



Neurodiversity in BigLaw: A conversation with Executive and Neurodiversity coach Julie Remer about this year's findings from Chambers Associate research.

by Cait Evans, Global Talent Head of Research at Chambers and Partners

The mantra of finding strength in diversity holds true when we explore the working patterns of neurodiverse lawyers across the US. Each year on Chambers Associate, we survey associates in BigLaw to discover how satisfied they really are with life at their firms. Since we began surveying the US market, we've seen trends emerge in how lawyers with varying backgrounds and identities respond to the market's collective experiences. Alongside the broader DEI concerns, recognizing neurodiversity is increasingly important to young legal professionals. We've looked at how this group interacts with different practice areas, career aspirations and general satisfaction, and the results are fascinating.

Understanding neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to variations between people's brains and nervous systems. When we talk about neurodiversity, we are not talking about it in the sense that it is a disability, as it is in law. In fact, the actual term negates the idea that there is one 'normal' way to think and function. Instead, it shows us that there are many ways in which people process information, their surroundings and their actions.

Being neurodivergent means different things to different people – there is no one size fits all. Most of us are familiar with terms like ADHD, autism and dyslexia, but the actual list is far longer. One thing in common with anyone falling into this category though, is that living with a condition listed under the umbrella term can be challenging to say the least. It's regularly associated with negative stigmas, particularly as you enter the world of work.

When I was diagnosed with ADHD at 20 years old, it was incredibly liberating. For the first time, I felt like I was able to understand myself, after years of feeling like something was just not right. But when I graduated from university, the one question I struggled to answer was *where exactly can I work with this condition?*

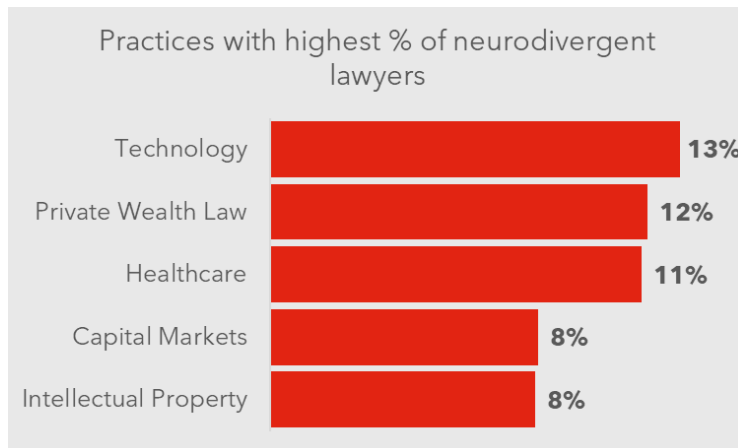
Many neurodiverse individuals approach career planning with this mindset. Everybody thinks about the basics, such as, what sort of work interests me? Where do I want to be based? What are the opportunities for growth? But living with neurodiversity requires you to think beyond that. You have to consider what sort of career will offer a specific environment that will cater for how you function. For example, will your ways of working be accepted there and will you be able to keep up with everyone else?

So, the concept of choosing a profession as tough and unforgiving as BigLaw might not initially jump out as an obvious match. After all, to someone with ADHD, long hours, high concentration and unpredictable demands do not conjure up images of their ideal working environment.

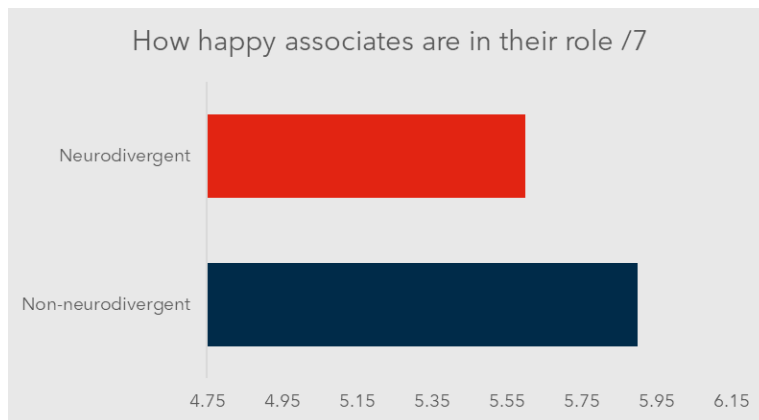
But there are plenty of neurodivergent attorneys who thrive in BigLaw, as our research shows. Sitting down with Julie Remer from Amicus Coaching, we explore what drives happiness among neurodiverse attorneys, how they are able to harness their abilities at work for the better, what work needs to be done

by firms to ensure that neurodiverse associates see the firm as a long-term career option, and what recruiters should be thinking about when working with a neurodiverse candidate.

Our findings



Of the 8,000+ associates we surveyed from August 2023 - January 2024, 9% reported being neurodiverse. Interestingly, we found that the practices which draw in the highest percentages of neurodivergent lawyers are more technical areas like technology, private wealth, healthcare, capital markets and IP. Remer, who coaches neurodiverse attorneys, tells us that *"this tracks with what I see in my coaching practice. I frequently work with neurodivergent attorneys in the tech fields, which suggests a natural gravitation toward areas where structured thinking and deep subject matter expertise are particularly valued."*

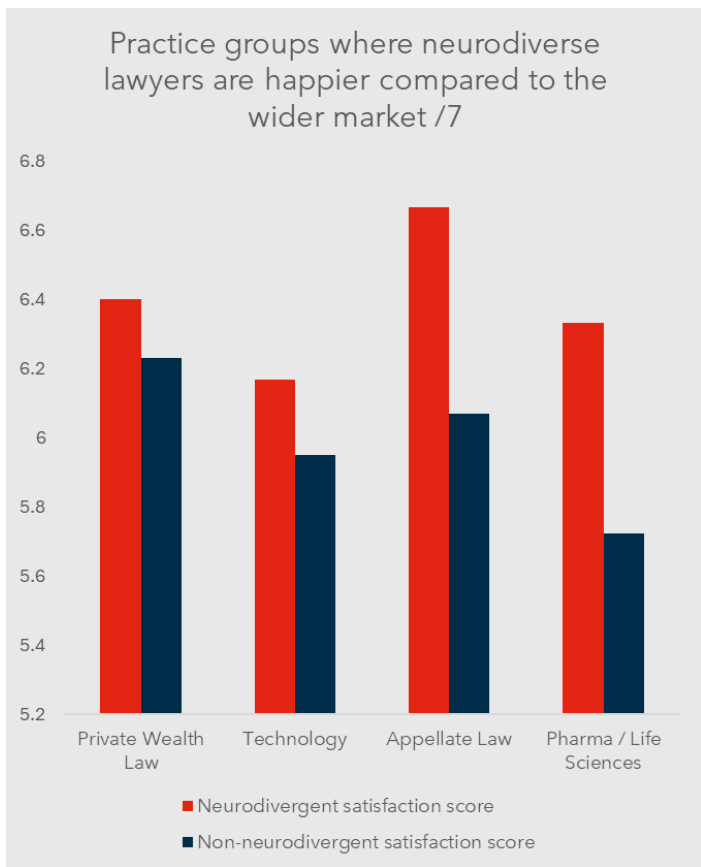


Despite this, neurodiverse associates are, on average, less happy overall in BigLaw than neurotypicals. But as Remer points out, *"the small gap in happiness scores (5.6 vs. 5.9) highlights that when properly supported, neurodivergent lawyers can achieve similar levels of job satisfaction as their neurotypical peers."* Remer adds that the gap in itself *"signals an opportunity to implement targeted well-being initiatives that address the specific challenges neurodivergent lawyers might face in legal practice."*

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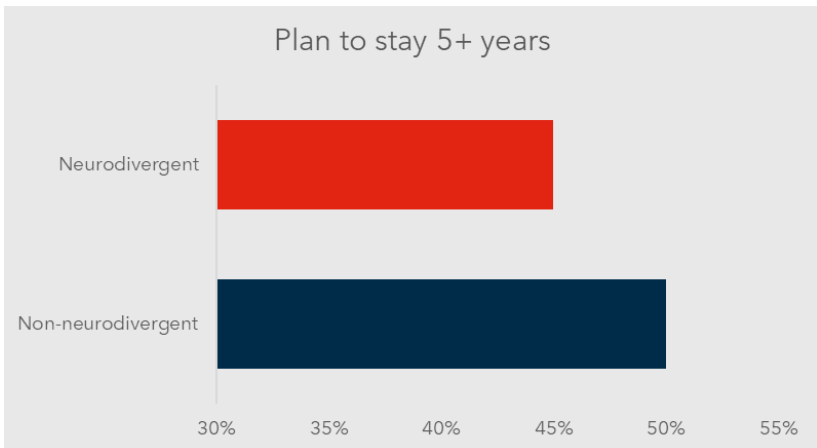
Focused training can also go a long way to ensure the happiness of a

neurodiverse attorney. Remer explains, “in my practice, I have found that when neurodivergent attorneys are able to take advantage of targeted coaching, they learn techniques and build skills which make them better, and happier, attorneys.”



Though if we take a closer look at happiness levels among associates, there are some practices where neurodivergent attorneys actually buck the trend and are happier in their role than neurotypicals. These include appellate law, private wealth, technology and life sciences. Once again, this signals that neurodiverse associates thrive in technical practices.

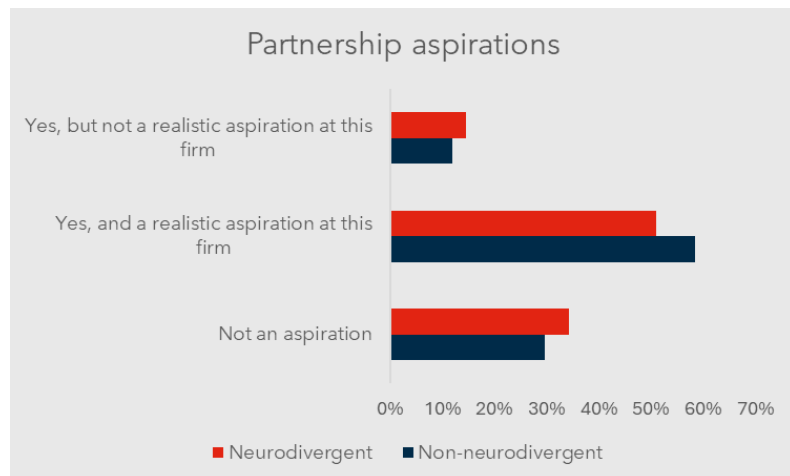
Remer suggests that “these environments may have already developed more inclusive practices and understanding of different working styles.” For instance, appellate law is where we see the most significant difference, and the highest reported happiness score among neurodiverse attorneys: “This could indicate that the structured nature of appellate work and the focus on detailed analysis plays to neurodivergent strengths.” Though Remer does caution that, “Appellate attorneys may struggle, however, with the longer timelines for drafting appellate briefs. Neurodivergent attorneys typically thrive with shorter deadlines because the urgency of the project makes it more interesting and motivating.”



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When it comes to long-term career planning, neurodiverse associates report being less likely than their neurotypical counterparts to envision staying at their firm for more than five years. In many cases, Remer highlights that “this retention gap represents a significant loss of talent and perspective that firms could address through improved accommodation practices and targeted career development support” within the firm.

“I most frequently see attorneys who are neurodivergent leaving their firm, the law firm environment, or the practice of law entirely, when they don’t have enough support and understanding from their supervisors and colleagues,” shares Remer, speaking from her own experience as a neurodiversity coach. “In a neurodiverse-affirming environment, many attorneys can thrive,” she stresses.



Neurodivergent associates are also less likely to view partnership as an aspiration at their current firm and are also less likely to consider it a general aspiration at any firm. “This difference suggests a need for more visible neurodivergent role models in partnership positions and clearer, more structured pathways to leadership for neurodivergent lawyers,” notes Remer.

Indeed, the profession has a long way to go on that front. Only 9% of associates taking our survey reported being neurodivergent, 10% preferred not to say. Neurodiversity is still very much a taboo subject in many workplaces. “Most neurodivergent lawyers I work with are reluctant to share their neurodivergence with their colleagues,” admits Remer. She adds that “this isolation makes it more difficult for neurodivergent attorneys to find role models and/or mentors. Without any evidence to the contrary, these attorneys will often feel like partnership is just not possible for them.”

Advice for recruiters

It's conditions such as these that may push a neurodiverse attorney to consider making a move. As a recruiter, there are a few crucial points to note if you're working with a neurodiverse candidate. Firstly, if you learn that a candidate is neurodiverse, make sure you get to know and understand their particular condition. Showing you care about their background and what makes them tick will not only be instrumental in making a successful placement, but for building a strong rapport with them too. The more you understand how their condition impacts them, the better positioned you will be to make a successful placement. It will show the candidate and the client that you're working in a considerate and strategic way. Secondly, we know that different types of people

thrive in different environments. When working with a neurodiverse candidate, be sure to ask what they expect from their next firm to help accommodate them. At the same time, learn from the firm about what initiatives they have in place that can address these needs. Ultimately, transparency is key on both sides. The little things will matter - not every firm will be able to offer the right environment to allow a neurodiverse candidate to thrive.

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At the firm level, recruitment teams should ensure that their recruitment process is accessible to all candidates e.g. clear and precise job descriptions, flexible formats for interviews, and allowing for extra time throughout the process. It’s also crucial that those involved in the hiring process are trained and educated in neurodiverse conditions, to avoid any hiring biases.

Unlocking the full potential of a neurodiverse employee and getting long-term commitment from them is the goal. Neurodivergent associates bring unique perspectives to the legal profession, such as the ability to hyperfocus, embrace technical problems or offer deeper creativity. Firms will only get there if they make their workplaces a positive and accommodating environment for their neurodiverse employees, where they can express themselves authentically without prejudice. We will continue to collect data on neurodiverse attorneys and will hopefully start to see a positive change over the years to come as the conversations around this topic continue.

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