

Phila's Top Plaintiff Firms Find Challenges to Recruiting Staff.

"Lawyers are always available because they're leaving the DA office," said one firm leader. "The thing that is the bigger challenge is maintaining good support staff. Lawyers are not as important as they think they are. Without having good, solid and responsible support staff, you can get yourself in a jam."

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Philadelphia's most visible personal injury boutiques in recent months have leveraged their national reputations to bulk up on legal talent, poaching lawyers from district attorneys' offices, in-house positions and high-net-worth companies and peer firms to keep up with a fresh influx of work.

But even for firms that have grown to national reputations—like Kline & Specter and van der Veen, Hartshorn and Levin, which have succeeded in expanding into new practice areas and leveraged online media to their headhunting advantage—challenges to recruiting staff continue to leave firm leaders scratching their heads, even as they make concessions to the demands of the current hiring market.

Recruiters and law firm leaders in the city said legal support roles come with annual salary that ranges from \$40,000 on the low end to \$75,000 on the high end for the industry's most senior support professionals. Several

litigators in the city said their legal assistants have been with them for decades and are close to retirement, leaving an open question of who will replace them.

“It’s very hard to find paralegals and staff,” said Kline & Specter partner **Shanin Specter**. “That’s still a significant problem for law firms across Philadelphia. It seems that the number of folks going into that area is decreasing or stagnant and it’s a significant need.”

Even with Kline & Specter’s flexibility when it comes to job benefits and remote work for paraprofessionals, Specter said “it’s hard to find good candidates.”

“We are trying every possible way of recruiting folks into paraprofessional roles. It just continues to be a challenge,” he added.

The Competitive Landscape is Changing

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The hiring cycles of personal injury boutiques tend to be slower than the fast-paced lateral market of the firms that constitute the Am Law 200. Beasley Firm managing member Jim Beasley Jr. said firms in the 10-12-lawyer range like his tend to reach a “steady state” where their headcount stands still for long stretches until it’s time to bulk up on talent for a big case or to expand into a new practice.

But firms looking to diversify their service offerings by building their mass tort practice are taking upon themselves a higher volume of work, which

requires more professionals to handle the intake, according to Beasley. Beasley added he's always steered his firm away from mass torts because he likes to have more direct interaction with clients than mass tort representations allow.

Kline & Specter, which named a new mass tort leader in November and has recruited to that practice in recent months, has grown to a total lawyer head count of 54 as of their recruitment of six new attorneys so far in 2022. Specter said an additional two associates are expected to join this summer after taking the bar exam.

Specter said the additions are driven by the high volume of lawyer referrals and an increase in direct client outreach.

"Referral lawyers are bringing more cases than ever before and more clients are coming to us directly," he said. "That's true in all areas of our practice whether it's medical malpractice, product liability or motor vehicle accidents."

Doubling Down on Marketing

Part of the recent influx of work at firms like Kline & Specter are the result of greater use of online media to advertise their personal injury prowess, said Robyn Addis, chief marketing and business development officer for Legal Internet Solutions Inc. Addis, whose company works with some of Philadelphia's personal injury firms, said coming out of the pandemic, firms "embraced digital marketing in ways they never had before."

"Marketing has fueled accelerated growth necessitating more attorneys and staff to handle the work that's coming in," Addis said in an email statement.

Such is the case for personal injury and criminal defense firm van der Veen, Hartshorn and Levin, which has hired six attorneys in the last 12 months, according to founding partner Michael van der Veen. In an interview Thursday, van der Veen credited high-profile legal representation with catalyzing the influx of work in the last two years, including what he called “cutting edge national vaccine litigation,” a reference to his representation of a union of federal prison workers who sued to block vaccine the Biden administration’s vaccination mandate.

Personnel additions have served to bolster the firm’s diversified practice mix, including two hires in personal injury, two in family law and two utility lawyers who were hired to bolster the firm’s commercial litigation practice, van der Veen said.

Van der Veen also ascended to the national spotlight with his defense of former President Trump in his second impeachment and representation of an alleged Jan. 6 Capitol conspirator.

“That national exposure combined with increase and aggressive marketing has translated into an increase in clients,” van der Veen said. Van der Veen noted that lawyers in both the firm’s criminal and civil divisions are obligated to market themselves and by proxy the firm itself, a staple of van der Veen, Hartshorn and Levin’s marketing strategy since its founding.

But van der Veen said over the last two years, many staff professionals switched out of a career in law firms to industries that offer a more flexible relationship with office work.

Beasley said a “change in mindset” has led to decreased interest in young generations seeking legal assistant roles. While the availability of lawyers continues to be bolstered by exits from government positions, like those in district attorneys’ offices, Beasley said “the thing that is the bigger challenge is maintaining good support staff.”

“Lawyers are not as important as they think they are,” Beasley said. “Without having good, solid and responsible support staff, you can get yourself in a jam.”