



## UP FROM THE BOTTOM

Job outlook a bit brighter as cautious firms consider hiring

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

The news from the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics came out like the first few hints of cool air at the end of a sweltering summer. The legal sector actually added 1,300 jobs nationwide in July and August, indicating improvements in the job market.

So how is this trend playing out in Connecticut? Don't get too excited. At least that's the message that legal recruiters and law firm managing partners have for potential job seekers.

"Firms and companies are open but cautious" about hiring, said Michael Lord, head of an attorney placement firm in Wilton and New York. "That differs from the last 12 to 24 months when many companies were just holding on and the attitude toward hiring could be characterized as closed."

Certainly, there's evidence that some Connecticut firms are starting to add attorneys, including first-year associates, though they're doing so at a deliberate pace. Connecticut is one pocket of the country where hiring actually is on a relative upswing, said Chris Braun, director of lawjobs.com for ALM, the *Law Tribune's* parent company.

Law firms not closely tied to the financial markets in New York have been the ones to start growing first, Braun said.

"I characterize this as the re-emergence of the middle," said Braun, noting that Philadelphia, San Francisco and Miami are other markets where hiring has been steady. "The mid-size firm didn't have as far to fall and they've recovered more quickly."

That said, "there are still some challenges for associates just coming out of law school" because of the glut of new associates whose starting dates have been deferred over the past 18 months.

Though the hiring atmosphere is mixed, Braun added, "We're not bumping along the bottom anymore."

Lord said the primary hiring focus is on partner-level attorneys rather than junior or senior associates. And the brightest prospects are in litigation and corporate law—including mergers and acquisitions and private equity—as long as the attorney brings in ample business.

"Partners must have verifiable, portable business with additional good business prospects," Lord said. "The amount of business that partners must have [to be an attractive hire] may have crept down a little bit over prior years."

Sina Amarell, president of Simsbury-based legal staffing service TR Grace, said she received more requests in September for

temporary attorneys than she had earlier in the summer.

"I hear from clients that business is picking up, but firms have to feel confident that they can support a new person to hire," Amarell said. "Law firms are cautious, and they don't want to lay off people again."

### No Huge Increase

Updike, Kelly & Spellacy is bringing in one new associate this fall with plans to bring on two more next year. The firm's new-attorney hiring pattern had held steady at about five to seven new attorneys at a time for the past decade before the legal industry contracted overall.

Managing partner John F. Wolter said the number of mail-in résumés his firm receives is "up greatly." But, "I don't think there's going to be any huge increase" in hiring in the state anytime soon, he said.

He also has noticed an increase in the number of third-year law students he's spoken to who are interested in judicial clerkships. "That's a function of the perception that the private sector jobs aren't there," Wolter said.

D. Robert Morris, managing partner at Pullman & Comley, said his firm is bringing in three new associates this fall and during the summer brought on a lateral partner and two of that partner's associates. "Many of us are not hiring or hiring fewer people," Morris said.

He's also noticed a change on law school campuses as "many fewer firms are going on campus at a variety of law schools," he said. "The trend is for people to be pulling back."

Robinson & Cole, on the other hand, has been one of the busier firms in the state over the past 12 months. It has added 15 new attorneys, including nine first-year associates, since last October.

Said managing partner John B. Lynch Jr.: "Entry-level hiring is not generally on the upswing, but in targeted areas where there is a need, there seems to be greater activity."

For Robinson & Cole, that includes practice areas such as insurance litigation, health care and corporate work.

The unevenness is evident throughout the country, too.

In late September, a New York State Bar Association task force conducted a straw poll among 21 large and small law firm managing partners and determined their outlook regarding increased business was "guarded optimism."

Robert Half Legal, a national staffing agency, surveyed 200 attorneys at law firms and companies last month and reported that 29 percent of respondents expect increased



Wilton-based legal recruiter Michael Lord said partner-level attorneys with portable business always are attractive hiring prospects.

hiring for the rest of the year. However, 59 percent believe hiring will remain flat in the next three months.

### 'Replacing Jobs'

Then there's Lisa Smith, managing director at legal industry consultant Hildebrandt Baker Robbins. She stirred things up late last month when she revealed that approximately 17,500 non-partner jobs could disappear from the country's largest law firms in the next five to seven years, based on her analysis.

Smith sees flat demand for legal services for the next two or three years and an increase in mergers between large law firms as two of the reasons for her prediction. Plus, more firms are outsourcing their legal work. Price pressures from corporate clients also will lead firms to adjust how they hire and compensate non-partner employees, she added.

"All of these shifts are replacing jobs, as opposed to just changing the mix as firms continue to grow," Smith said.

Legal recruiter Lauren Seder, of Seder Associates in Hamden, has noticed that "there's a higher percentage of attorneys casting a broader net" for job opportunities outside of the practice of law because the market is tight.

She said firms and companies in Connecticut are still cautious when it comes to adding attorneys. "I talk to other people in California, New York and Boston, and I'm not hearing anything that is much different from Connecticut," Seder said. "I still think there's a lot of uncertainty." ■