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Facing Associate Departures, Singapore Law Firms Fight Back With Perks

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At top Singapore law firm [Rajah & Tann](#), lawyers can let off some steam in lounges equipped with Nintendo Wii game consoles, pool and foosball tables, and electric massage chairs. Around the corner at rival [Drew & Napier](#), a "Ministry of Fun" coordinates a social calendar that, [according to the firm's Web site](#), includes trips to Thailand as well as "glamorous dinners and crazy parties where everyone from directors to trainees, boogie to the sun rises [sic]."

Though such perks at U.S. law firms mostly went out with the first dot-com bust, they are becoming *de rigeur* in booming Singapore. Unlike their counterparts around the world who are struggling to find or hold onto scarce legal jobs, young Singaporean lawyers are being courted and cosseted by leading local firms. The firms are hoping to keep them from walking out the door at a time when the country's economy, buoyed by a rebound in manufacturing and finance, has been outpacing even China in terms of economic growth.

Attrition is a major issue for the Singapore legal profession, which currently numbers 3,846 licensed practitioners. According to the Law Society of Singapore, 283 lawyers opted not to renew their practice certificates in the past year. These were replaced by only 220 new local law graduates. The departures have been most severe among relatively junior lawyers, starving the middle ranks. In 2005, there were 801 lawyers in Singapore with seven-to-12 years of experience. Over the past six years, that number has dropped to 458.

"With attrition, there are fewer and fewer experienced lawyers around," notes Lee Suet-Fern, the senior director of prominent local firm [Stamford Law Corporation](#).

Singapore's Ministry of Justice says long and unpredictable hours are to blame. The ministry--the equivalent to the U.S. Department of Justice--said as much in a [2007 report](#) that emphasized the issue and encouraged firms to improve working conditions and support greater work-life balance.

In the West, a round of salary increases might placate restive associates, but Lee says Singapore firms already bumped up pay by around 20 percent last year. A typical starting salary is now S\$60,000 (\$50,000). Clients, she says, simply would not accept the rate increases needed to boost associate salaries again.

Instead, firms have piled on the perks. In addition to foosball and video games, associates at Rajah & Tann can take paid one-month sabbaticals after four years. [According to the firm's recruitment page](#), lawyers at WongPartnership regularly enjoy in-office shopping bazaars and food festivals. At Drew & Napier, recruitment co-head Blossom Hing says the firm has introduced flexible hours along with its social activities.

Rajah & Tann says its efforts have led to lower attrition. Still, the firm still saw around 60 lawyers depart in 2010. One reason attrition remains high is that work hours remain long. Recruiter Shing Chow Cheng, a onetime Rajah & Tann associate, estimates most lawyers at big local firms average between 10 and 13 hours a day, with later nights frequently cropping up when lawyers are working on a closing deal or a major lawsuit.

The hours are an issue for current Rajah & Tann associate Serene Poh, who otherwise optimistic about life at her firm. "We do work very, very long hours," says Poh, an intellectual property lawyer. She notes the pressure is worse for corporate lawyers and litigators. "That's when you can burn out very quickly."

Cheng, who wrote a [scathing and widely-circulated critique of the treatment of associates by local firms](#) in the Law Society's *Gazette* five years ago, says firms definitely have improved in certain areas. But he says the hierarchical management culture at most Singapore firms presents an ongoing recruitment challenge. Associates are told to follow orders, says Cheng, and partners brook no dissent.

The firms disagree. Drew & Napier's Hing says hours are long but not excessive, and that the firm nurtures young talent through teamwork and mentoring. Patrick Ang, deputy managing partner of Rajah & Tann, says his firm has "progressive and enlightened policies," and actively encourages mentoring and feedback.

Lee says not all the fault can be placed on the firms. She believes today's Singapore law graduates have unrealistic expectations about the demands of a legal career.

"Some of them collect internships like boy scouts collect badges," says Lee, but don't build up an accurate picture of the heavy workload they will face because they hop between two-week placements during their law degrees. After a few years in the real world of law, many drop out, she says.

Where do they go? Like their counterparts in the West, many overworked associates aim for in-house

jobs, which are seen as offering more regular hours for roughly equal pay. Others join Singapore's burgeoning financial sector or otherwise switch to business careers.

Singaporean lawyers, who study in English and are trained in common law, also find themselves in heavy demand across the region. Hong Kong, which has a much-larger contingent of international firms, is a popular choice for transactional lawyers, as the deals tend to be larger. So do the paychecks. A newly qualified Hong Kong lawyer can expect to make around \$95,000 annually, roughly double the base salary in Singapore.

International firms also are competing with Singaporean firms on their home turf. Martin David, [DLA Piper](#)'s head of Asia project finance, says his firm is expanding in Singapore and will happily hire experienced associates from local firms.

Of course, international firms also have struggled with associate morale and retention issues. Philip Jeyaretnam, a former president of The Law Society of Singapore and managing partner of local firm [Rodyk & Davidson](#), says associates who leave for international firms often come back after realizing the grass is no greener.

"The sense I'm getting is the international law firms are not presenting them with the career development they're looking for," says Jeyaretnam. "They hit a plateau."

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