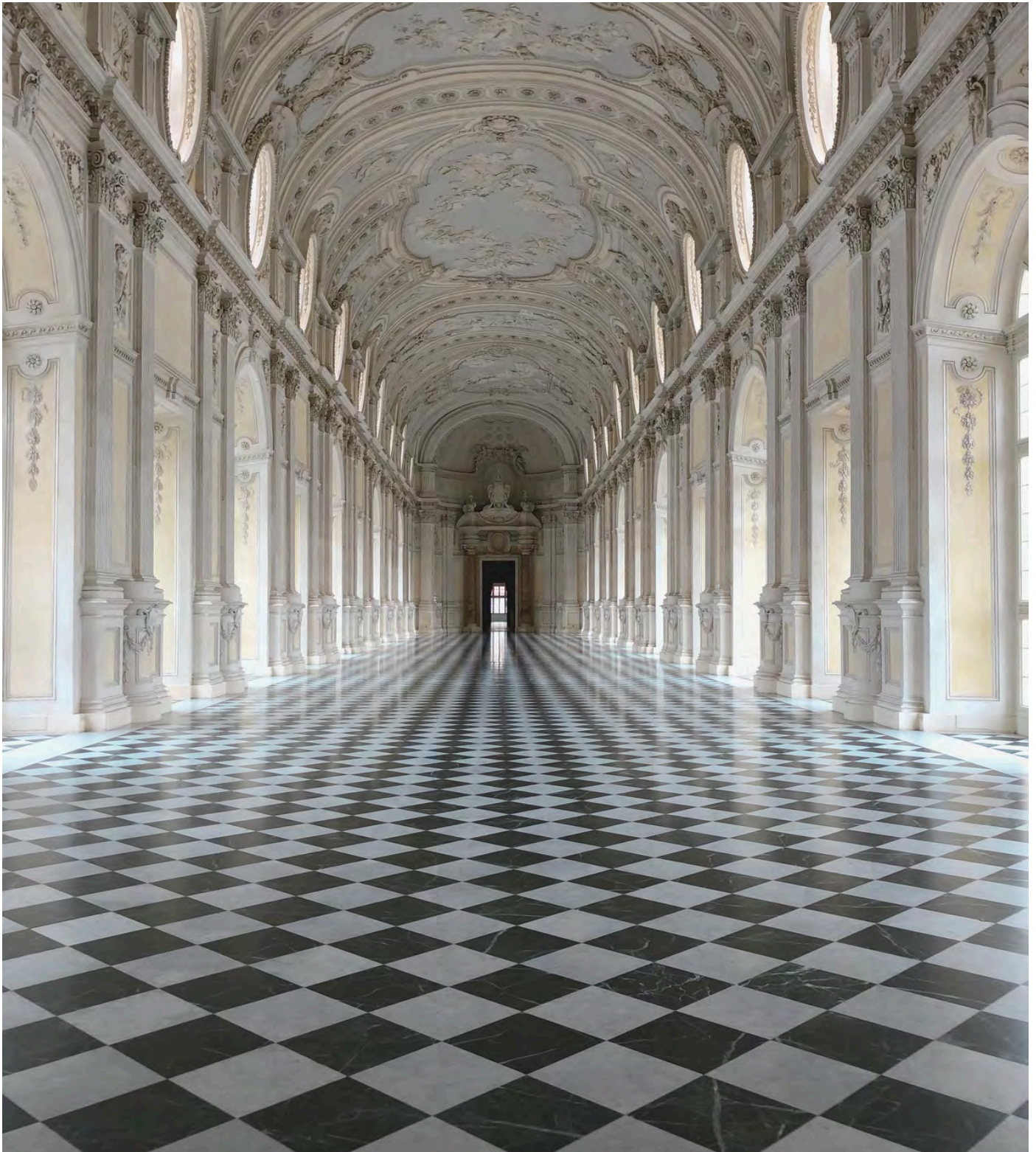




Keane M^cDonald
executive legal recruitment

LEGAL SALARY GUIDE

AUSTRALIA 2026



SALARY GUIDE

PRIVATE PRACTICE



SYDNEY

LEVEL	TOP TIER	BOUTIQUE / MID-TIER
1 Year	\$120,000-135,000	\$100,000-120,000
2 Years	\$130,000-160,000	\$120,000-140,000
3 Years	\$150,000-180,000	\$130,000-150,000
4 Years	\$165,000-190,000	\$140,000-160,000
5 Years +	\$175,000-200,000	\$155,000-175,000
SA 1 - 2	\$185,000-250,000	\$165,000-210,000
SA 3 - 4	\$230,000-300,000	\$200,000-255,000
Special Counsel	\$300,000-350,000	\$250,000-290,000

MELBOURNE

LEVEL	TOP TIER	BOUTIQUE / MID-TIER
1 Year	\$110,000-130,000	\$95,000-120,000
2 Years	\$130,000-150,000	\$110,000-135,000
3 Years	\$145,000-180,000	\$125,000-150,000
4 Years	\$160,000-190,000	\$145,000-160,000
5 Years +	\$170,000-195,000	\$150,000-180,000
SA 1 - 2	\$180,000-250,000	\$160,000-200,000
SA 3 - 4	\$210,000-290,000	\$190,000-240,000
Special Counsel	\$280,000-350,000	\$240,000-260,000

BRISBANE

LEVEL	TOP TIER	BOUTIQUE / MID-TIER
1 Year	\$100,000-115,000	\$90,000-110,000
2 Years	\$115,000-135,000	\$105,000-125,000
3 Years	\$130,000-145,000	\$120,000-135,000
4 Years	\$135,000-155,000	\$130,000-145,000
5 Years +	\$150,000-165,000	\$140,000-160,000
SA 1 - 2	\$165,000-205,000	\$145,000-185,000
SA 3 - 4	\$195,000-280,000	\$175,000-230,000
Special Counsel	\$250,000-320,000	\$200,000-280,000



SALARY GUIDE

PRIVATE PRACTICE

PERTH

LEVEL	TOP TIER	BOUTIQUE /MID-TIER
1 Year	\$110,000-130,000	\$95,000-120,000
2 Years	\$125,000-160,000	\$105,000-130,000
3 Years	\$140,000-170,000	\$125,000-150,000
4 Years	\$155,000-185,000	\$145,000-160,000
5 Years +	\$170,000-195,000	\$150,000-170,000
SA 1 - 2	\$185,000-260,000	\$160,000-190,000
SA 3 - 4	\$230,000-280,000	\$195,000-230,000
Special Counsel	\$250,000-350,000	\$225,000-255,000

IN-HOUSE

LEVEL	SYDNEY	MELBOURNE
Legal Counsel (1-3 years)	\$95,000 - 155,000	\$85,000 - 150,000
Legal Counsel (3-5 years)	\$130,000 - 210,000	\$120,000 - 195,000
Senior Legal Counsel (6+ years)	\$180,000 - 275,000	\$170,000 - 250,000
General Counsel	\$290,000 - 500,000	\$280,000 - 470,000

LEVEL	BRISBANE	PERTH
Legal Counsel (1-3 years)	\$80,000 - 150,000	\$80,000 - 150,000
Legal Counsel (3-5 years)	\$115,000 - 190,000	\$110,000 - 180,000
Senior Legal Counsel (6+ years)	\$160,000 - 230,000	\$160,000 - 230,000
General Counsel	\$260,000 - 420,000	\$260,000 - 400,000

MARKET REVIEW

Growth Is Real But Uneven

Legal salary growth of around 4% is outpacing the national average and mid-market M&A deal values rose 14% to AU\$20.9 billion in 2025. The headline figures mask a more complicated picture though; independent market commentary increasingly describes a "K-shaped" recovery where certain firms and practice areas are seeing strong demand and premium pricing, while others are navigating margin pressure, fee competition, and deliberate headcount restraint. Legal job advertisements were down 5.3% year-on-year as of late 2025. The recovery is concentrated, not broad-based. The market is growing in 2026, but not evenly. Your practice area matters far more than the headline numbers. If you're 3–8 PQE in banking and finance, construction, litigation, M&A, AML/CTF, or data privacy, structural demand is working in your favour and offers are moving fast.

AML/CTF Reform Is the Most Under-appreciated Growth Driver

The Tranche 2 reforms taking effect 1 July 2026 is estimated to pull between 80,000 and 100,000 businesses into the AUSTRAC framework for the first time. As the deadline cannot be moved, it is creating non-discretionary, time-pressured demand for legal and compliance expertise right now. The firms that positioned early are already seeing the pipeline. The work doesn't stop in July since mandatory audits, enforcement defence, and ongoing reporting advisory create a long revenue tail beyond the deadline.

AI Is Reshaping the Entry-Level Pipeline

MinterEllison cut its graduate intake by nearly a third (from 104 to 72) explicitly attributing the decision to AI. In contrast, HSF Kramer, Norton Rose Fulbright, Allens, and King & Wood Mallesons also reduced cohorts, citing market corrections rather than AI. The graduate pipeline is contracting and the profession's traditional entry point is narrowing. At the senior end, AI governance is emerging as a billable practice area and AI fluency is increasingly filtering into hiring criteria at mid-to-senior level.

The Regional Opportunity the Market Is Underestimating

Brisbane and Perth are outpacing Sydney and Melbourne on relative demand growth and face more acute talent shortages. Brisbane's pipeline is tied to pre-Olympic infrastructure investment and a distinctive agricultural and family office client base. Perth's is driven by mining, critical minerals, and energy – with major in-house teams unbundling their legal spend between global firms for major transactions and local boutiques for day-to-day work, fuelling growth at both ends of the market. Both cities are underweighted in most hiring conversations.

The Firm Landscape Is Stratifying

Global elite firms are being priced out of government panels and domestic advisory work, with national challengers capturing that share. Thomson Reuters data confirms large firms outside the traditional Big 8 recorded demand growth of 5.4% against just 1% for top-tier firms. Boutique firms are growing strongly across all four cities. For candidates, firm type is now a genuine strategic decision since it determines client access, progression timelines, billing structure, and international mobility.

Disclaimer: Figures are based on current market rates for salaries in Australia. There can be several reasons for large discrepancies between salaries, ranging from areas of specialism to size of firm and market demand.

Process Speed Is a Competitive Differentiator, But Only in Part of the Market

For mid-level candidates in high-demand areas, the market moves fast - from two days to under four weeks from first interview to offer, with sign-on bonuses now featuring in around 70% of associate offers. For the broader market, the average process runs five weeks, with firms replacing attrition rather than expanding. Underlying both is the "Big Stay" - Gartner data shows the Australian job market confidence at a three-year low, with fewer than one in five employees actively seeking a move. When strong candidates do come to market, the window is short. For firms, process design is as important as compensation.

Summary

The legal market in 2026 is growing, but not evenly; your practice area matters far more than the headline numbers. If you're 3-8 PQE in banking and finance, construction, litigation, M&A, AML/CTF, or data privacy, structural demand is working in your favour and offers are moving fast. AI is narrowing the graduate pipeline, which is tightening mid-level supply further. The old firm hierarchy is loosening, i.e. the choice between global, national, and boutique is now a genuine career decision worth making deliberately. Brisbane and Perth are growing faster than the southern capitals with real talent shortages, and are worth serious consideration if you're open to relocation. The one consistent theme across all of this: lawyers who move when the market favours them, rather than waiting for the perfect moment, consistently secure better outcomes.

Disclaimer: Figures are based on current market rates for salaries in Australia. There can be several reasons for large discrepancies between salaries, ranging from areas of specialism to size for firm and market demand.

ABOUT US



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This guide was prepared by the directors of Keane McDonald, an international legal recruitment firm placing lawyers across private practice and in-house roles in Australia, Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

Founded by Yvonne Kelly, 21 years ago, Keane McDonald brings decades of legal recruitment expertise and deep global market knowledge to the Australian legal landscape, giving us a ground-level view of where demand is moving and what candidates are actually being offered.

For a confidential salary discussion, contact Yvonne directly.

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