Brain drain: Singaporean firms are fighting to retain lawyers

Fickle junior lawyers are leaving Singapore’s law firms in the lurch.

by Candice Mak

Who has the best-fitting plug?

Massage Fridays, pilates classes, bowling tournaments... not the facilities for guests of Singapore’s luxurious Shangri-La Hotel, but for new recruits to the country’s law firms.

With up to five foreign firms due to enter the market by the end of this year (the government hasn’t chosen which ones yet), Singapore’s local firms are looking for novel ways to attract – and retain – a dwindling pool of young locally-qualified lawyers.

Each year, only about 180 law students graduate from the National University of Singapore, and competition among domestic firms for the best ones is fierce. This competition comes not only from local rivals: graduates are also lured away by lucrative in-house counsel roles and postings abroad with foreign firms.

A portion don’t even end up practising law. “It’s a sign of a maturing economy and education system where people see a law degree as not just a ticket to a law career,” says Kelvin Tan, a partner and the recruitment director of Drew & Napier.

The diagnosis is clear: Singapore’s law firms are facing a brain drain.

Recruit well, retain long

Ian De Vaz, a partner of WongPartnership, says the dearth of talent is most obvious among middle-tier lawyers: “They take on the view they want to do something else after five years or they get to the stage where they become attractive to foreign law firms.”

This attractiveness comes from a combination of features: they’ve already acquired necessary skills, learned enough to operate independently, but aren’t too senior to cost a lot.

K Anparasan, a partner and head of recruitment at KhattarWong, says his firm has “upped the ante on competition” and promotes a philosophy of “recruit well, retain long”. Since last year the firm has started a number of initiatives to retain junior lawyers.

These include gym memberships, social and sporting events, massage therapists, aerobic instructors, and regular stress-management workshops. “It’s not easy to appease the young generation anymore!” he laughs.

Other firms offer allowances for clothing and Blackberry smartphones. At WongPartnership, a launderette is hired to collect the lawyers’ laundry. “Inherently the legal profession is a pressurising one,” says Jarrod Ng, director of recruitment at the firm. “We recognise it’s the little things that count.”
In addition to the perks, many firms offer mentorship for new lawyers, requiring active participation and support from senior members. “Something that young lawyers don’t want is being in the dark; they do not want to be left alone. They want to have someone mentoring, teaching and guiding them along,” says Anparasan of KhattarWong.

Drew & Napier operates a similar programme: one benefit is a culture of openness among all levels of lawyers. “I have juniors telling me that what they like is the ability to walk into a senior’s office and speak about anything that concerns them,” says Tan.

Watching salaries

So far, so touchy-feely. But while a better work-life balance and a closer relationship with managers are doubtless appreciated, it will take more than pilates to make the best talent stay.

All the leading firms are considering revising their pay structures, but once the qualifying law firms come on board, nobody is sure how much they will offer. “We’ve upped our pay, but we don’t know if it’s enough,” says Anparasan. “You never know, it’s possible the new firms might offer up double and then it will be a challenge to match them.”

Jarrod Ng, of WongPartnership, is more optimistic, questioning the likelihood of a “pay war”. Nevertheless, he adds that his firm is watching salaries and other financial benefits closely.

Another reason young lawyers go to global firms is for greater exposure to different kinds of work, especially international work. Many local firms are taking this into account and marketing these opportunities to law graduates. WongPartnership, which recently expanded its operations in Abu Dhabi and has two other offices in Doha and Shanghai, can offer secondments to its overseas offices. “We’ve found that the younger lawyers are very keen to travel and it’s a huge attraction for them,” says De Vaz.

KhattarWong also has offices in Vietnam and China. “When graduates compare, they know they have opportunities to work abroad if they prove themselves,” says Anparasan. “This is one way we are competing with international firms – by having a good quality of work and focusing on regionalisation.”

Kelvin Tan of Drew & Napier – which has a Shanghai office – says partners have been at the firm since very early on in their careers, and interns and junior lawyers see this. When younger lawyers see this long-term perspective, believes Tan, they will be compelled to stay: “We look to develop them in terms of trying to grow their own practices and trying to get to the stage where they can stand as lawyers in their own right.”

Beacon of hope

If and when relief arrives, it will be in the form of the country’s new law school, at Singapore Management University (SMU). In two years, the first batch of graduates from SMU will enter the market, doubling the talent pool. For local firms, it is both a beacon of hope and a recruitment battleground.
Law firms have launched aggressive marketing campaigns: KhattarWong has offered a S$300,000 bond-free scholarship for law students. The same firm has also set up an online mentoring program for the students so they can seek careers advice from the firm’s partners. No doubt some career options will be pushed harder – towards the right students – than others.

Anparasan says that when his firm’s initiatives work, young KhattarWong associates become natural recruiters: “They tell their friends ‘hey, this is what we do!’, so you don’t have to really advertise. Word gets to the law schools and I am very heartened by the number of students who want to come and intern for us.”

WongPartnership sends young lawyers out on recruitment campaigns to speak to prospective graduates and share their experiences. “There is nothing like speaking to a real lawyer in the firm to tell you honestly what it’s like,” says Ian De Vaz. “That is the best recruitment strategy: hearing it from the ground up. That’s worked pretty well for us.”

And it’s a good thing too – if the strategy fails to pay off, it will be the senior partners who are in need of a regular massage.