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," 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 replacements," he said.

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. Wilayas, 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.

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 Azidi 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.