

What it's like working as a young corporate lawyer at a top tier firm

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Sleeping in the office is not in their contracts. Nor are 16-hour days that keep them at work until well past midnight. The Financial Review interviewed over 30 young corporate lawyers in the first three years of their career. Many young corporate lawyers say their job entails excessive hours, a culture of "presenteeism and an attitude from senior partners of "whatever the client wants, we do" meaning that the line between work responsibilities and exploitation can be blurry.

Many young lawyers said they enjoyed aspects of their jobs, such as the legal work and inspiring colleagues. But for many, like a draining romance, their relationship with their employers was complicated. One young lawyer was lured to a top-tier firm because of their pitch that working for them would help him become the best lawyer he could be, which is something he believes is still "a genuine thing that the firm can deliver". But when juniors feel the promises that lured them through the door are no more than spin, the rosiness fades.

Working past midnight, weekends and sometimes 13-14 hour days, was common. Clients could ask at 3pm for their lawyers to produce something by 9am the next day – a task which involved staying past midnight or even overnight to meticulously review thousands of documents.

One young lawyer said he had signed up to "work hard", but being pulled away from a family Christmas lunch and having to cancel numerous date nights with his partner were major pain points. "That goodwill only extends so far. Once I feel I'm being exploited, then that 'quid pro quo' dynamic changes. And lawyers sort of check out. That's why you see a lot of junior lawyers resign after two or three years. They've seen how the system works ... and they leave."

Junior lawyers at top-tier firms navigate work and life pressures on lesser incomes of about \$80,000-\$85,000. The amount is tiered to reflect experience and is certainly a generous sum by graduate salary standards, but its value diminishes relative to hours worked. "I think there's a public perception that we're paid a lot more than we actually are considering the amount of hours that we do," one said.

The Financial Review asked the 30 young corporate lawyers to rank which workplace policies would most improve their lives. The top three policies in terms of importance were better hours, better pay for overtime and more leave options.

The bottom three policies included 'perks' like free tickets to the theatre and gigs, firm-funded social events and adventurous team-building days and firm-produced media such as podcasts or blogs.

The first few years of a legal career can be a disillusioning experience for high achievers. One young lawyer said simple things like partners not sending harsh, all-staff emails to juniors criticising tiny mistakes, or simply checking in with how they're coping would improve his workplace. But longer term, curbing bloated hours and not letting clients get away with unreasonable demands was a priority, he said.

The insight into working conditions for young corporate lawyers comes amid two workplace safety complaints against several law firms. A complaint filed to by a senior lawyer at Gilbert & Tobin observed that some junior lawyers slept in the office and took stimulants to keep up with the demands of the job.

Gilbert & Tobin lawyers slept in the office more than one night a week – "60-80 nights per year" – and when they needed to stay awake, junior lawyers "abused supplements and drugs in the banking and corporate team" to "keep up with demands," the former Gilbert & Tobin lawyers said in their statement to the regulatory authorities.

Gilbert & Tobin responded: "We remain focused on the health and wellbeing of our people. We have put in place a number of processes to ensure that our people feel empowered and supported working at G & T, so that they can proactively manage their work in a flexible way, while delivering for our clients."

Conversations are under way. Further, many partners are not only aware of these issues, but experienced them as junior lawyers. But the complaints combined with the findings of the survey suggest there's still a way to go between aspirations and day-to-day life for many junior lawyers working in top-tier firms.