

## Recruiters Adjust as Law Firms' Hiring Slows

Gone Are High-Volume Associate Placements, But the Right Partners Are Still Looking

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**By Amy Yarbrough**

Daily Journal Staff Writer

The slowed economy and the recent implosion of two major California-origin firms have brought on gloomy times for associates and the headhunters trying to find them jobs.

"We're trying to be creative," said Delia Swan, a recruiter at Swan Legal Search in Los Angeles.

Time was, recruiters, most of whom earn their living on commissions, could make a significant salary churning out a high volume of associate placements that can be knocked out in six weeks. Now, Swan and others, say they must focus their energies on the more lucrative - but complicated - lateral partner placements that take seven to eight months to complete.

Jill Levin, another Los Angeles-based recruiter, said she weathered the dot com bust and expects this downturn "is going to be even worse."

Back then, firms were "bleeding" corporate associates, but at least there was demand for litigators, said Levin, the founder of Levin & Associates. By her estimates, there hasn't been an uptick in the demand for litigators for over a year.

There are silver linings though. Pressure to trim outside legal costs has prompted in-house departments to bulk up on lawyers, recruiters say. Folks like Swan say they are seeing some success placing lawyers at corporations.

And in-demand partners with big books of business who might have hunkered down where they are have now started to wonder if their firms are in the position to weather the economic storm.

The demise of Heller Ehrman and Thelen, San Francisco-origin firms that became national or international powerhouses, might have led some partners to wonder, "How my firm is doing?" said Bill Vochoska, a Santa Monica-based legal recruiter who places partners. "It makes everyone take a look around."

Swan, who has 10-plus years experience in partner recruiting, said she has been able to sustain her business but wonders about new recruiters who normally would cut their teeth placing associates.

"[Partner movement is] far more sophisticated," she said, "you have to have an in-depth knowledge of the firms you are marketing."

Recruiters must have a good understanding of each law firm's management structure and how compensation works, she said. They must be hyper-aware of potential conflicts that could arise between a lateral partner's book of business and the firm's existing clients, she said.

Swan said she, too, has weathered economic downturns and sees some benefits for the industry. "It weeds out a lot of the competition that isn't in it for the long term," she explained. "The tough times come, the good firms sustain. You just ride it out."

Levin agreed.

There's likely to be recruiters leaving the field, just as realtors probably are, thanks to the



ROBERT LEVINS / Daily Journal  
Delia Swan, left, Claudia Trevisan, right

mortgage crisis, she said.

"There's got to be a lot of realtors looking for other careers and I'm sure we'll have, if there hasn't been already, recruiters looking for something else to do," she said.

To illustrate just how dire the larger associate market is, Levin pointed to a service she uses that compiles associate job openings at large California firms. At the beginning of the year, there were 500 associate positions listed. Recently, there were 199. Roughly a third were for intellectual property work, a practice area that traditionally is less affected by market downturns. "That's making it even bleaker when you look at the majority of openings," said Levin, who does not focus on IP lawyers.

With the economy in flux, most firms are taking longer to make hiring decisions or just deciding to trim down their class of associates this year, recruiters say. And then there were all those associates at Heller Ehrman and Thelen who are now out of work. And most of the ones that have found other jobs did so on their own steam. Recruiter services - for associates and partners - aren't in high demand when it is well-known in the market that the attorneys are looking for work.

Levin said she hasn't bothered reaching out to many of those attorneys. "I'm not going after that many of them because there aren't many spots," Levin said.

Levin said she is focusing her energies on smaller firms. "I'm also getting a bit more careful about who I choose to work with," she said.

If you're competing over a smaller piece of the pie, firms want recruiters to bring in the "best of the best" candidates. "In this market it's going to be that much tougher," she said.

Amy Boyd, a recruiter with Mlegal Consulting in San Francisco, who specializes in associate and in-house placement, agreed.

"There a smaller bandwidth of candidates that firms want to see from headhunters," Boyd said.

"The schools need to be better, past experience needs to be better. I think it's unfortunate because there are great candidates out there."

Palo Alto-based recruiter Carl Baier that he expects business will increase as the year ends because of the "New Year's type of mentality."

After the year-end bonuses arrive - or don't, lawyers tend to ask themselves: "Where should I be next year and where do I want my career going."

Claudia Trevisan, a senior legal recruiter at Swan Legal Search, said some areas of the state are faring better than others. She said Bay Area firms have been less hard hit by the downturn. IP is still seems busy, so is labor and employment and bankruptcy, she said.

Then there are those with in-demand specialties, like clean tech.

"You work on what's in demand," Baier said. "2009 might not be the greatest year known to man but I plan to make a living."

[amy\\_yarbrough@dailyjournal.com](mailto:amy_yarbrough@dailyjournal.com)