

Long Island BusinessNEWS

Shorten Commute, Complex Work Entices Lawyers To LI

by Michael H. Samuels

Now that he no longer works in Manhattan, Paul Sweeney wakes up later, gets home earlier and even has time to watch his kids' Little League baseball games.

That's because prior to joining East Meadow-based Certilman Balin Adler & Hyman, Sweeney, a partner in the firm's litigation group, had been practicing law in Manhattan for more than 15 years. There, the above wasn't even a pipe dream. It was impossible.

"I don't expect to work any less here at this firm than I did at my prior firm," said Sweeney, whose commute shrunk from 2 ½ hours to 15 minutes. "I can work the same amount of time and still have a couple more hours in the day. Now I'm spending more time with my kids than with the conductors on the Long Island Rail Road."

Sweeney, who worked at Hogan & Hartson in midtown Manhattan since 2000, is just one of many attorneys who recently decided to make the move to work at a firm on Long Island rather than in Manhattan.

While there is no hard evidence to show that it has become a full-fledged trend, anecdotal data from a number of attorneys and law firms and the high number of layoffs coming from Manhattan firms illustrate that many attorneys that live here are looking to work here as well.

While recent numbers by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that nationwide the number of lawyers has decreased 3.7 percent from March to April, and as of May 9, more than 11,500 people have been laid off by major law firms since Jan. 1, according to Lawshucks.com, a blog that tracks attorney layoffs, the number of attorneys on Long Island actually increased from 19,262 in 2006 to 20,071 at the end of 2008, the New York State Unified Court System reports.

Brett Gilbert, the assistant dean for career services at Touro Law School, said small to midsize law firms like many on Long Island, are experiencing the benefits of the larger law firms shedding staff and implementing hiring freezes.

They are hiring recent law school graduates on an as-needed basis, as well as adding attor-

neys who are leaving the bigger firms, boosting their caché locally and nationally.

He also said that midsize firms like Certilman Balin are perfect for recent graduates because working there will provide them with the well-rounded experience they might not get at large firm.

"(Smaller firms) can't afford to just have you sitting in your office researching," Gilbert said. "There, you get into court sooner; you have a lot of client contact."

For instance, Katy Carney Cole, an associate at Uniondale's Farrell Fritz, said she left Davis Polk & Wardwell, located near Grand Central Station, after five years in March because she wanted more real-world legal experience.

Cole said even though she was at one of the top five law firms in the country, she was usually one of 20 or 30 attorneys working on a case and was jealous of friends at smaller firms who had already questioned juries, deposed witnesses and handled full cases on their own.

"I felt it was time to go to a smaller firm and really feel like a lawyer, to take on the responsibility I could not get at a bigger law firm," she said.

A Mineola resident, she said being able to spend more time with her young children was another reason why she left for Long Island.

"As much as I enjoyed the Manhattan practice, I found the hours and the weekend commitments were placing me in a position where I was, in sum and substance, an absentee mother," Cole said. "I was always the mother who could not make the Christmas pageant. There was some concern that I was not as available to my children as I would like to be."

While Long Island firms tend to be smaller, the work is no less sophisticated or important. Cole still handles complex commercial litigation involving contract disputes, government investigations and regulations, just on a more comprehensive level, she said.

She's not the only one who has found a Long Island firm to be more their speed and size.

Bill Heberer, a partner at **Moritt Hock**

Hamroff & Horowitz in Garden City, added that he moved to the Long Island firm from Manatt, Phelps & Phillips in Times Square in February because it was a better fit.

Heberer said he started out working at a 40-member firm, but switched to the larger firm when it was combined with Manatt Phelps in 2003.

As a marketing and advertising attorney, **Heberer** said it wasn't prudent for him to start a solo practice, and staying in Manhattan, his pricing was becoming so exorbitant that, in this economy, many of his clients could no longer afford him. So, he's come full circle, he said.

At **Moritt Hock**, his fees are two-thirds of his Manhattan rates. That's why he said he's had many clients make the switch with him, with no ill effects on his or their business.

"Partner rates on Long Island are much more in line with my practice than in Manhattan where I was getting close to \$600 an hour," **Heberer** said. "I was pricing myself out of the market."

A. Jonathan Trafimow, another attorney at **Moritt Hock** who recently moved from a Manhattan law firm to Long Island, said he also has kept a majority of his clients because he was able to charge less money for the same service.

"I feel very strongly that I can offer my clients just as high a level of service at a significantly reduced rate," said **Trafimow**, who moved to **Moritt Hock** from the Epstein Becker & Green offices on Park Avenue in the end of April. "Some of my clients have already expressed to me how happy they are to get the same service at a significantly lower rate."

Trafimow, who lives in Pelham in Westchester County, came to **Moritt Hock** to be the head of the employment law practice group. Since the firm has offices in Manhattan, he can work there if a case takes him to the city and his mere 35-minute commute to Garden City allows him to drop his kids off at school in the mornings.

"It's been fantastic," he said. "Everything that I was hoping would come true has been working out exactly the way I hoped."