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Partner Promotions Down a Third at Top 50 U.K. Law Firms

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New partner promotions across the U.K.'s top 50 law firms plunged by a third between 2008 and 2009, with the downturn impacting lawyers' opportunities to advance into the partnership.

Taking into account promotions at firms such as [Clifford Chance](#) and [Simmons & Simmons](#), which pushed their decisions back until the summer, there were 399 promotions across the U.K.'s 50 biggest firms by revenue in 2009. This compared with 598 in 2008.

As a group, promotion opportunities at the Magic Circle firms dropped markedly -- falling 41 percent, from 120 to 71. In contrast, the City of London-based 100 million pound firms -- which comprises those outside of the Magic Circle with revenues of more than 100 million pounds (\$163 million) -- experienced a 28.8 percent dip.

Several of these firms bucked the trend, with [Lovells](#), [CMS Cameron McKenna](#) and [Berwin Leighton Paisner](#) among seven firms promoting more partners in 2009 than in 2008. [Eversheds](#), [Clyde & Co](#), [Beachcroft](#) and [Trowers & Hamblins](#) also promoted more partners in 2009.

Lovells senior partner John Young said: "The primary force behind the overall drop is clearly the economic perspective, but over the years it has become harder to make partner generally. You have to be careful though, not to make snap judgments and wipe out a generation of new partners because of financial conditions. What you are doing must be defensible and explicable so as not to discourage your people."

Nicky Paradise, managing partner at [Nabarro](#), commented: "As with most firms our process is dependent on a business case and I suspect that this year the business case was not there for some candidates. Having said that, one should be careful not to just look at the immediate financial economics but also at the medium- and long-term strategic position."

Despite the steep drop in overall promotions, the proportion of new partners in London has remained roughly static -- with 35 percent of all new promotions coming in the City in 2009, compared to 36.9 percent in 2008.



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A similar picture emerges when it comes to female partner promotions. Across the top 50 there were 95 women promoted to partner in 2009, compared with 149 in 2008. In both years this equates to around a quarter of the partnership round, despite many firms stating that keeping and promoting female lawyers remain key goals.

Commenting on the overall trends, Tim Jones, London head of [Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer](#), said: "I suspect that most firms are coming to the realization that the 20 years of growth in the U.K. legal market has come to an end and do not think anyone expects their bit of the legal market to get much bigger."

[Withers](#) is yet to announce its partner promotions, which will be effective as of Oct. 1.

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