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Big firms slashed headcount at international offices, NLJ 250 shows

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Attorneys in the international offices of the nation's top law firms weren't spared a pummeling by a recession that hit global proportions in 2009.

A big piece of the 4% decline in the total number of attorneys at large law firms came from losses in international offices, according to The National Law Journal's NLJ 250, a ranking of the nation's biggest firms, which was released Nov. 9.

Law firms with significant foreign practices saw their numbers in those offices decline — often sharply — as they struggled to adjust to plummeting demand from clients.

No. 2 ranked DLA Piper cut its London office by 10.6%, to 379 attorneys from 424 in 2008. The firm's London location is its largest. The firm also closed its 23-attorney Bergen, Norway outpost. With 3,450 attorneys, DLA Piper experienced a 7.3% drop in headcount this year.

Jones Day, ranked No. 3 with 2,492 attorneys, saw an 18% decline in its Hong Kong office, which fell to 50 attorneys from 61. The firm's Beijing location fell to 28 attorneys from 40 last year, but it also opened an office in Dubai, with five attorneys. Jones Day's total headcount in 2009 dropped by 1.2%.

White & Case this year closed its Bangkok office, which had 44 attorneys in 2008. The 2,061-attorney firm is ranked No. 4. In addition, it lost a 15-lawyer office in Milan, Italy, and a seven-attorney office in Dresden, Germany. White & Case experienced a 6.5% decrease in total headcount.

Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, which slumped by 11.6% this year to 1,990 attorneys, declined by 12.6% in its London office, to 111 lawyers. The firm lost five attorneys from its Tokyo office, which now has 33 lawyers, and six from its Munich office, which has 13 workers.

Latham & Watkins' London office took a punch. It had 144 attorneys this year, compared with 167 in 2008, for a 13.8% decline. The firm's Paris office shrank to 79 attorneys from 103 last year. With 1,878 lawyers, the firm — ranked No. 6 this year — added a five-attorney office in Dubai.

The London office of Mayer Brown sank by 9.5% to 297 lawyers from 328 in 2008, and its Frankfurt office had a drastic



decline to 58 lawyers from 85 last year. Ranked No. 10 this year with 1,642 lawyers, Mayer Brown lost 12.7% of its attorneys in 2009.

Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton had a relatively good year. It said goodbye to 11 lawyers in its London office, now down to 74. However, it picked up 13 attorneys in its Brussels location. The 973-attorney law firm added 61 attorneys to its headcount this year, landing it in the No. 23 spot.

Shearman & Sterling's 99-attorney London office saw a 19-attorney reduction compared with 2008, for a 16.1% loss. At No. 39, it had 796 attorneys in 2009 compared with 870 in 2008.

No. 1 ranked Baker & McKenzie showed gains in nearly all foreign offices. In 2007, the firm slipped from the No. 1 spot that it had held since the inception of the NLJ 250 in 1978. As for this year's gain of 323 lawyers, a firm spokesperson said that its geographic diversity helped it weather the downturn and that the firm continued hiring lawyers in a number of international markets.

The 4% overall decline in attorney headcount on the NLJ 250 this year represents the biggest drop ever for firms on the survey and is only the third time that cumulative headcount totals have fallen.

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