

Associates Want to Return to the Office—With Caveats

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Attention law firm leaders: Fabulous news. Those floating in your office (or on Zoom) aren't quite the delicate snowflakes you thought they were. Despite all the talk about how young associates will never, ever return to working full time in the office—a recent poll finds that 49% of millennials and Gen Z would quit their jobs if remote work isn't allowed—some youngins aren't automatically dissing it. "I think it would be stabilizing to be in the office," says a graduate of Columbia Law School who's joined a Magic Circle firm. "My second year was completely remote so it'd be cool to meet some real people." Even young lawyers who are adamantly opposed to returning to the office full time might do so under the right circumstances. A third-year litigation associate who initially said he'd quit "if they forced us to return full time," softened when presented with the possibility of capping his work week at 50 hours. "The ability to stop working at some point—and not feel guilty for it—is critical," he says.

The popular perception is that young lawyers want to lounge in sweatpants all day and work wherever they please—be it the beach, their parents' basement or a treehouse. But what they really want is something both prosaic and elusive: work/life balance and an affirmation of their humanity.

A lawyer's life has never been warm and fuzzy but this past year has been outright brutal—and the pressure isn't abating. Lawyers experienced burnout more often, and nearly half report a decline in well-being." So now that some partners are pressuring folks to return to the office, are firms addressing these lingering issues of exhaustion—both physical and mental?

The answer is no. Despite all the talk about mental health, the kumbaya Zoom gatherings spurred by the pandemic and the social justice movement, and the smorgasbord of wellness seminars offered by firms, associates say that firms are oblivious at best about how much they are at the end of their ropes. They'll also tell you that partners just don't get it. "Money is why people go into Big Law for, and partners think they can tempt us by paying us more." Clearly, the money that Big Law has thrown at young lawyers to assuage their pain isn't doing the trick. "They could give me multiples of tens of thousands of dollars, but there's not much you can do with it if you're working all the time," says a 2018 law school grad who left two major firms during the pandemic. "At a certain point, money is meaningless. It gets to the point where my mental health is worth more." Some young lawyers say they'd trade not only their freedom but their compensation for less pressure. "I could probably live on \$150,000," admits another junior associate if it meant no work after 9 p.m. on weekdays and no weekends!"

Such a simple request—but who are we kidding? Between giving young lawyers regular hours but requiring them to show up full time in the office or working them to death but allowing them to do so wherever they want, is there any doubt which option Big Law would pick? The dirty little secret is that firms made a ton of money this year by pushing lawyers to the brink—and remote work helped make it happen. "We think associates are working harder from home than they ever could in the office because they're truly 24/7 and have no commute or business entertaining or much of a social life," says a New York-based corporate partner. "So bringing them back in the office will reduce billables." [...]

In the meantime, some young lawyers are willing to go back to the office—though they'd like to do it on their terms. What no one wants is to be forced back. But there are a few who actually can't wait to go back to the firm, though perhaps not for the lofty reasons that advocates of traditional face time hope. "I'm just sick of my apartment," says the third year NY litigator. "I live in a studio and my 'work space' is like 18 inches away from my bed—and sometimes I just work in my bed and barely get up. The only change of scenery I have is going to the bathroom."