

The Legal Profession's Job Recession

By Rebecca Cross

What do you call tens of thousands of unemployed lawyers? While the classic joke's punch line is "a good start," today's record high unemployment numbers are no laughing matter.

The website LawShucks.com, which tracks layoffs of lawyers and staff from major law firms, has reported more than 5,000 lawyer layoffs since it began collecting statistics in December 2008. Although the number of layoffs in early 2010 are significantly less than compared to 2009, many law firms are still avoiding bringing on new associates, leaving many law school graduates scrambling for employment. In addition, many state and local government agencies and branches have hiring freezes in effect. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, national unemployment figures, which reflect layoffs and reductions in hiring across the board, are in the tens of thousands for attorneys.

Legal recruiter Morgan Sheinberg Warren of Warren Recruiting says the current job conditions for lawyers are unprecedented.

"This is the worst legal hiring market that I've seen since I started law school," she noted. "Our generation of lawyers has not experienced the mass layoffs that we've experienced the past two years." She noted that for the first time, even the most highly credentialed attorneys cannot find jobs. "Years ago, someone from a top law school who was on Law Review and graduated top of their class was a hot commodity," she stated. "It was unfathomable that this person would be out of a job, much less have a hard time finding a new job."

In the past many young lawyer affiliates have focused on providing training in the practice of law or knowledge of a substantive area of the law to new attorneys. But in today's rough economy, bar organizations are increasingly being asked to help young lawyers find employment—a daunting task.

One young lawyer, an unemployed graduate of the University of Wisconsin Law School (Class of 2009) noted that the Chicago Bar Association has offered several helpful programs on finding jobs that she found useful. "It's difficult because so many young lawyers are unemployed or worried about unemployment, so I feel like support to the young attorneys needs to come from veteran attorneys willing to offer advice, wisdom, and encouragement," she stated.

"Most associations hold networking events and job hunting strategy events," said a 2009 graduate of the University of Illinois College of Law. "However, if there are no jobs there really isn't much more aid that associations can give."

Other unemployed attorneys had more practical suggestions.

"It'd be nice to have free MCLEs and networking," says an unemployed 2003 UCLA School of Law graduate living in Los Angeles, California. "I have no income other than side cases here and there, but they still want me to pay my bar dues and extra for MCLEs. I get stuff in the mail for career planning programs and networking events where they want me to pay more money to attend. Do they not understand that we have no money? That's why we need to do career planning and networking," said the out-of-work lawyer. He has been looking for work for more than a year after being laid off from a real estate practice in a good-sized law firm.

Some bar associations and young lawyer affiliates have addressed the crisis by offering conferences and resources for topics such as interviewing, considering less common career options, or setting up one's own law practice.

Jennifer Evans Morris, President of the Texas Young Lawyers Association (TYLA), says TYLA has been proactive in addressing the job needs of Texas's young lawyers. "Young lawyers in Texas are facing many of the same challenges as other lawyers across the country," she said. "For many 2009 brought layoffs, deferred offers, and recruiting program cancellations." Morris highlighted two different ways that TYLA is helping its own. "First, we are creating a message board or listserv to allow young lawyers to share information about job opportunities statewide," she stated. "TYLA is also helping the increasing number of lawyers who are hanging out their own shingle with a project called 'Office in Your Pocket,' which will provide everything a young lawyer needs to know to open up her own practice, all on a flash drive."

American Bar Association Young Lawyers Division
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One way the legal industry has attempted to make proverbial lemonade out of the sour economy is by pairing out-of-work attorneys with pro bono legal needs. The Los Angeles County Bar Association has created a Legal Public Service Corps, with job fairs allowing lawyers to interview face-to-face with various southern California government and nonprofit organizations in need of free or low-cost legal services. Probono.net, Lawyers Without Borders, and other groups have provided similar resources online, at national and global levels.

While bar associations should do everything in their power to help unemployed young lawyers, Morgan Sheinberg Warren stresses the importance of attorneys taking matters into their own hands. "Today, lawyers that have been laid off are having to retool their practices, join a smaller firm, move in-house, and generally be more open-minded than they have had to be in the past," she said. "My best advice to well-qualified candidates in this job market is to be as open-minded as possible and broaden their expectations about practices, type and size of firm, and nonlaw firm options."

Many lawyers without work have already taken this advice to heart. The 2003 UCLA School of Law graduate has shifted his focus to bankruptcy. "It's not the area of law that I want to do, but I got a few cases and hope to get a job in that field," he said. "They seem to be the only ones hiring."

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