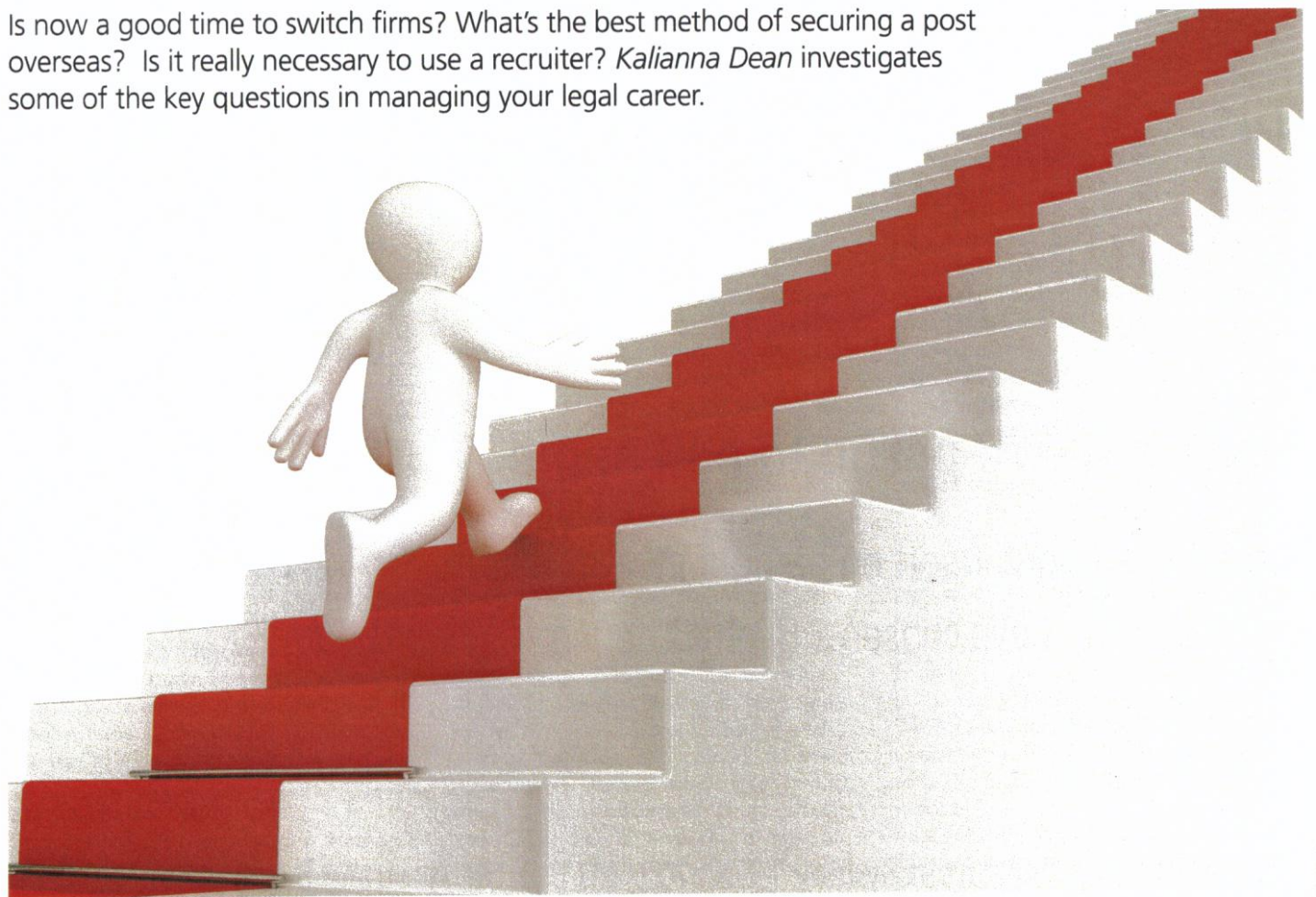


Advancing your career

Is now a good time to switch firms? What's the best method of securing a post overseas? Is it really necessary to use a recruiter? *Kalianna Dean* investigates some of the key questions in managing your legal career.



The market for legal professionals has clearly become more fluid in 2011 and there was much movement of lawyers between firms in the first half the year. There has been global economic turmoil since then but, according to recruiters and law firms, this has not yet impacted on the demand for lawyers in Australia.

Tim Fogarty, a recruitment consultant with Taylor Root, says that he is still seeing roles come through just as frequently as they were in the first half of the year. "Activity will probably slow down as we get to Christmas, [but] that's for seasonal reasons," he says. Randstad Legal national manager Paul Cowling

believes that the market is tighter than it was six months ago with a "general undersupply of candidates." He nominates construction and corporate as particular areas of demand.

Law firms seem to agree with these observations. "There's still corporate activity out there, still commercial activity out there," says Gilbert +

Tobin hiring partner Peter Jones. He notes that all law firms consistently have a need for good lawyers. However, G+T HR consultant Melissa Leslie concedes that the firm has been a "bit more cautious" recently, although recruitment is continuing.

Rolf Moses is the director of people and development at Norton Rose. He also believes the market is favouring candidates at the moment, an observation he says can be backed up by a quick look at the website of any major law firm.

"From a candidate perspective there's plenty of work out there," he says. "We are recruiting actively around infrastructure, energy, finance; [these are] notably areas in which we've done a lot of lateral partner appointments." He says the recruitment continues at the senior associate and associate level once those partners are in place.

Interestingly, the "big six" appear to be back in the market for the first time in a while. "A year ago you could identify probably half of the top six law firms that weren't recruiting. Now they all are," says Fogarty.

Overseas opportunities

International firms are popular with young Australian law graduates under the impression that this will improve their chances of an overseas secondment – but how true is that assumption? Moses says that the Norton Rose merger has delivered very real benefits for graduates. This year alone the firm has sent 13 graduates to Asian offices in Beijing, Singapore, Hong Kong and Tokyo.

"We've had three from Hong Kong come to us and rotate back this way

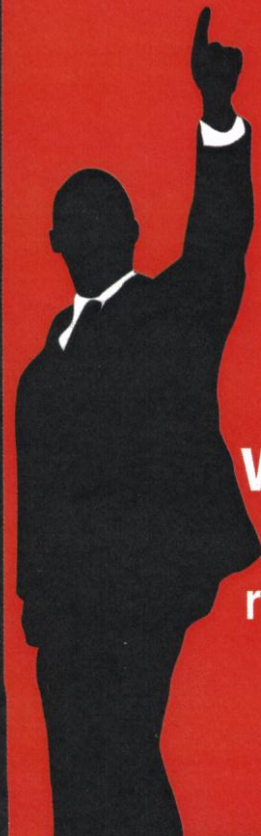
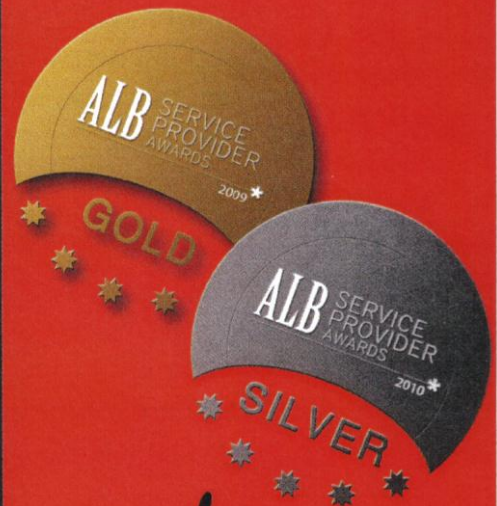
so there's a lot of that going on, that wasn't the case a few years ago," he says. In addition, he emphasises the point that firms with international practices generally know a year in advance which vacancies will arise and where, so lawyers who put their hand up for a space can often be accommodated.

The other option for lawyers is to join a top-tier firm whose brand is recognised by overseas firms. "Quality brands recognised in the legal market globally – Freehills, Allens, Mallesons etc – are highly sought after. If you get a large UK firm looking for a strong corporate lawyer and they look at overseas qualified lawyers, they will absolutely be interested," says Cowling. Mahlab recruitment consultant Lucy Duncan agrees and states that for junior lawyers, academic results may still be relevant for overseas employers. She also notes the importance of developing experience which is "relevant and useful" for international firms.

It is not only experience at the "six" which is capable of impressing overseas employers. Jones argues that the G+T brand is well recognised and respected internationally, particularly within China and Asia due to the strong referral and professional relationships the firm has built up in those jurisdictions. He argues that the notion of "leap frogging" from the large top tier firms into the internationals is less relevant.

Fogarty is another who believes that there is hope for those outside the "six". "The key is to come from an organisation in a domestic market that is recognised as premier – for example

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Tim Fogarty
Taylor Root

a boutique firm or mid-tier firm perceived as the best in the market [at a particular field]," he says. "If you are in a mid-tier firm that is good at what it does but not the best, you are better off moving to a firm that does have an international brand."

To use an agent or not to use an agent?

Should a candidate use a recruitment agent or apply directly to a law firm? The answer can depend on what level of seniority a lawyer has reached, according to G+T's Leslie. "Candidates continue to use agencies at the senior end," she says. However, she notes that people who know the firm apply directly to a particular partner or straight to HR.

For both junior and senior roles, there is a view that job applications made direct to the firm are more common. Norton Rose's Moses says that the way firms have introduced their own recruitment teams has meant

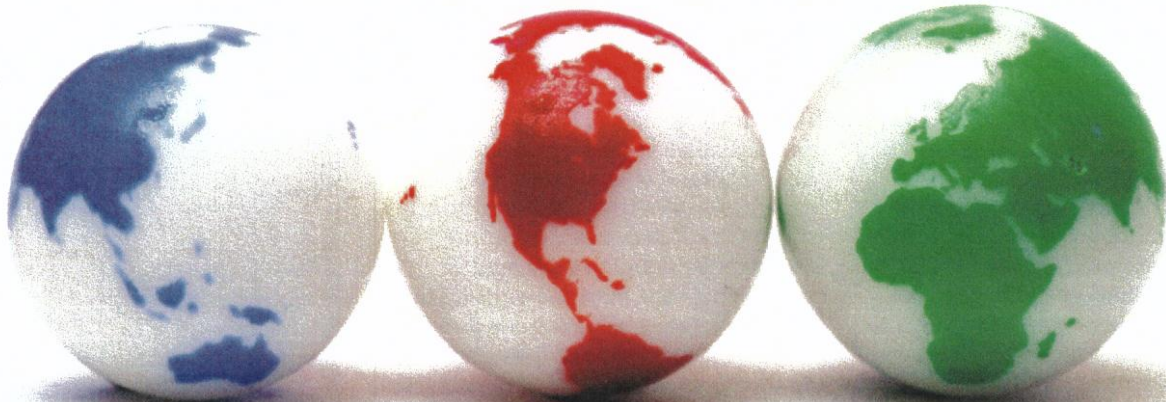
the need for external recruiters has diminished. "Ten years ago recruiters managed all recruitment in law firms. Most firms didn't have a sophisticated careers website. That's really, really shifted. The majority now really are going direct to firms," he says. The reason for larger firms using their own recruitment teams is to better manage the logistics of opportunities across a whole network of offices. According to Moses, an external recruiter won't be as well informed on all the opportunities available: "As firms become more international an external recruiter probably can't help with what's going on across the whole network of offices. Firms have gotten sophisticated and there's a lot of information about them available that wasn't [previously] available," he says.

According to Moses this shift leaves external recruiters best placed to help lawyers in need of career advice, rather than just a range of job opportunities. "I think [whether candidates go

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through an agent] has less to do with seniority and more to do with the extent to which a person requires career advice," he says. Duncan agrees, and emphasises the fact that recruiters are able to help with a broad range of 'soft' personal communication skills as well as the different types of working environments at various law firms. "We have a broad range of clients and will therefore be very well placed to speak about types of work and work environment different firms will offer," she says.

In addition, legal recruiters can match candidates with firms when they come across someone with a rare or exceptional skill set that a firm is not consciously seeking out. "Even when there's not necessarily a live opportunity, if we see someone's exceptionally strong in a certain area we will pick up the phone. That sort of introduction is difficult to do cold," adds Cowling.

McCullough Robertson is one firm that sees the advantage of having strong partnerships within the recruitment industry. "I think that good recruiters that the firm has partnered with can give a strong insight into the culture of the firm and can advise and help make a decision on similar opportunities," says the firm's recruitment manager Claire MacGinley.

Switching practice areas

A lawyer may decide to switch practice areas for any number of reasons. It's by no means an easy process and one which Duncan suggests is better made in the first two years.

A switch is also more likely to be supported by the firm where the value proposition of the lawyer is clearly known. Either way, lawyers need to be prepared to give a good explanation

of why such a change is desirable. "Particularly at senior PQE level after a lot of investment, [the firm] will want to understand where [the lawyer] wants to move and why they want to move, and whether there's a sustainable position for someone in that area," says Jones.

Contacts outside the firm may also be of value. "If you can point to academic pursuits in the field it can assist in providing academic understanding and through that course you might meet people who can facilitate that transition as well," adds Fogarty.

Making the switch to a completely new area is not the only way lawyers can progress their careers, according to Moses. He suggests lawyers might look at how practice areas are evolving and how to develop and transfer skills and experience from one area to incorporate elements of another practice area. "People's practices subtly change with the changes within the sector and clients. Looking at, for example, where are clients going? Where are they needed? That tends to happen more at intermediate levels," he says.

A gradual change – first to a more closely aligned practice area, then one further removed – is the recommended method. "Switching tends to be easier to do as a gradual shift," says Cowling. The most obvious example of a gradual change is where lawyers take on an in-house secondment as a way of testing out their in-house aspirations. Indeed, according to McCullough Robertson's MacGinley and director of HR Kerin McMahan, the number of lawyers who have a career goal of moving in-house following a secondment has increased dramatically in recent times. "I think it's important to note how many lawyers have that as a career goal," adds MacGinley. **ALB**

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Claire MacGinley
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