

# Graduate hiring blitz at mid-size law firms

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The shift away from the large top-tiers comes as law students and firms say the next generation of talent will increasingly prioritise firm culture and training over brand names when looking for a job.

Outside the big six, Norton Rose Fulbright and Gilbert + Tobin were among those to sharply increase their graduate numbers.

NRF more than doubled its 2020 intake (43 to 89), while Gilbert + Tobin rose by 54.3 per cent to 54.

Over the past two years, NRF has been investing heavily in its mergers and acquisitions, banking and regulatory teams, while exiting low-margin (but high-volume) practice areas such as insurance.

Managing partner Alison Deitz said that when she was appointed last year she was given a mandate to “march down the big end of town”. Attracting the most promising talent was a key part of that strategy.

“We have lifted our engagement with them across the board,” Ms Deitz said, “from engaging with students, articulating career opportunities and investing more in our induction and training.

“We are also targeting students earlier in their degree to build their awareness of our firm and to have a longer-term relationship with us.”

She said this had led to “greater success in attracting the sort of people we want to work at our firm”.

Gilbert + Tobin’s graduate growth comes as it cements itself as a national leader in banking, mergers and acquisitions and competition work.

Managing partner Danny Gilbert pointed to graduate recruitment as a key part of the firm’s growth strategy, but made no secret of the fact top talent was expected to work hard.

“We are talking to these recruits more about how the benefits of working at G+T are a great grounding to their career, whatever path they might eventually choose – potentially as a partner here, but also other paths within our firm, with clients or even outside the law,” Mr Gilbert said.



NRF’s Alison Deitz has a mandate to “march down the big end of town”.

*Peter Rae*

He said the firm was “emphasising the importance of commerciality in our recruitment messaging”.

“Commercial curiosity and a strong interest in business and the outcomes sought by our clients are critical attributes. In addition, we look for people who are engaged with all of the contemporary issues and challenges that face our communities.”

Insurance specialists Wotton + Kearney had the biggest percentage rise in graduates (137.5 per cent to 19) while Jones Day, Carter Newell and Holman Webb each doubled their graduate numbers on last year.



Danny Gilbert says Gilbert + Tobin is “emphasising the importance of commerciality”. *Wolter Peeters*

## Young talent shortage

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Several firms pointed to an industry-wide talent shortage of lawyers with two to five years of experience as triggers for their continued investment in junior recruitment despite the pandemic.

Corrs Chambers Westgarth said the recruitment of graduates and clerks was a priority in its “significant change agenda” to challenge the big six, while Gadens, Carter Newell, Wotton + Kearney, Colin Biggers & Paisley and Hamilton Locke all flagged new or enhanced clerkship and graduate programs as ways to secure talent.

At the big end of town, Allens (101) and King & Wood Mallesons (92) had the largest intakes.

Allens managing partner Richard Spurio said the firm took a “long-term view of talent” and thought it was essential to maintain the pipeline.

He said the firm was using “meet and engage” sessions to give law students “real, first-hand impressions of our people and what it’s like to work at Allens”.

KWM chief executive partner Berkeley Cox said graduates and young lawyers “want more than just a job”.

“They are looking for an experience and a purpose in addition to high-quality work. Overlaying this is a desire from clerks and graduates to be more legal-tech savvy.”



Richard Spurio says Allens takes a long-term view on recruitment. *Louie Douvis*

However, Ashurst's graduate numbers fell by a third to 69 recruits, while MinterEllison's dropped 20.9 per cent to 87. Herbert Smith Freehills and Clayton Utz's shrank 12.5 per cent and 6.7 per cent respectively.

Clerkship intakes at these firms also dropped. Allens' shrank by 77.4 per cent, from 212 in July 2020 to just 48 in July 2021, followed by MinterEllison (34 per cent decrease), Ashurst (31.15 per cent) and Clayton Utz (13.1 per cent).

HSF remained steady, as did the legal sector in general. The overall number of clerks hired by Australia's biggest corporate firms sat at 1556 this year – just 11 less than the pre-COVID-19 intake of the year before.

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