



“ **In summary, the Junior Category might be facing a perfect storm: a record high number of departures coinciding with a record low number of entrants. The Law Society is concerned.** ”

— **The late former President Adrian Tan (Opening of Legal Year, January 2022)**

In 2022, the then President of the Law Society of Singapore, the late Mr Adrian Tan, highlighted growing concerns about attrition within the legal profession. To better understand the reasons behind why lawyers do not renew their practicing certificate and leave law firm practice, the Law Society of Singapore commissioned Anthro Insights, a people science consultancy, to undertake an independent and rigorous study.

The Law Society of Singapore — Anthro Insights Legal Profession Sustainability Study is the most comprehensive examination of lawyer sustainability ever undertaken for Singapore’s legal profession to date documenting a four-year effort that gathered 855 survey responses and 31 in-depth interviews.

For more than three decades, the profession has identified **long hours, heavy workloads, poor work-life balance, and burnout** as drivers of talent loss. The outflow of talent has not been effectively stemmed despite attempts at interventions such as wellness programmes, flexible work policies, and mentorship schemes.

This study was designed to identify systemic factors contributing to attrition and, conversely, professional sustainability. The findings are intended to support the design of interventions to make the legal profession sustainable and effective in retaining and nurturing legal talent.

For the purposes of this study, the analysis was confined to attrition from law firm practice. The Law Society of Singapore recognises that lawyers who leave law firm practice do not necessarily leave the legal profession altogether, as many transition into in-house counsel roles in companies. This study, however, does not track or investigate attrition from in-house counsel roles.



Why This Study Matters

Evidence to support anecdotal accounts of lawyers' lived experiences. Singapore’s legal profession has been describing the same problems in official speeches, commissioned studies, and media reports since 1990. This study applies research methodology and statistical methods to systematically explain the factors that affect professional sustainability.

The human and business costs of inaction are substantial. Firms bear the direct financial cost of recruiting, training, and replacing lawyers who are compelled by firm or industry conditions to leave. Expertise lost when experienced lawyers depart widens the knowledge and mentorship gap for those who remain. The human cost, while harder to quantify, is as real in the form of preventable harm experienced by lawyers.

Law firms are unnecessarily losing talent who wish to remain in law firm practice. The study finds that many lawyers who consider leaving enjoy the practice of law but cannot sustain the conditions under which the work is structured. The gap between the work and conditions is a solvable problem and the study provides evidence to address this.



HIGHLIGHTS

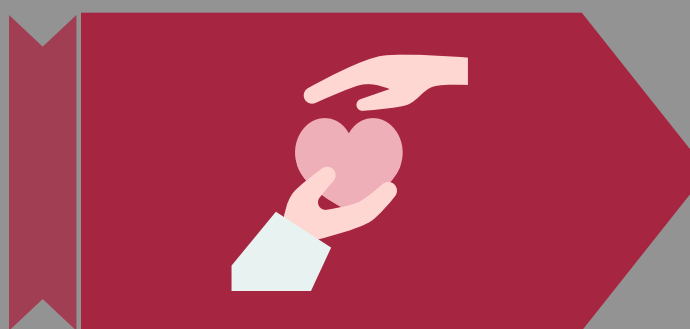
of The Law Society of Singapore

Anthro Insights Legal Profession Sustainability Study

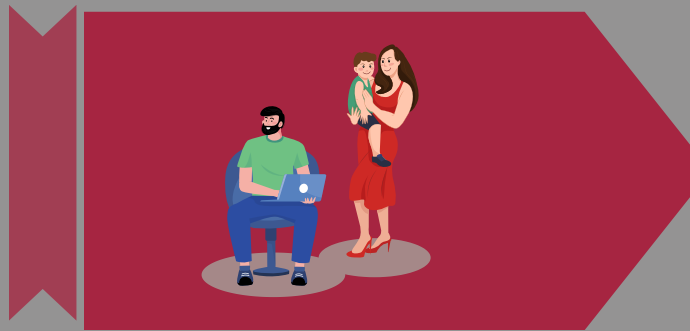
1 Firm retention and occupational retention (pursuing a legal career) are different challenges. Lawyers leave their firms because of workplace culture. Lawyers choose not to continue with a legal career for personal well-being, particularly mental health.

Firm Retention

The strongest factor in firm retention is workplace culture. The three dimensions of workplace culture that are the strongest independent predictors of lawyers remaining at their firms are:



Organisational Support: Whether lawyers feel genuinely valued as people rather than billing units, receive adequate resources, and have their contributions acknowledged. This is the single strongest predictor of firm-level commitment.



Family- and life-supportive work environment: Firms where work-life balance is genuinely practised, not merely stated in policy, see substantially higher retention.



Supervisory stewardship: When supervisors protect their teams from unreasonable demands and advocate for their people, lawyers in those teams respond with discretionary effort and loyalty.

Factors commonly assumed to drive retention decisions (compensation, firm size, and seniority) show markedly weaker independent effects once culture is accounted for.

Occupation Retention

The strongest factor in occupational retention is well-being. Poor workplace culture does not directly cause lawyers to leave the profession. It harms mental health over a prolonged period. Once well-being declines significantly, practice becomes unsustainable in any setting, and lawyers choose not to pursue a legal career altogether. Wellness programmes cannot solve retention problems when workplace culture continues to harm mental health.

2 System-level forces contribute to sustainability and attrition beyond any individual firm's control.



Billable hours, which are the dominant performance measure, penalize efficiency, encourage unhealthy competition, and make junior lawyers accountable for metrics entirely beyond their control.

Court-imposed pressures from court timelines and interpersonal conduct towards lawyers create conditions that cannot be mitigated by individual law firms.

Gap between legal education and practice, where the practice-oriented elements in law schools and the Part B course do not go far enough to bridge the gap. Legal education should play a bigger role in professional formation.

Early-career structures create vulnerability through premature specialisation, excessive dependence on a single supervisor, limited exposure to diverse practice areas, and insufficient psychological safety to learn from mistakes.

3 Young lawyers are most at risk because of structural problems. The data confirms that young lawyers leave at higher rates. The study firmly rejects explanations based on generational deficiencies or character failings.

Voices from the Profession



“And as I entered the private practice later on, I realised that it had become the be-all and end-all. The problem nowadays is not the billable hour itself, because it's basically how you account for your time, but the fact that that seems to be the be-all and end-all, you know, in terms of how people are measured. I think it causes a lot of stress...” - **Retired Partner**

“I look at the lives my bosses lead, too, and see that it is not much of a life. Hours sacrificed on the altar of the next deadline, an inability or unwillingness to push back on court or client deadlines. I ask myself if I want to be in their shoes in the next 10 years, and my honest answer is 'no.'” - **Middle-level Lawyer**

“In my experience, not having enough rest has been a major issue at work. Given how intellectually challenging legal work can be, it takes a fair amount of time for the body and mind to recharge and continue to be productive...” - **Middle-level Lawyer**

“Even if we're not physically at work, because we're always mentally 'at work' and exhausted, and not able to spend those time which is supposed to be personal time (if there even is any), outside work hours.” - **Middle-level Lawyer**

“We have to work during our leave and on MC. It feels like our illness is not taken seriously and we have to justify and 'prove' that we are sick.” - **Junior Lawyer**

“Law school gave me the potential to learn about practice very quickly. The problem is that when you go into practice, there's not enough interaction between the new lawyer and the other lawyers to really speed up the process of becoming a real practising lawyer. So, you're thrown in, basically. And it's kind of assumed that, if you've got your degree and done your pupillage, you can come in and do your work.” - **Senior Lawyer**

What This Study Recommends

The report highlights **six areas of strategic considerations** where the profession can work together to improve sustainability.

Strategic Consideration	What This Means
Diagnose before intervening	Firm-specific interventions require firms to assess which cultural factors are actually driving attrition in that setting before implementing solutions.
Coordinate ecosystem-wide responses	Challenges such as early-career design and billable hour culture transcend individual firms. They require coordinated responses through the Law Society, multi-firm initiatives, and engagement with the judiciary and regulators. Individual firm action cannot solve problems embedded in the profession's overall structure.
Redesign early-career structures	Current models push junior lawyers into narrow specialisations too quickly, under a single supervisor, with a limited breadth to pivot. Potential alternative models include structured rotations across practice areas, deliberate exposure to diverse supervisors, and delayed specialisation. This may require rethinking how training programmes are designed, how junior time is billed, and how performance is evaluated.
Embed mentorship in daily work	Formal mentorship schemes consistently underperform because they treat guidance as separate from actual practice. Potential reforms include on-the-spot training integrated into live matters, senior lawyers working alongside juniors on real cases, and mentorship being explicitly valued and rewarded rather than treated as an unpaid burden.
Track well-being with rigour	Compared to financial performance, well-being is not tracked with rigour and receives informal attention at best. Firms should implement regular validated assessments, track trends over time, analyse data by team and supervisor, and present well-being metrics to leadership alongside financial performance.
Strengthen the education-to-practice bridge	Law schools produce intellectually rigorous graduates, but multiple stakeholders identified opportunities to better prepare graduates for practice conditions. This may include building realistic expectations, frameworks for navigating challenging workplace dynamics, and professional identity resources during role transition.

Methodology

This study used a two-phase mixed-methods approach.

1 Phase One — Qualitative Interviews

Thirty-one in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a deliberately wide cross-section of the legal community: retired judges, law school academics, senior partners, junior associates, in-house counsel, and lawyers who had already left practice. These conversations totalled nearly 40 hours and generated nearly 900 pages of transcripts.

Five themes were identified inductively from the interviewees' own words: (1) billable hours; (2) courts; (3) law schools; (4) well-being; and (5) workplace culture.

2 Phase Two — Quantitative Survey

Drawing on the themes identified from Phase One, a survey was designed and distributed across the Singapore legal community. A total of **855 responses** were received from practising and former lawyers across all firm sizes, with a gender-balanced sample and strong representation from junior lawyers. **10% of respondents no longer held practising certificates.**

The survey measured 23 variables across **four predictor categories**: (1) demographics; (2) firm characteristics; (3) workplace culture; and (4) individual well-being — against **two outcome categories**: job engagement (commitment to the current firm) and occupational engagement (commitment to a legal career).

Next Steps

The full report will be available on Anthro Insights' website this week. The Singapore legal profession has shown strong growth, especially over the last decade. There is a strong core of around 6,400 Singapore lawyers in practice today, representing an increase of 26% between 2015 and 2024. It is nonetheless recognised that the sentiments in the Report reflect the lived reality for some in the profession, though not all. More can indeed be done to support continued growth and development as well as to harness new opportunities. To this end, the Law Society has constituted a taskforce to work with relevant stakeholders on the recommendations arising from the Report, in a manner that is practical, well calibrated, and aligned with the broader interests of the profession. These stakeholders, including the Ministry of Law, the Judiciary, the Singapore Academy of Law and the Law Society, are part of the Future of the Legal Profession Committee, which will consider holistically the challenges and opportunities facing the legal profession such as sustainability of legal practice, artificial intelligence and cross-border work.

