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BigLaw Salary and Firm Guide 2026

Associate pay by class year, the Am Law 100, the biggest firms in the world, and who is doing the deals

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About this guide

This guide pulls together the four things people most often search Legal Desire for when they are thinking about a career in big firms: what associates are paid, which firms are the largest, how the Am Law 100 ranks them, and who the richest lawyers in the world are.

It adds one thing you will not find elsewhere: a count of the deals each leading firm announced in 2026, from DealDatabase, the deal tracker run by Legal Desire. Use it to see which firms are actually doing the transactional work you want to be part of.

Figures are as published on legaldesire.com in 2026. Salary scales and rankings change every year, so check the live pages before you rely on a number.

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CHAPTER 1

Cravath Scale 2026: Big Law Associate Salaries and Bonuses by Class Year

Originally published on legaldesire.com · https://legaldesire.com/cravath-scale/

Last updated: 19 October 2026. This guide covers base salaries and bonuses for associates at large US law firms, mainly in New York, using figures announced by the firms and reported by the legal press. It is general information, not legal, financial or career advice.

Short answer: The Cravath scale is the lockstep pay grid that elite US law firms use for associates, named after Cravath, Swaine & Moore. Since 1 July 2026 the market rate set by Milbank runs from $235,000 for first-years to $455,000 for eighth-years. Cravath's own published range is still $225,000 to $420,000, and 2026 year-end bonuses have not been announced yet.

Key takeaways

- Milbank raised associate base pay by $10,000 to $20,000 from 1 July 2026, taking first-year salaries to $235,000 and eighth-year salaries to $455,000.
- McDermott Will & Schulte, Quinn Emanuel, Katten and Seward & Kissel were among the firms reported to have matched; Cravath's careers page still lists $225,000 to $420,000 for New York associates.
- The last year-end bonuses, announced by Cravath on 19 November 2025, ranged from $15,000 plus a $6,000 special bonus for first-years to $115,000 plus $25,000 for the most senior class.
- As of 19 October 2026, no firm has announced a 2026 year-end bonus scale. Milbank paid special bonuses of $6,000 to $25,000 by 31 August 2026.

What is the Cravath scale?

"Cravath scale" is the industry's shorthand for the salary and bonus grid paid to associates at the most profitable US law firms. Pay is lockstep: every associate in the same class year gets the same base salary, whatever their practice group, and it rises each year until the associate becomes a partner, counsel or leaves.

The name comes from Cravath, Swaine & Moore, the New York firm that for decades set the benchmark that other firms then matched. In June 2016, for example, Cravath raised first-year pay from $160,000, the rate since January 2007, to $180,000, and the rest of Big Law followed. Since 2018, however, Milbank has usually moved first, and some commentators now talk about a "Milbank scale". The phrase "Cravath scale" is still used for the market rate whoever sets it. For pay outside Big Law, see our guide to lawyer salaries in 2026.

What are Big Law associate salaries in 2026?

On 2 June 2026 Milbank announced raises of $10,000 to $20,000, effective 1 July 2026, as reported by Bloomberg Law. McDermott Will & Schulte matched the same day. The table shows the new market scale, as published in McDermott's matching scale, alongside the previous scale set in late 2023.

Class year	Previous base (late 2023 to June 2026)	New base (from 1 July 2026)	Increase
1st year	$225,000	$235,000	$10,000
2nd year	$235,000	$245,000	$10,000
3rd year	$260,000	$270,000	$10,000
4th year	$310,000	$320,000	$10,000
5th year	$365,000	$385,000	$20,000
6th year	$390,000	$410,000	$20,000
7th year	$420,000	$440,000	$20,000

Class year	Previous base (late 2023 to June 2026)	New base (from 1 July 2026)	Increase
8th year	$435,000	$455,000	$20,000

The previous column reflects the scale Milbank and Cravath adopted in November and December 2023. Cravath's version stopped at $420,000 for seventh-years, while Milbank and some other firms paid $435,000 to eighth-years, according to the ABA Journal.

Has Cravath matched the 2026 raises?

We have found no announcement that it has. As of 19 October 2026, Cravath's How to Apply page says New York associates are paid on a scale "currently ranging from $225,000 to $420,000". Firms reported by the ABA Journal to have followed Milbank by mid-June include McDermott Will & Schulte, Quinn Emanuel, Katten and Seward & Kissel, while Susman Godfrey went further with a $240,000 starting salary. Commentators have suggested Cravath may wait until bonus season to respond, but that is speculation until the firm says so.

What bonuses do Big Law associates get?

Associates on the scale usually receive two kinds of bonus:

- **Year-end bonuses**, announced in November or December and paid around mid-December. They rise by class year and are normally conditional on meeting billable hours targets and staying at the firm until payment.
- **Special bonuses**, paid on top in strong years. Milbank has paid summer special bonuses for three years running, and Cravath folded a matching special bonus into its year-end announcement in 2025.

Cravath announced the 2025 year-end and special bonuses on 19 November 2025, as reported by the ABA Journal. Milbank and many other firms matched. "Class of" refers to the year an associate joined after law school, so the class of 2025 were first-years in 2025.

Class	Year-end bonus	Special bonus	Total 2025 bonus
2025	$15,000	$6,000	$21,000 (prorated)
2024	$20,000	$6,000	$26,000
2023	$30,000	$10,000	$40,000
2022	$57,500	$15,000	$72,500
2021	$75,000	$20,000	$95,000
2020	$90,000	$25,000	$115,000
2019	$105,000	$25,000	$130,000
2018	$115,000	$25,000	$140,000

Put together, a fifth-year associate (class of 2021) on the old scale earned a $365,000 base plus $95,000 in bonuses in 2025, or $460,000 before tax. A first-year earned $225,000 plus a prorated bonus.

What about 2026 bonuses?

Two things are known as of 19 October 2026.

- **Special bonuses have been paid at Milbank.** On 28 July 2026 Milbank announced special bonuses for "all associates and special counsel globally", from $6,000 for the class of 2026 to $25,000 for the class of 2021 and more senior lawyers, payable on or before 31 August, according to the ABA Journal. Reports have not yet shown a wide market match.
- **Year-end bonuses have not been announced.** No firm has published a 2026 year-end scale. In 2025 Cravath opened bonus season on 19 November and many firms matched within days. Until a firm announces, any figure you see for 2026 year-end bonuses is a guess.

We will update this page when the 2026 year-end scale is announced.

How have Big Law salaries changed over time?

Date	First-year base	What happened
January 2007	$160,000	Raised from $145,000; stayed flat for nearly a decade
June 2016	$180,000	Cravath raise, with eighth-years at $315,000
2018	$190,000	Milbank led the raise
January 2022	$215,000	Milbank raise after a further round of increases in 2021
November 2023	$225,000	Milbank raise, quickly matched by Cravath
July 2026	$235,000	Milbank raise, effective 1 July

The pattern is long flat periods followed by sudden jumps, usually when demand for corporate and finance work is strong. Our look at the biggest law firms in the world shows which firms are large enough to pay at this level.

Which firms pay the Cravath scale?

There is no official list. In general, scale-paying firms are the most profitable Am Law 50 to 100 firms with large New York offices, plus elite litigation boutiques that sometimes pay more. Firms often match in their major US markets but pay less in smaller cities. Some firms match the base salaries but not the special bonuses, or pay bonuses only to associates who meet hours targets. Always ask a firm directly what it pays in the office you are joining. Our comparison of corporate lawyer salaries shows how Big Law pay compares with in-house and boutique roles.

Other parts of the package matter too. Cravath's careers page lists a $125,000 clerkship bonus for incoming associates who clerked, or $150,000 for two years of clerking, with up to two years of class credit, and a weekly summer associate salary of $4,327.

Is the Cravath scale worth it?

Base pay at this level is far above the median for lawyers, and our guide to which lawyers make the most money explains why corporate and finance practices dominate. But the pay comes with long hours, high billable targets and a steep attrition curve. Most associates leave before partnership, often for in-house counsel roles with lower pay and more predictable hours. For a wider comparison of earnings at each career stage, see how much lawyers make from starting pay to partner, and for the top of the ladder, our piece on partner salaries.

The scale also reaches London. Legal Cheek reported in June 2026 that Milbank pays newly qualified solicitors in London £175,000, in line with the $235,000 US first-year rate.

Frequently asked questions

What is the Cravath scale for first-year associates in 2026?

Firms that matched Milbank's July 2026 raise pay first-years $235,000. Cravath's own careers page still lists a starting point of $225,000 as of 19 October 2026, and some firms pay more, such as Susman Godfrey at $240,000.

Have 2026 Big Law year-end bonuses been announced?

No. As of 19 October 2026 no firm has announced a 2026 year-end bonus scale. In 2025 Cravath announced on 19 November, so announcements are likely in November or early December 2026.

What were the 2025 Big Law bonuses?

Cravath's 2025 scale paid year-end bonuses from $15,000 for first-years to $115,000 for the class of 2018, plus special bonuses from $6,000 to $25,000. Totals ranged from $21,000, prorated, to $140,000.

Why is it called the Cravath scale?

Because Cravath, Swaine & Moore historically set associate pay in New York and other elite firms matched it. Milbank has led most raises since 2018, but the name has stuck as shorthand for the market rate.

Do all Big Law offices pay the same?

No. The scale is a New York benchmark. Many firms pay it in major markets such as New York, Washington, DC, Chicago and California, but some pay less in smaller cities or only match base salaries, not special bonuses.

How much does an eighth-year Big Law associate make?

At firms that matched Milbank, $455,000 in base salary from 1 July 2026, up from $435,000. In 2025, the class of 2018 also received $140,000 in year-end and special bonuses.

This article is general information about Big Law associate pay and is not legal, financial or career advice. Salaries and bonuses are set by each firm, can change at any time and vary by office, so confirm figures directly with the firm.

CHAPTER 2

Am Law 100 2026: The Ranking, Revenue, PEP and What Changed

Originally published on legaldesire.com · https://legaldesire.com/am-law-100-2026/

Last updated: 5 November 2026. The 2026 Am Law 100 was published by The American Lawyer on 14 April 2026 and reports fiscal 2025 results. Its full tables sit behind Law.com's paywall, so the figures here are as reported by Above the Law and LawFuel, which match each other. Calculations marked as ours are our own. Merger figures are the firms' own or press estimates.

Short answer: The 2026 Am Law 100 shows Kirkland & Ellis first by revenue at $10.556 billion, the first firm past $10 billion, with Latham & Watkins second at $8.3 billion. Wachtell leads on profits per equity partner at $12.152 million. Combined revenue rose 13% to $178.95 billion, and average profits per equity partner rose 14% to $3.59 million.

Key takeaways

- Kirkland's revenue grew 19.93%. Latham grew 18.57%, and both pulled further ahead of the rest of the list: No. 3 DLA Piper reported $4.583 billion.
- Gibson Dunn passed Skadden to reach No. 4, and Simpson Thacher climbed two places to No. 10 on 22.66% growth.
- Wachtell became the first firm above $12 million in profits per equity partner, up 34.48%, and leads on revenue per lawyer at $5.085 million.
- Next year's list could look different. Hogan Lovells Cadwalader, Ashurst Perkins Coie and Winston Taylor all completed in mid 2026.

What is the Am Law 100 and how is it worked out?

The Am Law 100 is The American Lawyer's annual ranking of US-based law firms by gross revenue. The 2026 edition covers fiscal year 2025, which Above the Law describes as calendar 2025. If you are new to the term, our guide to what Big Law means explains the firms behind the numbers.

The figures are not audited public accounts. In the most recent methodology note we could read, from 2019, ALM said most firms supply their financials voluntarily, and that it estimates for firms that decline. It defines the main measures like this:

- **Gross revenue:** fee income from legal work, leaving out disbursements and nonlegal businesses.
- **Net income:** total compensation to equity partners.
- **Profits per equity partner (PEP):** net income divided by the number of equity partners.
- **Revenue per lawyer (RPL):** gross revenue divided by lawyers, counted as average full-time equivalents.

Who are the top 10 firms in the Am Law 100 by revenue?

These ten rows are as far as we could verify from open sources. The rest of the list is behind the paywall, so we have not reproduced it.

Rank	Firm	Gross revenue (FY2025)	Change
1	Kirkland & Ellis	$10.556 billion	+19.93%
2	Latham & Watkins	$8.300 billion	+18.57%
3	DLA Piper	$4.583 billion	+8.10%
4	Gibson Dunn	$4.211 billion	+18.37%
5	Skadden	$4.073 billion	+11.00%
6	Sidley Austin	$3.738 billion	+8.68%

Rank	Firm	Gross revenue (FY2025)	Change
7	Ropes & Gray	$3.737 billion	+9.39%
8	Baker McKenzie	$3.640 billion	+7.24%
9	White & Case	$3.594 billion	+8.36%
10	Simpson Thacher	$3.553 billion	+22.66%

Two things stand out. First, the top is pulling away. Kirkland and Latham together made about 10.5% of all Am Law 100 revenue, and the top 10 made about 27.9% (our calculation). Second, the middle of the table is tight: Sidley and Ropes & Gray are $1 million apart on rounded figures.

Scale alone does not explain Kirkland. It reported 4,145 lawyers and revenue per lawyer of $2.547 million, up 10.79%, so its growth came from both more lawyers and more revenue from each. Deal watchers can follow its announced work on DealDatabase's Kirkland profile.

Which Am Law 100 firms have the highest profits per equity partner?

Rank	Firm	PEP (FY2025)	Change
1	Wachtell	$12.152 million	+34.48%
2	Kirkland & Ellis	$11.121 million	+20.19%
3	Davis Polk	$9.800 million	+25.60%
4	Quinn Emanuel	$9.545 million	+10.44%
5	Gibson Dunn	$8.890 million	+23.90%
6	Latham & Watkins	$8.654 million	+21.29%
7	Paul Weiss	$8.631 million	+14.45%
8	Simpson Thacher	$8.569 million	+11.81%
9	Paul Hastings	$8.330 million	+24.05%
10	Milbank	$7.620 million	+11.86%

This list rewards a different model. Wachtell has just 272 lawyers, which is why it leads revenue per lawyer at $5.085 million, well ahead of Susman Godfrey at $2.876 million and Davis Polk at $2.588 million. Only Kirkland, Gibson Dunn, Latham and Simpson Thacher appear in the top 10 on both revenue and PEP.

What changed in the 2026 Am Law 100?

Almost everything went up. LawFuel's summary and Above the Law give this picture, set here against the 2025 edition's numbers:

Measure	2025 list (FY2024)	2026 list (FY2025)
Total gross revenue	$158.3 billion	$178.95 billion, up 13.0%
Average PEP	$3.15 million	$3.59 million, up 14.0%
Revenue per lawyer	Not verified	$1.39 million, up 8.7%
Firms above $1 billion revenue	58	62
Total lawyers	Not verified	128,868, up 4%

Other changes worth noting:

- **Breadth.** 94 firms grew revenue, 92 grew revenue per lawyer, and 70 raised PEP by at least 10%. Only two firms reported PEP falling.
- **Profit outran revenue.** Net income rose 16.3%, faster than revenue, LawFuel reported.

- **Rank moves near the top.** Gibson Dunn moved up one place to No. 4, pushing Skadden down to No. 5, and Simpson Thacher rose two places into the top 10.
- **Exceptions.** Fragomen had the steepest revenue fall at 5.5%. Gordon Rees had the weakest RPL result, down 15.79%, and Cravath's RPL was flat at $2.255 million, down 0.04%.
- **Biggest jump.** Littler Mendelson posted 40.89% revenue growth and a 33.73% rise in RPL.

Why such a strong year? We could not read The American Lawyer's own analysis, and we would treat confident explanations with care. LawFuel's preview pointed to a large rise in Wachtell's M&A volume, and the wider pattern is that revenue grew much faster than lawyer numbers, which means each lawyer brought in more.

Why should you read PEP with care?

PEP is a fraction, and firms can change the bottom half. A firm that moves partners from equity to non-equity status raises PEP without earning a dollar more. That is the point the two-tier partnership makes so visible in these tables. In this edition, equity partners across the Am Law 100 grew about 2%, while non-equity partners grew nearly 7%, according to LawFuel.

So high PEP does not mean every partner earns that sum, and it says little about pay at firms with wide gaps between top and bottom. ALM's definition also matters: it treats equity partners as those who receive no more than half their pay on a fixed basis. Compare firms on PEP and RPL together, and check the equity partner count where you can find it.

How will the 2026 mergers change next year's Am Law 100?

Three big combinations completed in the middle of 2026, too late for these fiscal 2025 figures:

Firm	Completed	Size cited
Winston Taylor (Winston & Strawn and Taylor Wessing)	1 June 2026	1,400 lawyers
Ashurst Perkins Coie	28 June 2026	About $2.8 billion revenue, reported
Hogan Lovells Cadwalader	1 July 2026	More than $3.6 billion on 2024 results

Our profile of Hogan Lovells Cadwalader notes that The Global Legal Post reported more than $3.9 billion on 2025 results. That would place it above Sidley's $3.738 billion on this year's table, but the comparison is rough: the firms grow, and the measures may differ. Our piece on Ashurst Perkins Coie explains why its first combined results are not expected until 2028.

We found no statement from The American Lawyer on how it will rank these firms, including whether a part-year combination or a firm with a London base will appear in the next list. Treat any forecast of a place in the 2027 table as a guess. Merger activity itself was not unusually high by count: Fairfax Associates recorded 43 completed in the first half of 2026, two more than a year earlier, and Law360 counted 35 announced, according to Best Law Firms.

What does the Am Law 100 mean for associates and clients?

For associates, the ranking is a rough guide to what a firm can afford, not a pay table. Many large firms pay on or near the Cravath scale, so high PEP does not mean higher first-year salaries. It tells you more about the partner track and the firm's leverage. Our lawyer salary guide shows how pay varies beyond this group.

For clients, a strong year may give firms less reason to compromise on rates, although we have not verified 2025 billing rate data here. Private equity interest in the sector is another thread to watch, and our guide to MSOs and Rule 5.4 explains what US rules allow.

Frequently asked questions

Which firm is number one in the Am Law 100 for 2026?

Kirkland & Ellis, with gross revenue of $10.556 billion for fiscal 2025, up 19.93%. It is the first firm to pass $10 billion. Latham & Watkins is second at $8.3 billion. On profits per equity partner, Wachtell ranks first at $12.152 million.

What fiscal year does the 2026 Am Law 100 cover?

Fiscal year 2025, reported as calendar 2025 by Above the Law. The list was published on 14 April 2026, so the 2026 mergers do not appear in these figures. The next list should appear around April 2027, though we found no announced date.

How much do Am Law 100 partners make?

Average profits per equity partner across the group were $3.59 million in fiscal 2025, up 14%. At the top, Wachtell reported $12.152 million and Kirkland $11.121 million. This is an average for equity partners only. Non-equity partners and many others earn far less, and pay within a firm can vary widely.

How many Am Law 100 firms make more than $1 billion?

62 firms passed $1 billion in revenue in fiscal 2025, up from 58 the year before. The total across the list was $178.95 billion, an increase of 13% on the $158.3 billion reported in the previous edition.

Are Am Law 100 figures reliable?

They are the standard benchmark, but they are not audited accounts. ALM has said most firms provide figures voluntarily, that it estimates for those that decline and that its reporters check the data. It also corrects earlier figures, so percentage changes may not match old published numbers exactly.

What is the difference between the Am Law 100 and the Global 200?

The Am Law 100 ranks US-based firms. The Global 200 ranks firms worldwide, so it includes UK and other non-US firms. For a worldwide view, see our list of the biggest law firms in the world. We have not used Global 200 figures in this article.

This article is general information based on published rankings and press reports as of 5 November 2026. It is not career, investment or legal advice. Figures are as reported by the sources named, and firms' own numbers can differ.

Featured image: Photo: Kidfly182 via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0 (adapted)

CHAPTER 3

Top 10 Biggest Law Firms in the World (2025–2026 Rankings)

Originally published on legaldesire.com · https://legaldesire.com/top-10-biggest-law-firms-in-the-world-2025-2026-rankings/

Quick answer · Updated October 2026

Kirkland & Ellis is the biggest law firm in the world by revenue, followed by Latham & Watkins and DLA Piper, based on the latest Global 200 and Am Law 200 rankings. By headcount, DLA Piper and Dentons rank among the largest because of their global office networks.

The legal industry's biggest names now operate more like global corporations than traditional partnerships, with several firms generating billions of dollars a year from mergers, private equity, litigation, and cross-border finance work. Based on the most recent Global 200 revenue rankings and Am Law 200 data, here's how the world's largest law firms stack up.

A quick note before the list: "biggest" here means highest grossing by annual revenue, not necessarily most prestigious or most profitable per lawyer. Some smaller, elite firms like Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz generate far more profit per partner than firms twice their size, they just don't chase headcount or gross revenue the same way.

1. Kirkland & Ellis

Revenue: Over $10.5 billion

Kirkland & Ellis holds the top spot by a wide margin, having become the first law firm in history to cross both the $4 billion and $10 billion annual revenue marks. Founded in Chicago in 1909, the firm's dominance comes largely from private equity, high-value M&A, restructuring, and complex litigation. It advises many of the largest investment funds and financial sponsors in the world, which has made it the go-to firm for high-stakes dealmaking.

2. Latham & Watkins

Revenue: Approximately $8.3 billion

Latham & Watkins is a decentralized global powerhouse with no single headquarters, though its largest office sits in New York. The firm has broad strength across corporate finance, antitrust, environmental law, and capital markets, and its scale puts it firmly in second place worldwide.

3. DLA Piper

Revenue: Approximately $4.6 billion

Formed through the 2005 merger of DLA and Piper Rudnick Gray Cary, DLA Piper operates in more than 40 countries and is known for its breadth across corporate law, real estate, intellectual property, and litigation. Its client base spans everything from Fortune 500 companies to startups and public institutions.

4. A&O Shearman

Revenue: Approximately $3.7 billion

Created by the 2024 merger of Allen & Overy and Shearman & Sterling, A&O Shearman combines deep London finance market roots with a significantly expanded US corporate practice. The merger was one of the most closely watched combinations in recent legal industry history, reflecting the pressure on elite UK firms to build stronger US footprints.

5. Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom

Revenue: Approximately $4.1 billion

Skadden has long been considered one of Wall Street's most influential law firms, built on a reputation for takeover work and high-profile corporate litigation. Despite a smaller lawyer headcount than several rivals above it, Skadden consistently generates some of the highest revenue per lawyer in the industry.

6. Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher

Revenue: Approximately $4.2 billion

Founded in California, Gibson Dunn now operates across North America, the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. The firm is particularly well regarded in litigation and white-collar defense, and has represented high-profile clients in major contract and corporate disputes.

7. Sidley Austin

Revenue: Approximately $3.7 billion

Founded in 1866, Sidley Austin has grown into a major global player known for corporate and transactional law, securities work, litigation, and regulatory compliance, serving multinational corporations, investment firms, and government entities.

8. Ropes & Gray

Ropes & Gray is notably smaller by headcount than most other firms on this list, but it punches well above its size in revenue, particularly through its strength in private equity, life sciences, asset management, and healthcare. It has also expanded its presence in London and across Europe in recent years.

9. Baker McKenzie

Revenue: Approximately $3.6 billion

Baker McKenzie built its global reputation by expanding internationally earlier than most competitors, and it remains one of the most recognizable legal brands worldwide. The firm is especially strong in tax, employment, trade, and multinational compliance work, with thousands of lawyers spread across multiple continents.

10. White & Case

Revenue: Approximately $3.6 billion

Founded in New York in 1901, White & Case has grown into a major international firm with a strong focus on banking and finance, M&A, international arbitration, and antitrust. Its international arbitration and cross-border finance practices in particular set it apart from more domestically focused competitors.

What These Rankings Actually Measure

It's worth understanding what "biggest" means in these rankings, since it shapes how the list should be read.

Revenue rankings (like the Global 200 and Am Law 200) measure total gross revenue, which favors firms with large lawyer headcounts and high-volume corporate work, even if their profit margins per partner are modest compared to smaller, more selective firms.

Headcount rankings favor firms like Dentons, which operates in more than 80 countries through a decentralized structure and ranks among the largest firms in the world by number of lawyers, without necessarily topping the revenue charts.

Profit per equity partner (PPEP) tells a different story entirely. Firms like Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, far smaller than any firm on this list, consistently rank among the most profitable law firms in the world on a per-partner basis, since they take on fewer, higher-value matters rather than scaling headcount.

None of these measures is more "correct" than the others. Revenue reflects scale and market reach. PPEP reflects selectivity and margin. Headcount reflects global footprint. The right lens depends on what you're actually trying to understand about a

firm.

Why These Firms Keep Growing

A few trends explain why the numbers at the top keep climbing year over year:

- **Private equity and M&A activity** continue to generate enormous fee volume for firms with deep bench strength in dealmaking, which is a major reason Kirkland & Ellis has pulled so far ahead of the pack.
- **Consolidation through mergers**, like the A&O Shearman combination, is reshaping the upper end of the market as firms chase scale and broader geographic coverage, particularly stronger US presence for UK-founded firms.
- **Rising demand for regulatory, antitrust, and cross-border work** has pushed revenue up across firms with strong international arbitration and compliance practices.
- **Technology adoption**, including AI-powered legal research and document review tools, is increasingly viewed as a competitive factor, with a large share of legal professionals expecting it to reshape how firms operate and compete going forward.

Final Thoughts

Size alone doesn't tell you which firm is "best," and the biggest firms by revenue aren't always the most prestigious or the most profitable per partner. But these rankings do capture something real: where the largest, most complex, and highest-value legal work in the world is currently concentrated. Kirkland & Ellis's position at the top, in particular, reflects just how dominant private equity and high-stakes dealmaking have become in shaping the modern legal industry.

Rankings and revenue figures are based on the most recent Global 200 and Am Law 200 data available and are approximate, as firms report on different fiscal calendars and figures are updated annually.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the biggest law firm in the world?

Kirkland and Ellis is the biggest law firm in the world by revenue, generating over $10.5 billion, driven largely by private equity, M&A, and litigation work.

What is the second biggest law firm in the world?

Latham and Watkins ranks second with approximately $8.3 billion in revenue, known for corporate finance and antitrust work.

CHAPTER 4

The Top 20 Richest Lawyers in the World (2026)

Originally published on legaldesire.com · https://legaldesire.com/the-top-20-richest-lawyers-of-the-world/

Quick answer · Updated October 2026

The richest practising lawyer in 2026 is John Morgan, founder of Morgan & Morgan, whom Forbes added to its 2025 Billionaires List with an estimated net worth of at least $1.5 billion. Historic fortunes such as Joe Jamail's (about $1.7 billion) were built the same way: contingency fees from mass-tort and personal-injury cases, not hourly billing.

Last updated: July 2026

The world's wealthiest practicing lawyers have built fortunes ranging from $6 million to $1.7 billion through high-stakes criminal defense, corporate litigation, entertainment law, and mass tort cases. This list ranks 20 attorneys and judges by net worth, excluding individuals who hold law degrees but no longer practice.

Who are the richest lawyers in the world?

Amongst various talented lawyers, here is a comprehensive look at the 20 richest lawyers in the world, ranked from lowest to highest net worth. Please note that the individuals on this list are all practicing attorneys, judges, or were actively practicing at the time their fortunes were built. There are plenty of other professionals with law degrees and considerably higher net worth, but they no longer use their legal training in practice.

Net Worth Comparison Table: Top 20 Richest Lawyers

Rank	Name	Net Worth	Primary Practice Area	Notable Achievement
20	Harish Salve	$6 million	Constitutional, Commercial, Tax	Former Solicitor General of India
19	Jose Baez	$8 million	Criminal Defense	Casey Anthony acquittal
18	Vernon E. Jordan Jr.	$12 million	Corporate, International	Presidential advisor, civil rights leader
17	Lynn Toler	$15 million	Family Law, Civil	Divorce Court TV judge
16	David Boies	$20 million	Corporate Litigation	Chairman, Boies Schiller Flexner
15	Alan Dershowitz	$25 million	Criminal Defense, Appellate	Harvard Law professor, author
14	Mark Geragos	$25 million	Criminal Defense, Civil Litigation	$38 million pharmaceutical verdict
13	Thomas Mesereau	$25 million	Criminal Defense	Michael Jackson acquittal
12	Judge Joe Brown	$30 million	Criminal Court	15-year TV court show
11	Robert Shapiro	$50 million	Criminal, Civil Litigation	O.J. Simpson defense, LegalZoom co-founder
10	John Branca	$50 million	Entertainment, Corporate	Michael Jackson estate co-executor
9	Jane Wanjiru Michuki	$60 million	Corporate	Largest female stockholder, Nairobi Exchange
8	Roy Black	$100 million	Criminal, Civil Defense	William Kennedy Smith acquittal
7	Willie E. Gary	$100 million	Personal Injury, Mass Tort	$30+ billion in settlements won
6	Judy Sheindlin	$150-250 million	Family Court	Judge Judy TV show
5	Bill Neukom	$850 million	Corporate	25 years as Microsoft legal counsel
4	William Lerach	$900 million	Securities Class Action	$7.12 billion Enron recovery
3	Wichai Thongtang	$1.1 billion	Corporate	Chairman, Cable Thai Holding
2	Joe Jamail	$1.7 billion	Personal Injury, Torts	$335 million Pennzoil fee
1	Richard Scruggs	$1.7 billion	Mass Tort, Tobacco Litigation	$1+ billion in tobacco judgments

Detailed Profiles of the World's Wealthiest Lawyers

20. Harish Salve: $6 million

Harish Salve has worked hard to develop a reputation as one of India's top and most expensive lawyers, specializing in commercial, constitutional, and tax law. Salve, who comes from a long line of lawyers and formerly served as the Solicitor General of India, has commanded fees of approximately $45,000 per day for complex matters. In addition to representing several government entities, large corporate clients, and industrialist Mukesh Ambani, he has represented Bollywood celebrities in criminal cases. He is frequently referred to as famed actor Salman Khan's "guardian angel" for keeping him out of jail on a hit and run charge. Indian prisons are notorious for harsh conditions, making Salve's legal victories particularly valued by high-profile clients.

19. Jose Baez: $8 million

Probably best known for defending Casey Anthony in 2011, Jose Baez is definitely an American success story. After dropping out of high school, he joined the Navy, earned his GED, and eventually obtained a law degree from St. Thomas University School of Law. He has been involved in a number of high-profile cases that resulted in acquittals, including the murder case of Nilton Diaz, which has been referred to as "the biggest legal upset since O.J." Among others, he represented former NFL star Aaron Hernandez. He is considered by many to be one of the most sought-after criminal defense attorneys in the United States. He is also the author of the best-selling book, Presumed Guilty: Casey Anthony: The Inside Story.

18. Vernon E. Jordan Jr.: $12 million

Born in 1935, Jordan enjoyed a long law career that began after his graduation from Howard University. In addition, he held more than 70 honorary degrees from various colleges and universities. He served as senior counsel, focusing on general counsel, business, and international law, at Akin, Gump, Strauss, Hauer, and Feld LLP. His early career focused primarily on civil rights, while he later served as an advisor to President Clinton. Most of his fortune was earned by representing huge corporations, such as Xerox and American Express, as well as spending time as a Wall Street banker. [VERIFY: Jordan passed away in 2021; net worth reflects career earnings]

17. Lynn Toler: $15 million

Better known as the judge from TV's Divorce Court from 2007 to 2020, Lynn Toler formerly served as the only municipal court judge in Cleveland Heights, Ohio for more than eight years. After receiving her law degree from the University of Pennsylvania Law School in 1984, she focused on civil law until becoming a municipal court judge. In this role, she was known for enforcing nontraditional sentences, such as writing essays. In addition to presiding over Divorce Court, Lynn is the author of multiple books on relationships and personal development.

16. David Boies: $20 million

Currently serving as the chairman of Boies, Schiller and Flexner, David Boies previously served as Chief Counsel for the US Senate. He graduated from Yale Law School in 1966 and almost immediately made a name for himself. He amassed his fortune by representing a number of large corporations, including IBM, Napster, George Steinbrenner (owner of the New York Yankees), CBS, and the NBA Players Association during the 2011 NBA lockout. According to Fortune magazine, he has been called "corporate America's number one hired gun." Boies has remained active in major litigation through 2026, continuing to take on complex commercial disputes and antitrust matters.

15. Alan Dershowitz: $25 million

After graduating from Harvard Law School in 1962, Alan Dershowitz went right to work. By 1964, he had become a member of the Harvard Law School faculty and in 1967, he was made a full professor. He retired from teaching in 2013. While teaching classes, he was also making a name for himself in the criminal law field. Thanks to his reputation as the "top lawyer of last resort," he has represented a bevy of high-profile clients, including Mike Tyson, Jim Bakker, Leona Helmsley, O.J. Simpson, and Jeffrey Epstein. In addition, he has written more than a dozen books. His legal practice, teaching career, and prolific writing together helped him amass his fortune.

14. Mark Geragos: $25 million

A 1992 graduate of Loyola Law School, Mark Geragos is a criminal defense attorney who has also been involved in a number of landmark civil litigation class action cases. He has represented everyone from Chris Brown, Michael Jackson, and Winona Ryder to Scott Peterson and Susan McDougal. Named "One of the 100 Most Influential Attorneys in California," he also holds a record for one of the top 10 verdicts in California history for a 2008 case in which he obtained a jury verdict awarding more than $38 million against a pharmaceutical company. He serves as a managing partner at Geragos and Geragos and continues to handle high-profile criminal and civil matters.

13. Thomas Mesereau: $25 million

Also a criminal defense attorney, Thomas Mesereau graduated from Harvard University and the University of California's Hastings College of Law. He was named "Trial Lawyer of the Year for 2015" by the National Trial Lawyers and has won plenty of other awards including "Criminal Defense Lawyer of the Year." He is known for taking high-stakes cases with impossible odds and getting extraordinary results. He was Michael Jackson's attorney when he was acquitted of 14 child molestation charges and has won an unprecedented three federal criminal jury trials in a row. While his hourly rate is so high that it is not publicly disclosed, he also does pro bono work through the Mesereau Free Legal Clinic, demonstrating his commitment to access to justice.

12. Judge Joe Brown: $30 million

Best known for his daytime court show that ran for 15 years, Judge Joe Brown received his law degree from UCLA. After serving as the first African-American prosecutor in Memphis, Tennessee, he opened his own practice before serving as a criminal court judge in Shelby County, Tennessee. While presiding over James Earl Ray's appeal for the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., he caught the attention of TV producers. Most of his wealth was gained through the show. In 2014, he ran for district attorney general in Shelby County, but lost to the incumbent.

11. Robert Shapiro: $50 million

Currently a senior partner at Glaser Weil Fink Jacobs Howard Avchen and Shapiro LLP, Robert Shapiro graduated from Loyola Law School in 1968 and began a career as a criminal attorney. After serving on O.J. Simpson's legal team and representing several other celebrities, he opted to move into civil litigation. In addition to his law career, he has written a children's book and is a co-founder of LegalZoom and ShoeDazzle.com. His entrepreneurial ventures in legal technology have significantly contributed to his overall net worth beyond his law practice.

10. John Branca: $50 million

A graduate of the UCLA School of Law, John Branca has had a lengthy career as an entertainment and corporate lawyer with a focus on representing rock and roll acts and independent investors. He has represented more than 30 members of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and appears on nearly every list of premier entertainment lawyers in the world. On a significant note, he serves as the co-executor of Michael Jackson's estate, a role that has involved managing one of the most valuable estates in entertainment history and negotiating major deals including catalog sales and tribute projects.

9. Jane Wanjiru Michuki: $60 million

Educated at the Kenya School of Law and Warwick University, Jane Wanjiru Michuki is a managing partner at Kimani and Michuki Advocates, a corporate law firm in Nairobi, Kenya that represents several of the largest corporations in Kenya, such as Equity Group Holdings Limited. In addition to her law career, she is the largest female stockholder on the Nairobi Stock Exchange, which is where a significant portion of her net worth originates. Her success represents the growing wealth and influence of African legal professionals in corporate law.

8. Roy Black: $100 million

A civil and criminal defense attorney and graduate of the University of Miami, Roy Black is the senior partner at Black, Srebnick, Kornspan, and Stumpf. For more than 40 years, he has represented high-profile clients, such as William Kennedy Smith (acquitted on rape charges), Albertsons Inc., and race car driver Helio Castroneves. Known by most in the industry for having "the best national reputation in Florida," he has also acted as a legal analyst on shows including "The Today Show" and "Good Morning America" and teaches advanced criminal evidence at the University of Miami School of Law.

7. Willie E. Gary: $100 million

Nicknamed “The Giant Killer,” Willie Gary has taken on several of the nation’s biggest corporations, including Anheuser-Busch and Disney. He has won some of the largest settlements and jury awards in the United States, including several cases valued at more than $30 billion. A graduate of Shaw University, he served as managing partner at Gary, Williams, Parenti, Watson, and Gary PLLC, works as a motivational speaker, and has appeared as a legal analyst on “The Early Show.” His courtroom success in personal injury and mass tort litigation has made him a legend in the plaintiff’s bar.

6. Judy Sheindlin: $150 million to $250 million

Best known for being a no-nonsense TV judge, Judge Judy has earned approximately $47 million per year at the peak of her show’s run. A 1965 graduate of New York Law School, Judge Sheindlin was originally a corporate attorney, though she quickly grew tired of it and chose to become a family court prosecutor. In 1982, she was appointed as a criminal court judge, where she earned a reputation as a “tough” judge and presided over more than 20,000 cases. This reputation, along with several books she wrote, caught the eye of TV executives and eventually led to her massively successful TV show. In addition, she is the author of seven books and has served as a legal analyst on various TV shows. Her program Judge Judy ran from 1996 to 2021, and she launched a new show, Judy Justice, which continues her television career.

5. Bill Neukom: $850 million

Bill Neukom served as the founder and CEO of the World Justice Project, which is dedicated to promoting the rule of law all over the world. Neukom is a corporate attorney who is well-known for his philanthropy. After graduating from Stanford Law School in 1967, he worked at a small firm until he was asked to do work for Microsoft, which was still in its beginning stages. Eventually, he became Microsoft’s legal counsel, a position he held for 25 years during the company’s explosive growth period. His stock options and compensation from Microsoft form the foundation of his wealth. Previously, he was an investor and managing general partner of the San Francisco Giants.

4. William Lerach: $900 million

Although he was disbarred in 2009 for his involvement in a kickback scheme, William Lerach had a lucrative career as a corporate lawyer with a specialty in private securities class action lawsuits for more than 30 years, which is how he amassed his considerable fortune. Nicknamed the “King of Pain” and often referred to as the most feared lawyer in America during his heyday, Lerach, a University of Pittsburgh School of Law graduate, holds the record for the largest sum ever recovered in a group of securities class action lawsuits for the $7.12 billion judgment he received against Enron. Despite his legal troubles and imprisonment, he retained the vast majority of his wealth.

3. Wichai Thongtang: $1.1 billion

Considered by many in the industry to be “one of the top names in the profession from around the globe,” Wichai Thongtang is a powerful lawyer in Thailand. After graduating from Thammasat University in 1970, he went into corporate law, where he represented a number of top Thai executives and corporations and took the opportunity to learn about the stock market and investing. In addition to his law career, Thongtang is the Chairman of Cable Thai Holding PLC and owns 15 percent of Dusit Medical, a Bangkok healthcare firm. His diversified business interests and strategic investments have propelled his net worth well beyond what legal fees alone could generate.

2. Joe Jamail: $1.7 billion

Although he passed away at the age of 90 in December 2015, Joe Jamail makes this list because he was the wealthiest practicing lawyer in the United States at the time of his death. Often referred to as the “King of Torts,” he represented Pennzoil in a 1985 lawsuit against rival Texaco. His contingency fee was $335 million after the courts decided in Pennzoil’s favor. The 1953 graduate of the University of Texas School of Law was a former Marine who had a longstanding reputation in the courtroom for being abrasive, rude, and vulgar. However, outside of the courtroom, he was known for his generous philanthropy, including major donations to the University of Texas and other charitable causes.

1. Richard Scruggs: $1.7 billion

A 1976 graduate of the University of Mississippi School of Law and a prominent trial lawyer, Richard Scruggs is best known for his focus on tobacco and asbestos cases and the fact he won more than $1 billion in judgments against various

companies. He was also highly involved in the 2000s Ritalin class action lawsuits, as well as a 2003 case against Lehman Brothers for which he won a $51 million verdict. However, in 2007, he was accused of judicial bribery. In 2008, he pleaded guilty and eventually served six years in federal prison. He completed his sentence and has retained his massive fortune, though he remains disbarred from practicing law.

What practice areas generate the most wealth for lawyers?

While many of these top-earning lawyers built their fortunes through corporate law, criminal defense, and high-stakes litigation, others have also made significant wealth representing clients in cases involving personal injuries and complex liability claims. The most lucrative areas include mass tort litigation (tobacco, asbestos, pharmaceuticals), securities class actions, entertainment law, corporate transactions, and high-profile criminal defense. Contingency fee arrangements in major civil cases have produced some of the largest individual paydays, while long-term corporate counsel positions with stock options (such as Bill Neukom at Microsoft) have generated enormous wealth through equity appreciation.

Geographic location also plays a role in wealth accumulation. While the majority of the wealthiest lawyers practice in the United States, attorneys in emerging markets such as Thailand and Kenya have built substantial fortunes by combining legal practice with strategic business investments and stock market participation. Media presence through television shows, books, and legal analyst roles has also proven to be a significant wealth multiplier for several attorneys on this list.

How do the richest lawyers compare to other high-earning professionals?

The net worth range of the world's richest practicing lawyers ($6 million to $1.7 billion) places them among other elite professionals, though typically below the wealth levels of top investment bankers, tech entrepreneurs, and corporate CEOs. However, the lawyers at the top of this list have achieved billionaire status, a distinction reached by relatively few professionals in any field through earned income alone rather than business ownership or inheritance.

The wealth disparity within the legal profession itself is notable. While these 20 individuals represent the peak of legal earnings, the typical lawyer earns substantially less. The path to extraordinary wealth in law generally requires one or more of the following: representing major corporations or ultra-high-net-worth individuals, winning massive contingency fee cases, building a prestigious law firm, or leveraging legal expertise into business ventures and investments.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is the richest lawyer in the world?

Richard Scruggs and Joe Jamail are tied as the richest lawyers with net worths of $1.7 billion each. Scruggs built his fortune through tobacco and asbestos litigation, while Jamail earned his wealth primarily through personal injury and tort cases, most notably his $335 million fee from the Pennzoil v. Texaco case.

How much does Harish Salve charge per day?

Harish Salve, one of India's most prominent lawyers, has charged approximately $45,000 per day for complex commercial, constitutional, and tax matters. His high fees reflect his status as a former Solicitor General of India and his expertise in handling sensitive cases for government entities, major corporations, and high-profile individuals.

What is Jose Baez's net worth?

Jose Baez has an estimated net worth of $8 million. He built his reputation and wealth through high-profile criminal defense cases, most notably the successful defense of Casey Anthony in 2011. His success is particularly remarkable given that he dropped out of high school before eventually earning his law degree from St. Thomas University School of Law.

Do criminal defense lawyers or corporate lawyers make more money?

Both practice areas appear among the wealthiest lawyers, but the paths differ. Corporate lawyers often build wealth through steady high-income positions, stock options, and long-term client relationships (such as Bill Neukom's $850 million from Microsoft). Criminal defense attorneys can earn substantial fees from high-profile clients but generally need celebrity clientele

or media presence to reach the highest wealth levels. Mass tort and class action lawyers have achieved the highest individual net worths through contingency fees on billion-dollar cases.

How do lawyers become billionaires?

Lawyers typically become billionaires through contingency fees in massive class action or tort cases (Scruggs, Jamail), long-term equity compensation from major corporations (Neukom at Microsoft), or combining legal practice with strategic business investments (Thongtang in Thailand). Pure hourly billing, even at premium rates, rarely generates billionaire-level wealth. The billionaire lawyers on this list all leveraged their legal expertise into extraordinary one-time paydays or equity positions rather than relying solely on traditional legal fees.

Why John Morgan now tops any list of rich lawyers

John Morgan founded his Orlando firm in 1988 and renamed it Morgan & Morgan in 2005 after buying out his partners. It is now the largest personal injury firm in the US, with more than 1,000 lawyers and over 100 offices. WFTV, reporting Forbes' figures, said the firm generated over $2 billion in revenue in 2023 and spends around $350 million a year on advertising. Forbes put Morgan's own net worth at an estimated $1.5 billion or more when it named him a self-made billionaire in 2025. He also holds real estate, the WonderWorks museums and a stake in Margaritaville.

Two notes on the ranking below: Joe Jamail (died 2015) and Vernon Jordan (died 2021) are listed with their estimated wealth at death, and every figure except Morgan's is a media estimate rather than a disclosed number.

Want the full story behind some of the names? Read our profiles of Jose Baez, Thomas Mesereau, John Morgan, Brian Steel, Kevin Reddington and Harish Salve.

CHAPTER 5

Who did the deals in 2026

DealDatabase reads every law firm deal announcement Legal Desire publishes and records the firms, lawyers, clients and values. The table counts the deals each firm announced between January and early November 2026.

Rank	Firm	Deals announced in 2026
1	Latham & Watkins	824
2	Clifford Chance	295
3	Linklaters	230
4	Sidley	194
5	Hogan Lovells Cadwalader	169
6	DLA Piper	137
7	Baker McKenzie	134
8	Dentons	131
9	Herbert Smith Freehills Kramer	129
10	Mayer Brown	49

READ THIS WITH CARE

This counts published announcements, not market share. Firms that issue more press releases appear more often, and some leading firms announce few of their deals. Use it to see who is visibly active, not to rank firms by size of practice.

See each firm's full 2026 deal list, the lawyers on every team and alerts for new deals at dealdatabase.co.

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