

US hiring boom sucks in legal eagles keen to fly the coop

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AUSTRALIAN-trained lawyers are benefiting from a hiring boom in the US as law firms look across the Pacific in their search for experienced legal personnel.

Senior lawyers are being lured away with the promise of interesting international legal careers, big salaries and bonuses, according to legal recruiters.

The pay bonanza is also trickling down to junior levels — young lawyers can triple the size of their Australian income as first-year associates in a US firm.

New York based headhunter Beatrice O'Brien says business has never been better for her boutique employment agency, Attorney Placements International.

The high value placed on Australian law degrees, combined with the introduction of the E-3 visa for Australian professionals in 2005, makes locally trained lawyers very

attractive to US employers, she says.

O'Brien, formerly of Sydney, recently scored a coup by placing a senior Minter Ellison lawyer with a large west coast firm.

Darren Gardner, who pioneered Minter's operations in the US, has joined Seyfarth Shaw as managing partner of its international practice group.

"Darren was the prime candidate," O'Brien says.

"I assessed both sides as having the synergies — Seyfarth is a highly recognised labour law firm and Darren has the expertise to assist the firm in building and expanding its international base."

O'Brien says it may surprise many people to learn that Australian law degrees and legal training requirements are highly recognised in the US.

The trend is across the board. She says Attorney Placements International is in the process of placing a young graduate making \$50,000 as a paralegal in Sydney into a first-

year associate's position in New York, where she stands to make, as a starting salary, the equivalent of \$180,000 a year.

"The popularity of Australians is due, in part, to the introduction of the E-3 visa two years ago, which allows American firms to employ Australian professionals with the minimum of fuss," she says.

"We have been able to fit Australian-qualified attorneys into US firms on wages well above those they would earn at home."

America's gain has been Australia's loss when it comes to Gardner, the man who established Minter Ellison as one of the few home-grown legal firms with an independent presence in the US.

Gardner, 37, grew up at Muswellbrook in the NSW Hunter Valley, completed the Higher School Certificate at Barker College in Sydney and obtained his law degree from the University of NSW, graduating in 1995.

After working at Qantas after



Gardner

graduation, he moved to Minter Ellison in Sydney at the end of 1997, into its employment practice.

Gardner says he was fortunate to specialise in international employment law at an early stage of his career, due to the importance of the field these days in the era of global outsourcing.

"The US market was very hot," Gardner says. "Minter saw an opportunity in the US and the firm thought that I would be one of the right people to come and help set it up."

The original office was set up in New York but after September 2001 the office was moved California. Home is now San Diego. Gardner splits his time between Seyfarth Shaw's offices in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

"Almost from day one I was

spending an inordinate amount of time (in California) because my focus was the Asia-Pacific region.

"By September our daughter was six weeks old and we were living in mid-town Manhattan.

"Then came September 11 and the anthrax attacks. It was a difficult time in New York but the New Yorkers are an amazing bunch. With my wife and her family being from California, it made sense in the short term to be closer to her family."

He says this turned out to be a great decision from a business perspective as well, because of the proximity of the Pacific coast to Asian markets.

Gardner would still be head of Minters' west coast office had it not been for a fortuitous phone call from O'Brien late in 2006.

"I was getting on with life at the end of last year and things had been going really well for my practice and the San Francisco office.

"I was getting a lot of calls from

headhunters but I was very happy doing what I was doing. I got a call from Beatrice and she explained to me she thought she had an opportunity that I might be interested in talking about, and she made an introduction to the managing partner of my current firm.

"Seyfarth Shaw is a national US firm that is a powerhouse in my practice area. My practice fits beautifully within Seyfarth's structure, so it really made perfect sense for me to move across."

Gardner says he is still on good terms with his old colleagues, even though another important player in Minter's US operations, lawyer Dominic Hodson, has followed him to the new firm.

"Seyfarth does not compete with Minter in any way," he says.

Gardner says Australian lawyers fit in well in the US, in part due to their work ethic and the quality of their training.