Consulting Partner Mobility in a Disruptive Market

Russell Reynolds Associates

Partner mobility at the top of consulting has shifted

Lateral moves are fewer, exits are sharper, and the strongest pull now comes from industry and private equity. At the same time, technology and AI are changing the definition of excellence. Partners are now expected to create new revenue streams through innovation, demonstrate emotional intelligence to drive transformation, and translate technology investment into measurable client impact.

Given the rise of moves driven by discrete firm events and the accelerating influence of technology on performance, Russell Reynolds Associates set out to understand what drives senior consulting partners to leave their organizations and what attracts them to new ones.

To separate anecdotes from patterns, we drew on dozens of conversations with senior leaders across strategy houses, the Big Four, and tech services firms globally. Despite differences in market and model, similar pressure points surfaced across conversations.

Why partners look beyond their firm

Unsurprisingly, senior partner movements are deliberate, typically occurring at a point of friction or inflection. These include:

01 Event-driven triggers

A missed promotion or bonus, an internal reorganization, or an unfavorable succession outcome top the list of most common reasons why a partner would look beyond their firm. Several leaders described deciding to leave within weeks of a clear trigger, like a missed practice-lead succession or a bonus dispute.

02 Ownership and operating model constraints

Partners move when they can't own and scale a business. Partners cited a limited sense of autonomy, sales-model fatigue, and delayed progression as key reasons they look elsewhere. Rigid practice boundaries and layers of approval mean partners may feel like they are not truly owners of the business. Separately, constant utilization pressure can crowd out the importance of client impact. For those who succeed in this model, the time-served promotion and equity accrual can feel delayed.

Audit restrictions add another layer of limitation. In multidisciplinary firms, independent rules often prevent partners from pursuing work with key client accounts. For growth-oriented leaders, this constraint can be frustrating and can create a ceiling on commercial opportunity.

03 Culture, collaboration, and governance fit

Partners stay when teams genuinely work together and decision-making processes are clear. Conversely, they look elsewhere when the firm operates in silos or rewards individual rainmakers in an outsized manner, especially if the firm emphasizes team above self.

04 Lifestyle demands

Travel, intensity of work, and caregiving needs increasingly shape partner decisions, especially for those seeking models with less travel and more control over their time. Needing increased flexibility or even relocation often becomes a common tipping point towards looking elsewhere.

05 Reputation dynamics

Reputation still matters. A similar role at a lower-prestige firm rarely appeals without a clear elevation of scope or a distinctive compensation package; even improved work-life balance fails to outweigh the important of prestige in the eyes of a candidate. Reputation shocks also trigger quiet reassessment, weakening attachment even when partners ultimately stay.

06 Role evolution with AI

The partner role is shifting as firms test for AI readiness and refresh performance systems to emphasize teaming and impact. Leaders who don't see a path to adopt and convert AI into client value begin to explore alternatives. These factors often put partners in motion and open to outreach from external firms and investors.

07 Career inflection points

Inflection points for partners tend to cluster at three stages of their career. After the initial years post-promotion, the experience may sour if the expected advancements in title, equity, and the platform for growth—the clients, brand, and resources to expand their impact—don't materialize. Around 10 years into partnership, if progression slows and partners view firm strategy with a more critical eye. Later in their career—typically within three to five years of retirement thresholds--lifestyle priorities and eligibility rules may become a dominant factor. In this case, some may seek roles that extend their runway or ones that support a more flexible lifestyle with reduced travel.

These windows don't create movement on their own, but amplify the impact of triggers. They also offer insight into when senior partners are most receptive to new opportunities and what signals capture their attention.

Engaging senior partners requires substance and credibility

While the consulting leadership landscape is difficult, it's not impossible to attract top talent. Here's what these leaders said would compel them towards new opportunities:

01 Determine the candidate's mission and demonstrate firm alignment

For established partners, a move involves re-anchoring a client base, a network, and years of earned credibility. These leaders are thoughtful about legacy building and the kind of impact they want to make next, whether that's shaping a new practice, leading a market transformation, or building ownership in a growing platform.

Our latest Global Leadership Monitor find that 40% of professional and business services leaders cite a strong connection to their organization's mission and purpose as a key reason for staying in seat. This underscores that mission alignment is not a soft factor for consulting leadership, but a critical one for attracting top talent. Outreach resonates most when it shows a genuine understanding of what a partner has built and a credible rationale for how the role extends their influence and aligns with their mission.

02 Share the vision for the firm's future state and the role they will play in actualizing it

As consulting faces reputational scrutiny and technological disruption, senior partners look for transparency on direction and conviction. They want to understand the firm's growth agenda, who its key backer are, and what would be considered a successful start to this new chapter. They are drawn to organizations where their leadership is central to strengthening trust, advancing innovation, and defining what comes next.

03 Clarify the 'reinvention' opportunity for the candidate

For many senior partners, the most compelling opportunities create space for reinvention. They want to apply their experience to new contexts, lead meaningful transformation, or extend their reach across geographies, clients, or capabilities. What draws their attention is not a lateral move but the chance to shape something distinct within the firm's platform.

Clarity and coherence throughout the recruitment process is critical. Candidates want to understand what they would own, what success looks like in the first year, and how the firm will enable that success through investment, teaming, and client access. A consistent narrative across interviewers and a thoughtfully managed process convey alignment and professionalism.

04 Consider multi-year guarantees for top leaders, senior partners, or heavy hitters

Top partners understand that revenue traction takes time. Multi-year guarantees help bridge the ramp-up period, ensuring leaders have the confidence and stability to focus on integration, client development, and long-term value creation. Firms that demonstrate this level of conviction have a better shot at attracting and retaining the partners others can't reach.

05 Prioritize meaningful, in-person connection

Even in a hybrid world, personal engagement remains the clearest indicator of culture. Meeting future peers and leaders allows candidates to test chemistry, envision their place within the partnership, and begin building trust before day one.

The same principle applies after the offer is signed. Two common pitfalls stand out in the integration process. Entrepreneurial cultures can unintentionally leave new partners to navigate the early months alone, and the onboarding is too often treated as a digital experience. Effective integration brings together structured touchpoints and personal connection, from shadowing opportunities and client introductions to curated development plans and clear milestones that build confidence and momentum.

Firms that combine purpose alignment, clear vision, credible investment, and human connection send a powerful signal of partnership intent. In a market defined by disruption and choice, these qualities distinguish firms that convert opportunity into sustained business advantage.

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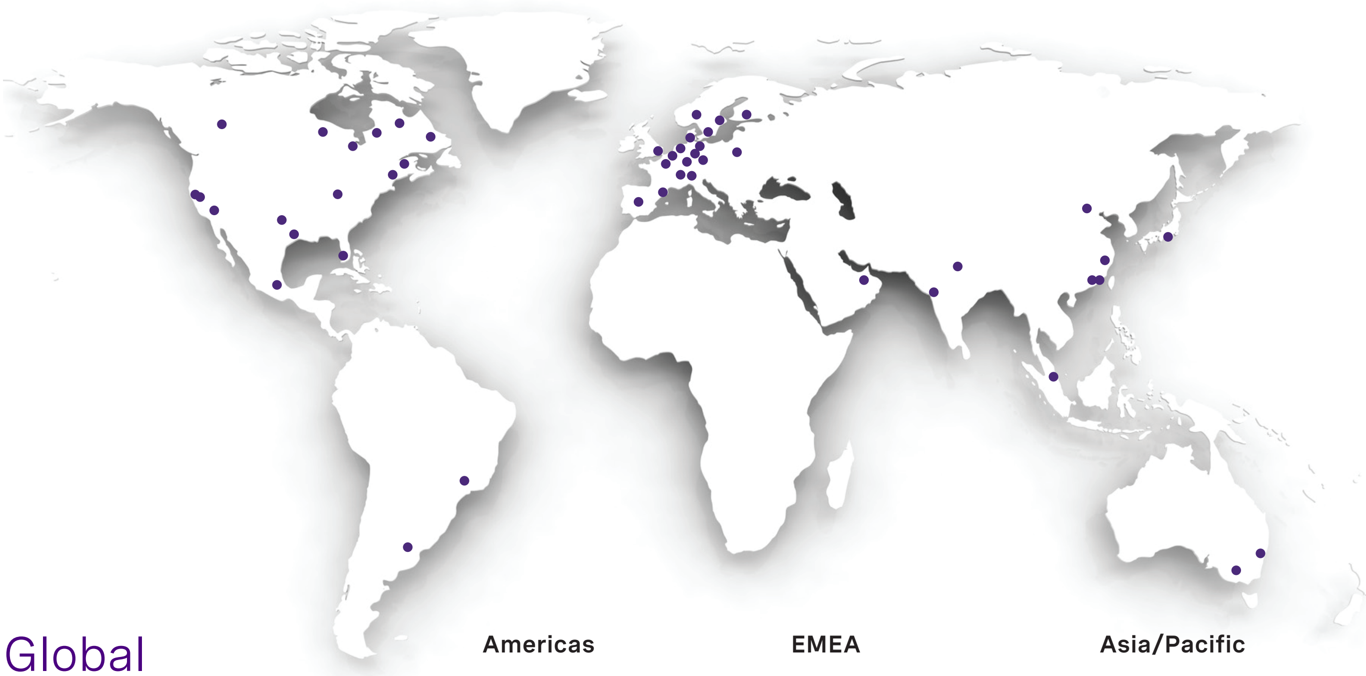

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