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Indian firms benefit as top talent moves back home

Law firms in India are reaping the benefits of the contracting legal market abroad by recruiting top talent from major international firms.

The trend emerges as new data reveals the US legal industry shed almost 3,000 jobs in March alone while, at the same time, Indian lawyers who joined UK firms during the boom periods are now being sent home.

India firms such as Khaitan & Co, Amarchand & Mangaldas and Nishith Desai Associates (NDA) are either in the process of recruiting or have recently boosted their numbers with significant hires.

Vivek Kathpalia, a partner at NDA, said that the firm has recently received several enquiries from lawyers overseas, particularly Indian lawyers who would normally seek positions abroad after completing their LL.M degrees there. "We've received a number of enquiries and we're very excited with this development," said Kathpalia. "We've responded positively and look forward to them joining us soon."

Delhi-based Khaitan & Co has also received a significant boost by appointing a former Freshfields senior associate, Bharat Anand. Anand had been with the Magic Circle firm since 2001, based in the London office.

Rabindra Jhunjhunwala, a partner at the firm, said that, as economic conditions deteriorate overseas, both Indian and foreign lawyers abroad are looking to India as the country's influence escalates and it emerges as a significant source of work for firms.

"The economic environment may have started a trend but more importantly, I believe, those that come here, establish themselves and identify those firms that will be the most sought after," he said. "There will be one set of lawyers who arrive here with the foreign firms, and another set of lawyers who, after having seen the [growth], would want to join Indian law firms who have an alliance with foreign firms."

Last year, Khaitan & Co made headlines after announcing it had appointed lawyers from an international firm.

"I think we started the trend in September last year," said Jhunjhunwala. "We made a number of hires from Ashurst, first the firm's India group head [Murali Neelakantan] and then ... other corporate lawyers."

NDA, which has offices in both India and the US, recently hosted a group of Harvard law interns. "They spent time with us in Mumbai and it was an enriching experience both for them and for us," said Kathpalia. "The economic crisis may actually be a catalyst for that overall trend," said Kathpalia. "But the growth in the Indian economy will [also] increase this flow of talent."