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2006 Salary Forecast: Larger Paychecks

Thomas Adcock
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Good health and increasing wealth for the private sector of the U.S. law industry are predicted for 2006 in a newly released annual salary forecast from Robert Half Legal.

Nationwide, average starting pay for legal professionals -- attorneys, law firm administrators, paralegals, librarians and clerks -- is expected to rise 6.1 percent across the board this year, according to the report. This year's estimation is almost double the 3.4 percent rise for 2005, a year in which salaries rose as modestly as during the previous two years, according to Maura Winson Mann, a northeast regional manager for Robert Half

Legal.

"Legal hiring managers [are] more confident about a sustainable economic recovery," said Charles Volkert, executive director of Robert Half Legal. "As a result, they are adding staff and planning for new business opportunities."

Norman Reimer, president of the New York County Lawyers' Association, agreed.

"Salaries don't go up unless revenues are going up, so that's good news for some segments of the profession," said Reimer.

He added a rhetorical question, "But is this a harbinger of inflation?"

For the New York City metro market, steep salary boosts are projected for young in-house lawyers at corporations: 9.9 percent for first-years and 9.1 percent for those with one to three years experience.

Other large increases are expected for associates at small to midsize firms: 8.5 percent for senior associates and 7.9 percent for first-years. Projected salary increases in other categories ranged from customary to robust -- 3.2 percent to 7.2 percent -- but were virtually flat for senior associates at large firms (0.4 percent).

Seth Zachary, chairman of Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker, said the forecast "parallels our own perspective" in his firm's hiring and recruiting of younger lawyers to beef up legal teams in order to meet growing demands in practice areas that Robert Half sees as next year's hottest.

Litigation, said Mann, "is the driving force." She also predicted increased business in patent and copyright law, as well as general corporate matters, "particularly in financial services and banking."

Beyond New York, she said, the new year is expected to bring increased business in real estate and bankruptcy practice areas.

"Law offices are hiring on a full-time and project basis," according to the forecast. "For project positions, they are bringing in legal professionals with specialized skills to address complex initiatives and support case teams. ... The employment market is heating up, and qualified job seekers are beginning to receive multiple offers."

Zachary attributes business growth -- and, therefore, more hires and brisker salaries for attorneys and other law firm employees -- on demand from abroad.

"So many American firms have a growing international focus, with growing demands from their global clients," said Zachary. "It puts

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a strain on our administrative personnel."

Consequently, he said, there are "new opportunities" for increased compensation. Those opportunities extend to such legal specialists as librarians and automated litigation support managers, where Robert Half expects salaries on a nationwide basis to jump 16 percent and 10.3 percent, respectively, in 2006.

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