

'Fewer white males, and more women'

ELLIE DUDLEY

Australia's legal market has seen an unprecedented lift in female lawyers joining partnerships over the past 12 months, a move legal analysts put down to mentorship and leadership programs enabling women to get "a bit more attention".

Data obtained through The Australian's Legal Partnerships Survey shows the number of female partners in Australia law firms has risen by 10 per cent, as has the number of equity partners. Overall female fee-earners jumped by 18 per cent, the survey found. Women now make up 31 per cent of all equity partners, the sur-

vey found, for the first time rising above the 30 per cent mark.

"It's the biggest increase we've seen in a long time," Eaton Strategy + Search partner Shaaron Dalton told The Australian.

"We're certainly seeing a generational change; there weren't many female partners 10 years ago. They were mainly, let's face it, for want of a better term, white males."

Mid-tier firm Addisons had a huge rise in female partners, with a 43 per cent increase over the past 12 months. Hamilton Locke was similar, with a 35 per cent lift, while McCullough Robertson lawyers saw a 38 per cent increase.

Firms with more than 50 per cent female partners include



Lander & Rogers, Seyfarth Shaw and Russell Kennedy, while Allens, Ashurst, Addisons, Gilbert + Tobin, Sparke Helmore, Gilchrist Connell, White & Case, Pinsent Masons, Cooper Grace Ward and



Genevieve Collins

Moray & Agnew all have over 40 per cent.

Lander & Rogers chief executive Genevieve Collins told The Australian the firm's equal gender split among senior staff was due to

"our intentional efforts in building a workplace where there is equal opportunity for everyone".

"This reflects our holistic approach to gender equality and is not the result of just one or two policies. We apply a gender-lens to all our decision-making," she said.

"We have also implemented targeted initiatives in key areas: flexible working practices with no mandated office days, job-sharing and job-pairing options, career support and mentoring in our talent pipeline, gender equal pay and benefits and a focus on inclusive leadership across our firm. We conduct regular interactive sessions and surveys with our people, track our progress and celebrate our successes."

Ms Dalton said the overall uptick in women in senior positions was the result of mentorship programs implemented over the past decade.

"It's been shown that females need a bit more attention because they won't push themselves forward as much as males. It's starting to really look good in terms of balance," she said.

"You're seeing more females actually growing internally into partners. It's been difficult to laterally recruit female partners - it does happen, but it certainly isn't easy."

Ms Dalton said firms required "laser-like concentration" to ensure they reached gender parity in the upper ranks.

"It means that you have to have mentors in place to keep your female associates and senior associates tracking through to partnership," she said. "They have sponsors, they have mentors in their firms, and that's the way you get them through."

Firms Ms Dalton said "have work to do", with a female equity partner count below 30 per cent, included Jones Day, Piper Adelman, Thomson Geer, HWL Ebsworth, Mills Oakley, K&L Gates, HFW, Clayton Utz, Arnold Bloch Leibler, CBP and Hopgood Ganim.

"I think those firms have had trouble retaining female partners, and so they haven't been able to build on it enough," she said.

Want to be busy? Look at cyber, IR and energy

ELLIE DUDLEY

Unprecedented demand for cybersecurity, workplace and energy lawyers has defined the Australian legal market over the past year, while corporate work slowly creeps back to pre-pandemic levels.

The Australian's Legal Partnership survey of nearly 50 firms found many were seeing huge demand for energy lawyers due to a government-led green push, while various large-scale data hacks - including at Optus and Medibank - have seen the need for solid cybersecurity skills.

Firms also indicated workplace lawyers were seeing huge amounts of work, as Labor's right-to-disconnect laws are introduced and employee rights make their way to the fore.

DLA Piper managing partner Amber Matthews said energy transition expertise was "highly valued in this market now and will continue to be in the coming years". Lander & Rogers chief executive partner Genevieve Collins said the energy transition and ESG had become a huge area of demand for the firm.

"Energy transition and ESG generally have become a growth area for our firm as clients bid for transmission infrastructure projects across Australia, seeking strategic legal and commercial advice across renewable energy infrastructure and relevant regulatory frameworks," she said.

"Two of our recent lateral partner hires practise in the energy and environment sectors. Hoda Naghdy, a Sydney-based partner who joined the firm in September 2023 to enhance our construction and infrastructure offering with a focus on renewable energy infrastructure.

"Tom White, also based in Sydney, who advises on environment and planning law with a focus on energy and infrastructure projects and property development."

Similarly, Herbert Smith Freehills executive partner Kristin Stammer said demand for energy transition "remains a top priority". She also said the firm was seeing an increase in corporate M&A activity, despite the sector dropping off massively during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ashurst global chief executive Paul Jenkins said his firm had seen growing demand for energy transition, technology, banks and funds, infrastructure and government work. He added that clients were increasingly concerned about cybersecurity. "An increase in client concerns about privacy, data protection and cyber security is keeping our digital economy and risk consulting teams very busy," he said. "ESG compliance is another hot topic, as companies face increased scrutiny over sustainability and social licence issues."

K&L Gates regional managing partner Jason Opperman said the firm was experiencing demand across a range of areas, including some that had dropped off as a result of Covid.

Client demand for employment and workplace safety law remains strong, and construction, banking and finance, energy, infrastructure and renewables, and insolvency are all areas of increased activity," he said. "We are seeing early indications that real estate and corporate/M&A work is beginning to trend upwards."

State of the market: survival of biggest in turbulent times



SHAARON DALTON

They say there is safety in numbers and bigger is better, and that seems to be the mantra for law firms in the past financial year.

Despite economic turbulence, the increasing usefulness of AI and higher employment costs, law firms across the board have grown, at partner, fee earner and graduate levels in the 12 months from July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024.

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) teams must also be celebrating as the gender balance swayed even further in favour of females in every level. We saw an increase overall in partner headcount of 3.73 per cent but females in partnership headcount went up 10 per cent, as did the percentage of females in equity partnership.

Fee earners increased overall headcount by 7.66 per cent, while the percentage of females vs. males in that headcount increased 18 per cent.

Grad numbers increased 5 per cent and the number of female graduates increased by 8 per cent.

The dramatic difference in this survey period is the demise and non-participation this year of the Big 4 consulting firms' legal arms.

Although only KPMG Law has fully exited the Australian legal market, the other three teams have shrunk and are no longer spruiking a growth trajectory.

However, there are several leading law firms growing consulting and legal process management areas, previously dominated by Big 4. For instance, Ashurst and MinterEllison have hired in many of the refugee consulting partners from PwC and KPMG.

The legal firms are focused on risk and regulatory management, and focusing on highly regulated sectors such as financial services. We will be interested to see how integration works when the lawyers are running the show. It was not seamless the other way around.

The firms surveyed are a mix of top 50 local market and international commercial law firms, and those firms have been doing exceptionally well in an economy that is under stress. Fuelled by capital markets that didn't die as expected, increasing regulation and legislation in the sectors serviced by these firms and increasing risk in the cyberworld and envi-

'Lawyers are lucky for now as there are plenty of good opportunities at all levels'

ronmental social and governance (ESG) and with rising insolvencies, the firms continued to hit budgets and hire at all levels.

In addition, there are several law firms in the list that do a lot of insurance sector policy and claim work; with floods, fires and infrastructure catastrophes, those firms have been busier than ever.

The strongest growth at partner level was seen in the domestic firms with nearly 4 per cent growth. Next were international firms, averaging 2.84 per cent partner growth.

For top-tier firms partner growth was marginal at 1 per cent.

Where top tiers outstripped the market was in fee earner growth with 22 per cent growth for the year, compared with only 9.64 per cent in domestic firms and 4.44 per cent for international firms.

The market for talent at the as-

sociate and senior associate level is tough. Firms that have the best attractor brands and pay the best are growth oriented with good opportunities for their talent to work on interesting large and complex matters, and are winning more of the available talent pool.

In many cases firms can be as interested in the team that follows a partner as they are in the partner themselves, because those partners are able to hit the ground running in transitioning their fee base.

Trends to watch for the next year is more of the same. London is opening up to hiring Aussie lawyers again and we expect the talent squeeze in popular practice areas of Corporate, Finance, Projects, Competition and IT/Cyber to tighten further at the sweet spot of 3-6 year experienced lawyers as they go for money and experience offshore. It is fortunate that firms stocked up in the past year as that may hedge them as the new war for talent takes hold.

Partner moves will continue, although may slow somewhat with the upcoming election as firms may choose to wait for certainty. We expect the demand for partners to continue in the domestic larger and mid-market sector with the addition of the growth-oriented internationals. In top tier there will be team moves when conflicts or the work type of the partner is no longer a good fit and where there is significant financial enticements on offer, and we will see further hiring for gaps or new practice areas but we are not expecting those firms to grow significantly overall.

Lawyers are lucky for now as there are plenty of good opportunities at all levels, and in a cost-of-living crisis they are well-positioned for continued prosperity.

Shaaron Dalton is a managing partner, legal search consultant and strategic adviser to law firms at Eaton Strategy + Search

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

The Australian's 2024 Legal Partnership Survey

Firm	The Australian's 2024 Legal Partnership Survey				Snapshot of women in the legal sector			
	Partners	% change 12 months	Fee earners	% change 12 months	Fee earner to partner ratio	Female partners	% of total	% change 12 months
Addisons	23	21.1	50	-18.0	2.2	10	43.5	42.9
Allens	159	1.9	868	-4.0	5.5	64	40.3	8.5
Arnold Bloch Liebler	45	4.7	138	-11.5	3.1	9	20.0	12.5
Ashurst	207	7.8	788	4.8	3.8	91	44.0	9.6
Baker McKenzie	75	-10.7	211	-2.8	2.8	27	36.0	-10.0
Barry Nilsson Lawyers	41	2.5	210	8.8	5.1	16	39.0	0.0
Clayton Utz	175	0.0	845	2.7	4.8	51	29.1	-1.9
Colin Biggers & Paisley	72	-1.4	168	-6.2	2.3	19	26.4	11.8
Cooper Grace Ward Lawyers	21	0.0	64	-13.5	3.1	9	42.9	0.0
Corrs Chambers Westgarth	142	-0.7	700	4.8	4.9	45	31.7	9.8
Dentons	83	0.0	199	11.2	2.4	29	34.9	11.5
DLA Piper	76	0.0	200	-4.3	2.6	24	31.6	9.1
Gadens	99	6.5	228	6.1	2.3	39	39.4	5.4
Gilbert + Tobin	111	5.7	555	21.7	5.0	45	40.5	9.8
Gilchrist Connell	36	2.9	95	11.8	2.6	16	44.4	6.7
Hall & Wilcox	145	14.2	521	15.3	3.6	60	41.4	22.5
Hamilton Locke	62	24.0	197	85.9	3.2	23	37.1	35.3
Herbert Smith Freehills	172	0.6	968	2.2	5.6	67	39.0	4.7
HFW	33	32.0	88	69.2	2.7	7	21.2	16.7
Holding Redlich	56	-13.9	182	-15.0	3.3	22	39.3	0.0
Hopgoodganim Lawyers	44	4.8	116	-1.7	2.6	11	25.0	10.0
HWL Ebsworth Lawyers	279	-0.7	869	-1.9	3.1	83	29.8	7.8
Johnson Winter & Slattery	83	-2.4	191	-6.4	2.3	28	33.7	7.7
Jones Day	30	7.1	67	3.1	2.2	8	26.7	0.0
K&L Gates	78	4.0	221	4.7	2.8	17	21.8	13.3
Keypoint Law	76	15.2	4	-33.3	0.1	32	42.1	18.5
King & Wood Mallesons	193	2.1	958	6.0	5.0	68	35.2	1.5
Lander & Rogers	99	5.3	318	3.3	3.2	51	51.5	10.9
MacPherson Kelley	39	-45.1	106	16.5	2.7	14	35.9	-50.0
Maddocks	91	1.1	368	8.2	4.0	35	38.5	0.0
McCullough Robertson Lawyers	58	3.6	169	12.7	2.9	18	31.0	38.5
Mills Oakley	162	12.5	439	5.8	2.7	45	27.8	18.4
MinterEllison	244	-5.1	999	-5.6	4.1	87	35.7	1.2
Moray & Agnew	112	3.7	385	41.0	3.4	53	47.3	10.4
Norton Rose Fulbright	118	-4.1	434	0.0	3.7	38	32.2	0.0
Pinsent Masons	33	26.9	107	24.4	3.2	15	45.5	50.0
Piper Alderman	90	9.8	222	42.3	2.5	25	27.8	25.0
Russel Kennedy Lawyers	50	-3.9	112	8.7	2.2	26	52.0	8.3
Seyfarth Shaw Australia	13	8.3	31	3.3	2.4	7	53.9	16.7
Sparke Helmore Lawyers	102	12.1	478	29.9	4.7	43	42.2	22.9
Thomson Geer	150	4.9	324	6.2	2.2	38	25.3	15.2
White & Case	34	3.0	117	11.4	3.4	15	44.1	15.4
Wotton + Kearney	70	12.9	402	68.9	5.7	26	37.1	8.3
TOTAL	4128	3.6	14,853	7.7	3.6	1479	35.8	10.0

Source: Eaton Strategy + Search

Top-tier lawyers win their case for pay rises as firms look to lock in talent

Sydney salary benchmarks 2024

YEAR LEVEL	TOP-TIER FIRMS	MID-TIER FIRMS	BOUTIQUE FIRMS
1	\$100,000 - \$120,000	\$90,000 - \$110,000	\$75,000 - \$90,000
2	\$115,000 - \$145,000	\$95,000 - \$125,000	\$85,000 - \$110,000
3	\$130,000 - \$155,000	\$115,000 - \$140,000	\$95,000 - \$125,000
4	\$145,000 - \$165,000	\$130,000 - \$150,000	\$110,000 - \$135,000
5	\$150,000 - \$175,000	\$135,000 - \$165,000	\$120,000 - \$150,000
SA 1	\$180,000 - \$205,000	\$150,000 - \$180,000	\$140,000 - \$170,000
SA 2	\$200,000 - \$225,000	\$170,000 - \$200,000	\$155,000 - \$185,000
SA 3	\$210,000 - \$250,000	\$180,000 - \$225,000	\$165,000 - \$200,000
SA 4	\$230,000 - \$290,000	\$195,000 - \$240,000	\$180,000 - \$230,000
SA 5/SC	\$250,000 - \$370,000	\$220,000 - \$290,000	\$200,000 - \$260,000

*The above salary levels are inclusive of superannuation guarantee Source: Eaton Strategy + Search

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so they stick around and they can get a return on their investment."

Gadens CEO Mark Pistilli said his firm had offered pay rises to graduates because they "are an important contributor to the fabric of our firm, they are our pipeline of talent and future leaders".

"Graduates should be rewarded consistent with how the firm rewards performance and in line with their experienced colleagues," he said.

Clayton Utz chief executive partner Emma Covacevich said lawyers salaries would be "competitively" raised this year.

"In addition to our salary package, we offer a generous bonus scheme to our lawyers once they have finished our graduate program," she said. "Our recognition scheme offers diverse financial benefits that can be in the form of vouchers, time off, or smaller bonuses. It's an important and timely way of saying thank you to our people or giving them an ad-



Pistilli

ditional break for their hard work."

Hamilton Locke managing partner Nick Humphrey said his firm was planning to raise salaries

"in line with the market", but said his employees also had an equity stake in the business.

"This promotes a sense of ownership and shared purpose which we see as a competitive edge in terms of attracting and retaining talent that is the right fit for us," he said. "It also fosters collaboration and innovation: people working together for mutual benefit, rather than competing in silos. We also offer bonuses for high performance and collaboration, including an additional 'Values Bonus' of up

to 10 per cent of salary to individuals who actively demonstrate our values in action."

Lander & Rogers chief executive partner Genevieve Collins said salaries had been adjusted to "reflect parity by gender, role and employment status".

"We were pleased to deliver competitive remuneration in 2024, reflecting our firm's strong performance in the last financial year," she said, adding the firm also offered free lunches, discretionary bonuses and other benefits.

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