

Fresh grads shun smaller law firms

Inability to hire junior staff affecting operations of smaller companies

By FIONA LOW

SMALL and medium-sized law firms have been the worst hit by the shortage of lawyers in Singapore, with many finding it impossible to hire entry-level staff.

They say fresh graduates are looking to join large companies or international agencies which offer better salaries and exposure to higher-profile cases.

This means smaller Singaporean players either have to take on rejects from the bigger firms or face being unable to hire at all.

Their comments come in the wake of an announcement that the Government will review the supply of lawyers.

Mr Adrian Wee, a director at medium-sized law firm Characterist, said the company has been trying to recruit for the last three years and would like to employ at least five junior lawyers. It now has only one.

"Without these junior lawyers to handle the simpler tasks, the firm is unable to take on as much high-value work as we would like to," said Mr Wee.

"Also, we want to promote those who are already in the company, but we can't if we still need them to continue doing entry-level work because we cannot find re-

placements."

There are currently 5,200 lawyers practising in Singapore, the latest statistics from the Ministry of Law show. Their numbers have been rising slowly, from about 4,000 in 2002 to 4,200 in 2007.

But lawyer R.S. Wijaya, who has his own practice, describes the situation as a "chronic shortage". He currently runs the firm in Chander Road alone because he has been unable to recruit. "It is impossible to hire even if I am looking for just one person," he said. "I've put out recruitment advertisements but I did not even get a single applicant."

Junior lawyers handle work such as drafting, legal research and taking instructions from clients. This frees up their senior colleagues to attend to weightier tasks such as crucial court hearings.

Lawyers estimate that the five largest firms here, including big names such as Rajah & Tann and Allen & Gledhill, employ about 20 per cent of the industry's practitioners. This leaves slim pickings especially in terms of junior-level staff.

Professor Michael Furmston, dean of the School of Law at Singapore Management University, said New Zealand has about three times as many lawyers as Singapore, despite its slightly lower population. Similarly, England and Wales have about 11 times as many people as Singapore between them, but about 34 times as many lawyers.



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**BIGGER PAY,
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Mr Hri Kumar Nair, a Member of Parliament for Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC, told The Straits Times that boosting the number of lawyers here will improve the situation. "If we increase the overall supply, ultimately the big firms will not be able to absorb all the growth and this will trickle down to give smaller firms more choice," he said.

In Parliament last week, Law Minister K. Shanmugam said a committee has been set up to look into increasing the pool of lawyers here. It will consider possible adjustments to the current admissions policy, and may look into moving to a single Bar exam model.

Law schools here are confident that relaxing the admission criteria or increasing intakes will not mean lower standards.

"Admission is extremely competitive, thus moderate adjustments in numbers should have little impact on the quality of law students," said Prof Furmston. His law school receives more than 1,000 applicants each year, and fewer than 120 end up being accepted.

At the National University of Singapore, between 750 and 800 applicants to the law faculty are shortlisted for interviews and a written test each year, but only 250 are admitted.

Prof Furmston said that increasing the number of graduates who enter the profession may not actually boost supply because many leave the industry within five years of qualifying.

To address this, Mr Nair said that the solution must not be focused solely on the admissions level. Firms have to play their part by keeping things interesting and exciting for lawyers. At the same time, companies have to make sure their staff have work-life balance in order to manage the high stress of the job, he said.

The 14-member committee, which includes Chief Prosecutor Aedid Abdullah and Law Society president Wong Meng Meng, is expected to present its recommendations towards the end of this year, said a Ministry of Law spokesman.

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