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New Associates Find Work but Remain Mindful of Bad Economy

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Three months before graduating law school, Jennifer Brooks had already lined up her first associate's job and was planning out her life. Recently married, she was working as a transactional paralegal at a busy commercial real estate firm in West Hartford, Conn., and attending law school at night.

The deal was Brooks would join the firm after she passed the bar exam later that year, and she single-handedly negotiated her contract, including an agreement for the firm to pick up the tabs for exam prep courses and bar exam fees.

Then in the early part of 2008, the firm announced drastic personnel cuts. Brooks' job offer was rescinded. She was left with few options, because with a job seemingly in hand, she hadn't participated in any on-campus interviews with other firms visiting the [University of Connecticut School of Law](#).

"I had the rug pulled out from under me," Brooks said.

About a year and a half later, Brooks is now a first-year associate, this time at [Conway & Stoughton](#), an eight-lawyer West Hartford firm that focuses on insurance defense and business law. But what she realized in the year after the rug was pulled out is that she needed to diversify her skill set in a volatile economy. To land the Conway & Stoughton job, she worked as litigation clerk in the Milford Superior Court.

"As the [job] market continues to change, I think having transactional and litigation experience is pretty valuable," she said.

Brooks' experiences came at the early stages of the upheaval that the legal industry is experiencing. Associates have been cut by the hundreds since last year, and law school students who thought they had jobs this fall found that they wouldn't start until next year or that they didn't have a job at all.

"I had friends whose job offers were rescinded as well," Brooks said. "Some transitioned to in-house counsel positions to try to insulate themselves. I think everybody scrambles a little bit in this recession."



MORE CAUTION

Last week, the *Connecticut Law Tribune* published its annual New Associates Yearbook, about a month after new associates have traditionally joined firms. But not everyone who expected to be working right now is on the list. Like dozens of counterparts throughout the country, some of Connecticut's largest firms have pushed back start dates.

The newest associates at [Wiggin and Dana](#) and [Day Pitney](#) won't start until early 2010, and [Robinson & Cole](#) delayed its class until next month. Five new associates have already started at [Shipman & Goodwin](#), but three colleagues won't begin until next fall.

Stephen Gellman, hiring partner for Shipman & Goodwin, said his firm is more cautious now to match hiring strategies with needs as business has slowed. But because other firms have scaled back hiring as well, Gellman has noticed during this fall's recruiting season that the quality of potential employees is increasing.

"Overall, we saw candidates with higher academic credentials from their law schools," Gellman said. "A sub-set of that is we saw a lot of students from Connecticut who are at top law schools and are including Hartford firms in their job search for the first time."

Theresa Augustauskas, a new attorney at [Saxe, Doernberger & Vita](#) in Hamden, Conn., said some of her friends have been caught up in firms' downsizing. She counts herself among the fortunate to have landed at a firm that was tops on her list.

"Everyone [in law school] was concerned about the job market," said Augustauskas, who graduated from [Quinnipiac School of Law](#) in May. "A lot of people I know either settled for a job or went for the absolute best job at big New York firms and now they have nothing" because firms rescinded offers.

Augustauskas said she wasn't worried about losing her job offer this year. She worked 15 hours a week on research projects for Saxe, Doernberger & Vita during her last year in law school and found that the firm's partners were open to discussing the law firm's financial outlook with associates.

She also realized that last-second job changes cut both ways.

"In the past year or two, some students had accepted jobs and then backed out on [Saxe, Doernberger & Vita] when something better came along," Augustauskas said. "I felt [the firm] had been burned in the past and they wouldn't do that to me."

ONE STEP AHEAD

James Needham knows all about those high-profile jobs in New York City. He spent the last four years at [Cahill, Gordon & Reindel](#), a corporate litigation firm of about 300 lawyers that earlier this year shed 10 percent of its associates.

But by then, Needham was on his way out because he had no intention of running the rat race in Manhattan while starting a family. He hooked up with the Hartford office of [Bracewell & Giuliani](#) in part because he connected with former Connecticut U.S. Attorney Kevin J. O'Connor, who joined the firm earlier this year and who also had once practiced at Cahill Gordon.

"Working in New York City was stressful," Needham said. "Then you read the blogs and the news about firms cutting lawyers. I knew I didn't want to work in New York City very long."

While Needham brings experience as a white-collar criminal defense attorney, he's branching out by working in Bracewell & Giuliani's international bankruptcy practice group. "I've learned you need a hedge in a down market," Needham said.

For the past 10 years, Nelson DaCunha has been trying to insulate himself from the effects of a bad job market by balancing work, school and family as the sole breadwinner and father of three children.

In June, he started as a first-year associate with [Cantor Colburn](#), where the former electrician researches patents for computer software, hardware and business operations. But DaCunha has more life experience than the typical first-year, and he's had plenty of opportunity to worry about job security.

After earning his undergrad degree in computer science in 1998 then an MBA, he joined Webster Bank around 2000 when the bank was unveiling its online banking system. He worked his way up to a senior management position responsible for Webster's online services but decided he wanted to enroll in law school to address matters of technology and the law.

It was good timing. As DaCunha was entering his final year of law school in 2008, Webster was on the verge of massive layoffs. So he left Webster and joined Cantor Colburn in a research position before graduating from UConn law school in January.

"There was some risk [in leaving a high-level job at Webster], and it was one of those things where I was starting over at the bottom and taking a pay cut," DaCunha said. "But we tightened the budget at home and made it work."

And even as patent business slowed for IP firms like Cantor Colburn over the past year, DaCunha didn't question his career switch. Through his various jobs, DaCunha has already learned a lesson that younger associates may have been exposed to for the first time. "There's nothing guaranteed, no matter where you are," DaCunha said.