

Australian lawyers find Big Apple's huge salaries appealing

Erin O'Dwyer
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RECORD numbers of Australians are sitting the gruelling New York bar exam, lured by the bright lights and big bucks of Big Apple law firms.

They can win starting salaries of \$US145,000 (\$190,000) in New York, compared with \$80,000 in Sydney.

At least 350 Australians sat the exam this year, compared with 200 in 2005.

New York-based Australian lawyer Beatrice O'Brien, of recruiting firm Attorney Placements International, said the increase was due to booming demand for lawyers, better professional opportunities and whopping salaries.

"The bottom line is that when you work so hard to do a law degree, you want to see what your options are."

Her company offers exam training and job placement for Australians.

"Some see it as a short-term prospect, others see it as a long-term prospect. But doors open for a person who has done the New York bar exam."

Each year 12,000 people sit the two-day closed-book exam. Known as the most difficult in the English-speaking world, foreign candidates have a 47 per cent pass rate.

Australian law graduates said studying for the exam was like squeezing a four-year law degree into four months.

Adelaide couple Rodrigo Santelices, 35, and Melissa Godwin, 23, sat the exam straight from law school, bypassing top Sydney firms in favour of New York.

"I thought, 'New York is as expensive as living in Sydney so why not take a much bigger leap'," Mr Santelices said.

"I just love the city," Ms Godwin said. "It's so exciting and the opportunities to work here are just incredible."

Lawyers are not the only young professionals flocking to the US.

Demographer Graeme Hugo said the E3 visa, introduced last year under the US Free Trade Agreement, helped the brain drain.

The visa allows 10,500 Australian professionals and their partners to work in the US each year. Previously only 900 Australians secured work visas each year.

Professor Hugo, of the University of Adelaide, said most in demand were people working in law, finance, engineering and management.

Source: The Sun-Herald

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