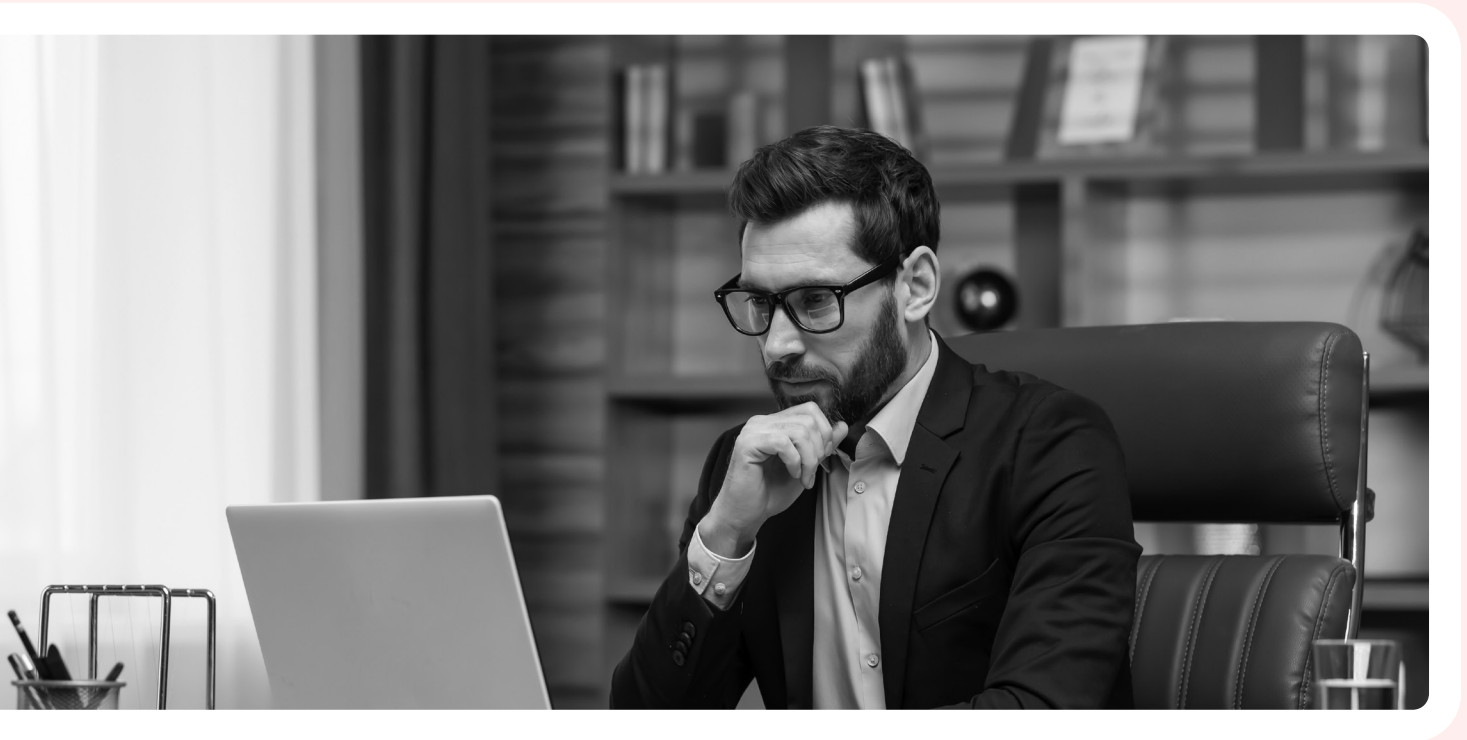
"The things I liked the least about the process were (i) timing uncertainty (and my new firm kept me in the loop as best they could so were good on this front but still these things can take many months during which you are living a double life pretending business as usual at existing firm); and (ii) tiresome form-filling, necessary but really quite difficult to pull together all sorts of info and data on yourself, every client matter you've worked on in 5 years, especially difficult to get info from existing firm systems when nervous about them finding out why you're doing it."

Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently during the onboarding process?

"I would have asked for a clear outline of onboarding process and steps so that I could understand timings, who would be involved; plus, a list of all documents to have to hand."

"I would have been better at getting a proper job description."

"Generally, it was very good. Overall, across all firms, takes far too long to move with no clear milestones or expectations at each stage."



“I would probably have interrogated them more about their document management and accounting functions which are not that great to be honest.”

“I had to process a lot of information and then was thrown in the deep end.”

“This was system driven and, again, very organised and sleek. I really couldn’t have asked for more.”

Are there any further comments you would like to make?

“I must admit, I have been surprisingly shocked at the level of support and kindness that my new firm have shown me. I was nervous moving away from the “traditional” law firm but, at this stage of my life, something had to give. I couldn’t have asked for more at this stage.”

“I will only do this once in my career, so I have nothing to say other than I had the wildest of rides.”

“I think there should be more structure as to the things you need to know. It feels you are taken along with what they are offering, and you don't have time to consider.”

“I was very impressed by the clear and transparent enunciation of the global strategy of the firm and my practice area which was compelling. My global head was very collaborative, and I felt engaged with that strategy and listened to during the interview process. The reality of joining has been consistent with that too! This was a clear point of differentiation from previous recruitment experiences and a hugely contributory factor to my decision.”

“It makes a huge difference when the firm know what they want, have a team to make it happen and they put time and effort into it.”

“Letting go is difficult but overall change can be very good if well captured.”

“This is only the second time I have moved in my career. I was very impressed with the process in reassuring me that the firm was a good fit for me going in as equity as well as giving me opportunities to say what I could bring to the Partnership. All positive and it has been a good move for me.”



**I will only do this once in my career,
so I have nothing to say other than I
had the wildest of rides.**

Deep dive

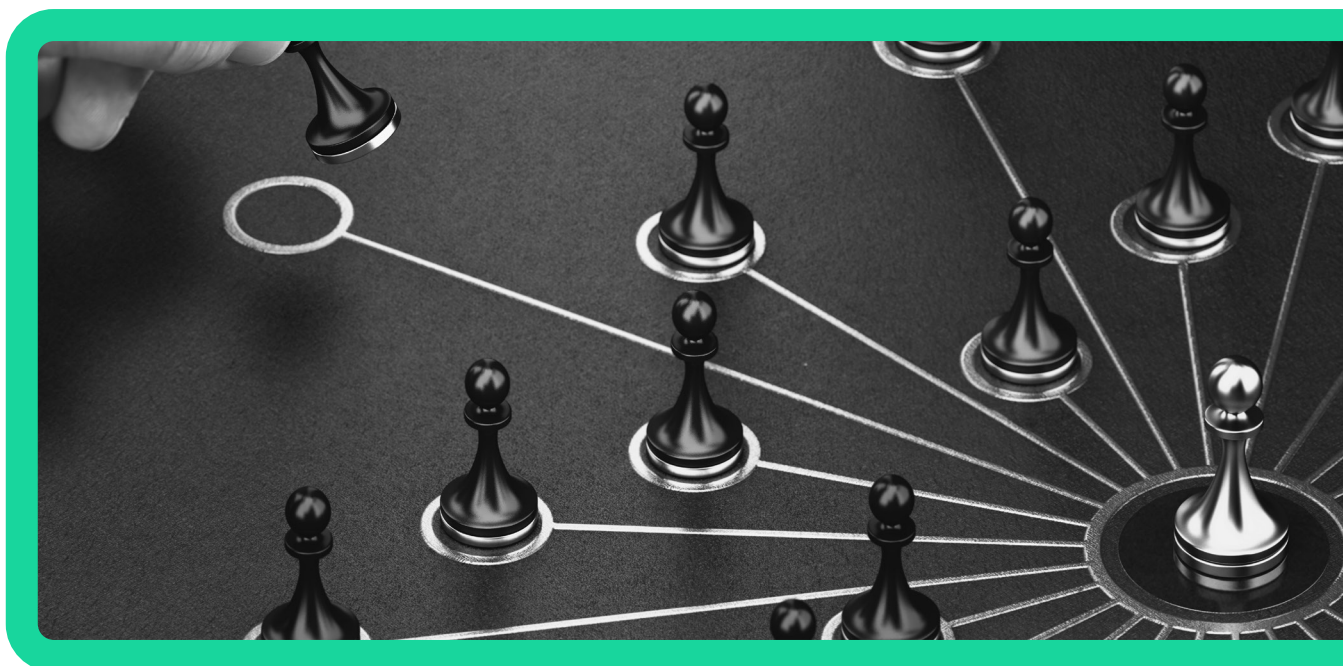
The internal recruiter perspective

This section of the report includes interviews with the internal recruitment teams (senior HR and recruiting leaders) at three large law firms as identified by The Lawyer in our UK 200 ranking. It investigates the hiring process at these firms in detail, covering topics including what firms look for when hiring Partners, how they measure success and concludes with a retrospective view about how the hiring process has evolved over time.

What do law firms look for when hiring Partners?

A key priority is the candidate's ability to generate new business. Firms look for Partners who can bring in clients, grow their practice area, and show a strong ambition for business development.

Cultural fit has become increasingly important, with a preference for candidates who can integrate well into the firm's culture and who are committed to the long-term. A red flag is someone who frequently moves between firms.



Firms hire Partners based on specific needs, such as bolstering or growing a practice area, succession planning, or managing heavy workloads. The requirement for a “book of business” can vary based on the requirements of the individual firms.

The ideal partner has a growth mindset and the ability to cross-sell services outside their practice area, maximising opportunities for the firm as a whole. Networking and collaboration across departments are highly valued behaviours.

What is the hiring process for law firms when hiring Partners?

Some firms aim for a short recruitment process, completing the hiring process within 1-2 weeks once a suitable candidate is found. This is notably faster than many competitors.

The hiring process involves thorough reference checks, including consultations with the candidate’s clients and colleagues to assess

reputation and fit. Demonstrating cultural alignment is a deal-breaker, and they avoid candidates who are overly competitive or do not share the firm's values.

New joiners typically have a sponsor from the senior executive team who helps with the onboarding process. This ensures the partner is well integrated into the firm and aligned with its goals.

Certain firms use psychometric testing to screen potential hires, and help them identify candidates who are a good fit. However, other firms avoid these tests, fearing they may bias against neurodivergent candidates.

How do law firms measure success and over what period?

Success is primarily measured by the partner's ability to grow their practice area, generate new business, and cross-sell to other areas of the firm.

Many firms evaluate new Partners based on their three-year business plans. They expect them to show progress aligned with these plans generally expecting success to be measurable within two to three years.

Success is also often measured by how well the partner integrates into the firm's culture and takes on added roles such as publishing, training, or contributing to internal growth.

Firms will monitor the new partner's financial hygiene, including how well they manage billing and maintain financial discipline, such as reducing lock-up times.

How have hiring processes evolved over time?

There has been a shift away from focusing solely on a partner's "book of business" towards a more sustainable approach that emphasises cultural fit and long-term collaboration. This change is a reaction to past experiences where an over-emphasis on business generation led to short-term gains but often also quick exits.

Over time, the recruitment process has become more formal and structured. Whereas partnerships were once formed informally through casual conversations, firms now follow more rigorous processes.

Firms have become more selective, raising the bar for partner hires so as to ensure they align closely with the firm's strategic goals and culture.



Featured interview on Partner recruitment



Kate Ludlow, Partner and CEO Designate Saxton Bampfylde

Kate has worked at Saxton Bampfylde for over a decade: she became CEO designate at the end of 2024 and heads the firm's legal and professional services practice, supporting clients with executive and non-executive appointments. She is passionate about partnering with clients to ensure genuine cultural fit and values alignment.

Saxton Bampfylde has a long history of successfully supporting high profile clients in other sectors to make key leadership appointments at board and executive level. What prompted you to broaden your offering into the legal market?

Entering a competitive market with established players was not a decision that was easily taken. It was prompted by conversations with a number of law firm leaders who had been disappointed by their experience of making lateral partner hires - both in terms of the range of candidates identified and their fit. In looking for talent, they wanted to reach beyond the usual suspects. One partner responsible for hiring in a major firm likened it to looking in an estate agent's window and seeing the same properties for sale over and over again. Also, no matter how great a candidate looked on paper, if the fit wasn't absolutely right, then long term success would be compromised.

The feedback we received was that some search firms were taking a plug-in and play approach, assuming that talent would transfer from one firm to another without properly interrogating the evidence. Discussion with clients underlined just how considerable the opportunity cost of a bad hire was.

How has your experience in other sectors benefitted the approach that you have taken in dealing with lateral partner hires? What differentiates Saxton Bampfylde in this market?

We have an industry-leading 98% success rate in other sectors. Using the lessons we have learned over nearly 40 years; our goal is to achieve that in the legal market too. Our success has been achieved by looking beyond the obvious and searching for the best. Rather than picking names out of a black book or having someone working on a number of briefs and dipping in and out, our clients get a dedicated researcher committed exclusively to the brief. Digging deep allows us to identify the stars of the future. Translating that approach to the legal sector is a real differentiator.

What would you identify as being the main ingredients for making a successful appointment that matches the right candidate with the right firm?

It's about really understanding our clients' businesses and what drives the candidate. This means exploring the strategy of the law firm and knowing the role that the hire will play in executing it. Getting into the weeds on issues such as structure and succession enables us to take a more focused approach, zeroing in on the right candidates. With this information, we are also better able to advocate for the firm, attracting talent that might otherwise not have been interested. Once we have scoped the candidates, we interrogate not just their technical skills, but their business development abilities, how good they are at leading a team, and perhaps most importantly, their potential for growth.

How do you ensure that there is a genuine cultural alignment between the firm and the lateral hire?

No matter how good the firm and the potential candidate are, if there is no cultural alignment, we have seen time and time again that the likelihood of a successful outcome will be diminished. It's all about matched expectations. The values expressed by most firms are similar. Looking beyond these so as to understand how these are translated into behaviours gives us a much better understanding of the culture of the firm. When we look at the candidate, we want to understand what drives them - not just their ambitions but their concerns. One quality that often gets left off the shopping list but is crucially important is whether they are good citizens.

How can law firms work with recruiters to ensure a smoother onboarding process?

I think that the most important element is clear communication - a proper understanding of the expectations of the firm. It is helpful if candidates are introduced to the firm in a structured way - with strategy papers, policies and systems being explained at an early stage. Having a tailored onboarding plan is helpful - one that includes introductions to teams and training. Putting in place a mentor or buddy (especially someone who is a previous lateral hire) will pay dividends. And for us, it's very useful to have a feedback loop providing a candid assessment of the hire which will help us refine future searches.



Digging deep allows us to identify the stars of the future.

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