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For NLJ 250 firms, weak partner growth, while 'others' disappear

Leigh Jones
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Associate losses at the nation's largest law firms made history this year, but results for other attorneys and partners on the NLJ 250 show upheaval within those ranks as well.

Law firms since 2005 had increased the number of "other" attorneys — a category comprising counsel, of counsel, senior counsel and staff attorneys — to help handle boom-time business.

But in 2009, they cut about 10% of those attorneys, for a loss of 1,113 lawyers. By comparison, NLJ 250 firms shed 8.7% of associates in 2009. This year, 46 "other" attorneys worked at the average NLJ 250 firm, compared to 50 the year before.

The results are part of the [2009 NLJ 250](#), *The National Law Journal's* annual ranking of the nation's largest law firms, which was released Nov. 9. For the purposes of the NLJ 250 survey, "other" attorneys are neither partners nor associates.

From 2005 to 2008, law firms increased the number of "other" attorneys by 16.7%. The biggest one-year jump occurred from 2006 to 2007, when firms added 15% more of those types of lawyers. This year, the number declined to 11,434 from 12,547 attorneys in 2008.

"When you've got overcapacity, the first thing you get rid of are these extraneous groups," said Ward Bower, a consultant with Altman Weil. He said that as business wanes, counsel and staff attorneys become less profitable, and, therefore, more expendable.

Partners fared better in 2009. This year, NLJ 250 firms had 0.9% more partners, a number that may well be little comfort to attorneys in the other categories, but one that nevertheless represents a marked decline in growth.

From 2005 to 2008, NLJ 250 firms increased partner headcount by 13.8%. The biggest jump in recent history was from 2005 to 2006, when the number of partners climbed by 5.1%. This year, the partners total was 53,468, compared with 52,980 in 2008.

That partner numbers did not decrease is evidence that law firms sought to protect their biggest moneymakers in the



downturn, Bower said.

The overall decline in attorney headcount this year on the NLJ 250 was 4%. The drop was the biggest since the inception of the survey in 1978 and only the third time ever that totals have fallen.

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The NLJ 250

Our annual ranking of the nation's largest law firms.

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