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SOUL SEARCHING

Some Attorneys Find Legal Recruiting A Professional and Personal Fit

By Jennifer Byrd

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SAN FRANCISCO – It's no secret that the number of lawyers who hate their jobs is growing. Some attorneys leave the law to become investment bankers or to write the next great American novel; others are choosing legal recruiting as an alternative career.

Two recent entrants into the headhunting market are former practitioners Helena Pappas and Luci Yamamoto, who opened an attorney search consulting firm, Pappas & Yamamoto, in San Francisco last year.

Their new jobs, they said, are a better professional and personal fit.

"Recruiting is people-oriented in a more emotional way than law," said Yamamoto, who practiced educational law for two years at Ruiz & Schapiro in San Francisco. "I didn't want to be in a litigious combative relationship."

They, along with other attorneys who have made the transition, said that they didn't have to learn a new set of skills and that becoming a headhunter is easier than starting over in another profession. Former lawyers are highly sought after by recruiting firms because they already have an established business network made up of colleagues and law school classmates.

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Delia Swan of Swan Legal Search in Los Angeles has the same approach – hiring lawyers to recruit other lawyers. "I started my company on the promise that it would be all attorneys," she said. "As attorneys we have an edge and know what it means to work in a law firm. And we understand the language."

But not every headhunter agrees that a legal background is a prerequisite to a successful career in recruiting.

"I haven't found the fact that I'm not a lawyer to be a detriment to my success," said Larry Watanabe of San Diego-based Watanabe & Nason. Seasoned lawyers may start with an advantage, "but even after a short period of time they would exhaust those contacts pretty quickly," he said.

Gary Davis, a former Brobeck litigator who joined Katharine Patterson Consulting in San Francisco in 1990 said being a lawyer "is a security blanket for some people who are new to the profession."

But even that won't shield them from the initial shock of entering the profession, say headhunters. Lawyers have to give up the comfort of a firm, a regular pay check and traditional promotion track to enter a world of financial uncertainty, longer hours and hard work, they added.

Some even have to work through the stigma of being a "headhunter," which is comparable to the negative stereotypes of a slimy salesperson. "It's stressful when you first start," said Davis. "You have to make cold calls and extend and expose yourself. You wonder if the person really wants to hear from you. Recruiters are not always looked at in the best light, and I initially missed the prestige of being a lawyer."

Recruiters say their profession has a bad reputation – and some say deservedly so – for being more interested in lining their pockets rather than working in their clients' interests.

A few recruiters, however, try hard to set themselves apart. After a visit from his firm, said Major, lawyers think differently about headhunters, seeing them as strategic partners rather than pariahs.

"In Los Angeles and most major cities, recruiting firms are considered to be part of the fabric of life," said **Swan**. "But it's like any industry, there's good and bad."

To find a potential new hire for a law-firm client, headhunters usually scroll through their own database of names or look through Martindale-Hubbell for a lawyer that has the necessary qualifications. When Julie Qureshi, a recruiter with Major Hagen's Palo Alto office, finds someone who fits the bill she prefers to contact the lawyer via e-mail.

"It's a bad thing if you're a pest," said Qureshi, who once practiced real estate law at Brobeck. "You're interrupting them at work, which is like getting a marketing call at dinner."

When she is actively searching, she can send up to 150 e-mails a day. That she works so hard is not surprising. Although new recruiters are usually given a small base salary until they establish themselves, most

are paid only a commission, typically 25% of a lawyer candidate's annual salary.

Although it's an "eat what you kill" atmosphere, there's a potential to make good money, said Qureshi.

Swan, who said the money she is making is "fine," is quick to point out that a recruiter needs to be disciplined and be in the business for the long term to weather the ups and downs of the market.

In the end, it's not the money but the risky, fast-paced lifestyle that is most attractive.

"I'm working harder than I worked as a lawyer," said Davis. "Sometimes it's mind numbing and there are some difficult situations that you can face everyday. Like establishing trust in a 10-second phone call. But the harder you work the [sooner] rewards will come."