

## Business of Law

# Washington State Legal Community Braces for Huge Turnover in Lawyer Population

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By [Mark Hansen](#)

Washington state's legal community is bracing for a huge turnover in its lawyer population over the next five years.

The expected turnover, driven largely by demographics and economics, poses big challenges for firms both large and small, though small firms and solo practices seem especially vulnerable, the [Puget Sound Business Journal](#) reports.

In response, some large firms are going out of their way to recruit prospective senior leaders, and the Washington State Bar Association is trying to match older attorneys with younger lawyers, among other things.

The moves come following a recent bar association survey showing that 7,200 of its members—almost a quarter of the state's practicing lawyers—are considering retirement within the next five years. Another 32 percent of the state bar's members are weighing whether to leave the profession or cut back on their practices, the survey shows.

Seventy-one percent of the state bar's members are 50 or older, with 21 percent being 61 or above, according to the survey. But bar admissions are not keeping pace with retirements. Between 2007 and 2011, the number of lawyers admitted annually dropped 13 percent, to 1,148, according to state bar data.

In the last five years, 5,997 applicants passed the state bar exam, an average of just under 1,200 a year, a number that could easily be overtaken by retirements, the survey shows.

"The membership survey was a bit of a wake-up call," Michael Badger, associate director of lawyer services for the state bar, said to the Business Journal.

Declining law school enrollments are only adding to the concern, because fewer law school graduates means fewer candidates for the bar.

The problem is not peculiar to Washington state, according to the Business Journal's interview with Allan Koltin, president and CEO of the Chicago consulting firm Koltin Consulting Group. "There's a succession-planning crisis going on right now, within law firms and other professional service firms," Koltin said.

Koltin attributes the crisis to two trends that emerged in the 1990s. First, dot-com companies lured away many potential lawyers and other professional workers. Second, an emphasis on work-life balance soured many Generation Xers on following traditional career paths.

"If you worked for a law firm, there was a feeling you were signing your life away," Koltin said. "Students didn't want to be a slave to billable hours."

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