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Dissatisfied associates looking again at local firms



While large international firms will always attract the brightest lawyers who want to work where the most money is available, legal recruitment executive Shing Chow Cheng has noticed that the larger domestic firms, mainly in Singapore, seem to have improved their strategies for retaining associates. "There is certainly a concerted effort. Mid-level to senior managers are much more hands on," Shing, senior director and general manager of the Recruit Express group, said.

More open legal markets such as Hong Kong, Dubai or Shanghai can be attractive to lawyers with less than five years post-qualification experience, according to Shing.

However, the fact that some larger international firms with local offices have retrenched lawyers while domestic firms have not had to take that step has also led unhappy candidates to take a second look at domestic firms. "Now that there is a second law school in Singapore, with the first traineeships starting next year, we are finding there is always a shortage of good young lawyers," said Shing.

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In Hong Kong, where the attrition rate is also high, lawyers tend to move from smaller to larger firms, according to Tim Smith, director, JLegal, Hong Kong. Unlike candidates from Singapore, Smith said that considerations about doing good work often came second to the chance to join a firm with a more prestigious name. Associates don't necessarily stay at the second firm long term either and reasons for leaving vary from junior to senior level, according to Smith. He also commented that Chinese speakers are increasingly interested in Chinese firms with offices in Hong Kong following a recent spate of partner moves from international firms back to domestic Chinese firms. "Some of the large Chinese firms pay partners extremely well and there can be a broader variety of services, which is attractive to these lawyers," Smith said.

Shing also recommended that associates need up to eight years to learn their superior's job. "I always caution patience," he concluded, recommending lawyers think hard before moving.

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