

Firms urged to address psychological issues driving talent turnover

1 June 2026 Scott Jones [Legalfutures.com](https://www.legalfutures.com)

Law firms' rush to embrace both mergers and AI risks making staff retention harder if they ignore "the psychological and cultural issues driving talent turnover", a leading psychologist has warned. Cheryl Donaldson, a clinical psychologist who practises both in London and the US, identified that "high-performing lawyers" looked for three things when deciding to join or leave a firm: connection, structure and expectation. Mergers and AI were among the ways these could be derailed.

Ms Donaldson told *Legal Futures* that managing partners had to create a culture in which lawyers could foster connections across the firm, build a sustainable structure to their workload, and always expect to see growth within the firm and their own career. This would determine which firms "thrive or fall" as the talent war rages on.

"Human beings are wired for connection. If a brilliant associate was taken under the wing of a partner and saw that leader as a mentor, the odds of that talent leaving decrease drastically. The finances and external perks will sustain high performers for a time, but if there's no genuine connection within the firm, they will have no reason to stay and build there. Loyalty makes hard work worth it. People don't work long term for people they don't feel connected to, and don't want to work with people they have no connection with. In a law firm, this shows up everywhere: in partner retention, cross-selling, associate development, mentorship, and ultimately the client experience itself. Business is about relationships as much as it is results."

With sustainable structures to workloads, Ms Donaldson said lawyers needed a "natural boundary" between work and their private lives. With lawyers now available 24 hours a day from virtually any location, many never have the chance to recharge. With growth, Ms Donaldson said managing partners needed to understand the psychological make-up of most lawyers. "Lawyers are high performers. The thing that makes them tick is winning. The nature of the profession is cutthroat, and they seek constant, competitive challenges. But more than this, they want to be in a company where they can imagine their own growth. They want to know that if they stay on this law firm's platform, they will have the stability to develop their expertise and professionally expand over time. Lawyers need to feel that they can grow within the firm's culture, that leadership listens to them, that there are opportunities for mentorship, collaboration, and advancement, and that strong associate talent is being developed beneath them. Everyone grows together.

"Without that continued growth, a high performer will eventually disengage or leave."

Ms Donaldson said the approach applied to firms of all sizes and lawyers of all ages. "Law firms are incredible at providing external perks, like gym memberships, concierge services, and bonuses, but they do not invest in the internal development of each individual in the firm. Those external rewards do not address the deeper psychological and cultural issues driving talent turnover. The investment in employees' professional development must go hand in hand with internal personal development. Law leadership needs to recognise this."

In a market where mergers are increasingly prevalent, she warned against leaders focusing only on the economics and not the integration of those involved. Without that, "instability quickly follows", she explained. "The risk is that the culture becomes a free-for-all where expectations, communication styles, and values are no longer aligned across the system. "The law firms that are merging need to invest in the systemic health of their company to sustain and grow without losing talent."

She added that high performers were "naturally drawn toward optimisation", and AI was accelerating that instinct within the profession. "It increases output speed, but it also raises the pressure to perform at an even higher level. AI can be both an exciting asset and a trigger for intense anxiety about perfection in the profession. Companies are not machines; they are human systems interacting with one another. If you lose the human element, you lose the business."