



18 & 19 September 2006
The Dorchester Hotel, London



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Law firms seek flexible work strategies to retain key staff

>By Michael Peel

>Published: June 5 2006 03:00 | Last updated: June 5 2006 03:00

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Tony Angel, managing partner at Linklaters, warns it is "one-dimensional" for law firms to think healthy pay increases are sufficient to stop junior staff seeing jobs elsewhere as less stressful or more rewarding.

He says Linklaters offers its busy lawyers emergency childcare, time off in lieu and even a concierge to go to their houses to "collect the washing machine or meet the plumber".

Linklaters typifies the paradox confronting many leading law firms: profitability has risen 58 per cent over the past two years, but some of its lawyers below partner level are looking for more than merely a greater share of the spoils.

"What we are seeing is a much greater demand from 'Generation Y' for much greater flexibility in their lives," Mr Angel says. "It's not just pressure for pay."

Mr Angel reckons the proportion of junior lawyers who go on to become partners has fallen at most firms during the past decade. This is partly because it has become harder to be made a partner, and partly because more new recruits may not want to spend their entire careers in one place.

As a result, the ratio of associates to partners is rising in British-based firms towards levels seen in the highly profitable and highly remunerating US market.

Mr Angel says Linklaters is looking thoroughly at the way it runs itself, although he insists that the traditional partnership model is still viable and has adapted successfully from its "almost Dickensian" state a few decades ago.

The firm has set up working groups in Hong Kong, New York, Paris, Frankfurt and London to try to grapple with a question preoccupying much of the industry: "What is a law firm going to look like in 10 years' time?"

Some critics of the profession also say the big firms are still failing to do enough to attract and cater for members of ethnic minorities and women, even though 60 per cent of newly qualified solicitors are female.

Cat Griffiths, editor of the *The Lawyer* magazine, said the shift in junior lawyer behaviour had not yet caused a mass exodus from the big firms but could be seen as an early warning that the profession was in danger of "eating itself".

"I think people are quite freaked by that," she said, "because they have no answer to it."

The earnest talk now among law firm managing partners, who were recruited during an era when the progression from qualification to partnership was both expected and relatively swift, is of the need to cater for juniors' demands for mobility and a better work-life balance.


The long-term question for the firms is whether the strategies that have helped them achieve such stunning financial success over the past year may turn out to contain some of the seeds of their own destruction.

"People work very, very long hours," acknowledged David Childs, managing partner at Clifford Chance. "There is an issue: is this model sustainable in the long term?"

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