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
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**leading question**

By: Lori Johnston

What are law firms doing to adjust to the economy?

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They're taking the same steps as clients, by focusing on growing practice areas, trimming staff as workloads related to real estate transactions and mergers and acquisitions plummet, and slashing expenses.

"They are biting their fingernails as never before," says Chuck Santangelo, a Bonita Springs-based senior partner and law firm consultant with Hildebrandt International. This recession is having a greater impact on the law profession than previous ones have. Hildebrandt's 2008 Law Department Survey shows that total legal spending has increased at a slower pace than in previous years.

"This time around, the legal profession is tracking the general economy more closely than ever before," he says.

Firms have curtailed travel and meeting expenses, frozen or reduced salaries, and let associates, partners and staffers go, Santangelo says. Hildebrandt's survey showed that 34 percent of companies in 2008 reported a decrease in lawyer staff, compared with 23 percent in 2007.





"Most firms are simply laying off lawyers in the practice areas that are having slowdowns and consequently laying off staff in support of those attorneys," says Denise Wheeler, managing shareholder of the Fort Myers office of Fowler White Boggs P.A. It is among those that have done so, but the firm is adding attorneys to in-demand practice areas such as bankruptcy, employment law and litigation related to foreclosures. Fowler White Boggs, which has 18 attorneys in Fort Myers, hired a lawyer for its bankruptcy practice earlier this year and anticipates hiring more, Wheeler says.

"You don't want your cardiologist doing plastic surgery, and it's the same for the specialty that we have," Wheeler says. "It's not



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that easy just to switch over to a new practice area." Hahn Loeser & Parks LLP, which has 11 attorneys locally, plans to add five or six more this year in growing areas such as commercial litigation, says Jeanne L. Seewald, a partner in the Naples office.

Wheeler has seen an increase in unemployment-related claims, too. "People, who in good economic times may be reluctant to engage in litigation, maybe now are less hesitant because they simply are more desperate financially," she says.

Entrepreneurs starting online businesses or seeking a patent have given the intellectual property area a boost, says Seewald. "I'm really seeing this economy spurring innovation."

Santangelo says some clients are requesting more experienced attorneys, unwilling to pay for first-year associates. Firms are easing up on the "endless drumbeat of billable hours" and spending more time counseling clients. Another indicator of changes: alternative pricing arrangements, such as fixed prices or a retainer for specific services.

Local firms aren't seeing much demand from clients for changes in the traditional hourly billing process, but it could be on the way.

"There's just not enough money to go around," Santangelo says. "If there's a silver lining to all of this, it's that firms are far better managed today than ever before."