

Recession Advice to Associates: Keep Your Head Down and Work

By Ashby Jones

Had you administered truth serum to your average Big Law partner just prior to the recession, he or she may well have given you an earful about law-firm associates. They're spoiled, he may have said. We pay them \$160k per year — a king's ransom for any 26 year-old with virtually no real work experience — and yet their list of complaints is legion. Our hours are too long. We're not getting courtroom experience. Pro-bono work doesn't count toward our billable requirement. Waaaa!!!

Ah, what a difference a few years and a deep global recession make. Granted, with layoffs and pay-cuts and an ever-dwindling amount of work, life has been anything but pleasant for law-firm managers. But on the bright side, they're presumably hearing fewer complaints from associates, who, [according to a story](#) in today's NLJ, "are finding that the balance of power has shifted away from them and into the hands of law firm managers."

According to the NLJ story, one mid-level litigation associate is still furious about her firm's decision in March to slash the salaries of associates who didn't bill their target hours in 2008. But that doesn't mean she's going to take up her grievances with the partnership at the national firm. Instead, she has resigned herself to quietly fuming about the cuts, even though she said she met her target hours. "You're really between a rock and a hard place," said the associate.

So what are associates finding themselves staying mum over? To name a few: Working from home, reducing hours, the type of assignments received, sabbaticals and technology allowances.

"If I were an associate, I would keep my head down. I wouldn't want to be the one asking for anything," said Sheri Michaels, a partner and head of the global associate practice group at Major, Lindsey & Africa.

To a large degree, associates seem to be following this advice. Some associates who may have believed they would get challenging assignments are performing less-stimulating tasks such as document review, as work has dried up. But they aren't complaining to partners.

"There has been a lot of work/life pressure from Gen Y attorneys on law firms, and now that voice is being tempered because of layoffs, delayed start dates and rescinded offers," said Deborah Epstein Henry, founder and president of consulting firm Flex-Time Lawyers.

Henry added that the poor economy is dissuading some mothers pursuing flexible or part-time schedules because they fear losing their jobs.

"My general sense is that the economy and the layoffs have impacted attorneys' willingness to ask for flexible work schedules," said one part-time attorney and working mother who asked not to be named. "You want to be careful, bill as many hours as you can, and not be next on the list," she said.