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Eckert Seamans lays off 160 contract lawyers at project end

Premium content from Pittsburgh Business Times - by Patty Tascarella

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Eckert Seamans Cherin & Mellott LLC, Pittsburgh's fourth-largest law firm, is laying off roughly 160 contract lawyers as of June 8, confirmed CEO **Timothy Ryan**.

Ryan said the attorneys, who all work out of the company's Pittsburgh office, had been brought on to work on "a very large mass tort litigation project that's winding down."

Roughly 40 will be moved to other projects, Ryan added. Currently, the firm has contract lawyers working on two other cases. Ryan would not identify the clients.

Using lawyers hired for the duration of a project, often two to three years, has been part of **Eckert Seamans'** business model since the late 1980s, but increased significantly during the past decade because its caseload grew and the volume of data related to trials accelerated.

"We've had upward of 200 contract lawyers at several points over the past 10 years when we began mass tort project work and handled a number of pharmaceutical product liability cases," Ryan said.

The contract lawyers review electronic documents and data, freeing full-time lawyers to concentrate on areas of specialization and to build client relationships. Ryan said this system enables the firm to keep costs at bay for clients.

"Around 25 years ago, lawyers would sit around a conference table and wade through boxes of content related to litigation," said **Richard Dandrea**, chairman of **Eckert Seamans'** mass tort group. "Now, because of the volumes of data that sits on servers and in email files of personnel involved in litigation, it's more intense and time-consuming. The key is to bring efficiency to it."

Dandrea said the project that required 160 contract lawyers largely involved reviewing and coding documents that were sent to opposing lawyers, and identifying important documents for review by the defense team.

Contract lawyers are not included in **Eckert Seamans'** official head count — now 352 firmwide, up by nearly 30 so far this year — although some have been brought on repeatedly.

"Some have worked for us since 2001," Ryan said. "For the most part, we hire directly. We've been doing this long enough and have vetted resumes. We've been fortunate to find a group of talented lawyers to handle these tasks while delivering tremendous results."

Eckert Seamans isn't alone. Last year, 31 percent of law firms across the country added contract lawyers, according to a national study released last week by **Altman Weil Inc.**, a Newton Square, Pa.-based consulting firm. The study, conducted in April and May 2011, polled leadership at 805 firms with 50 or more lawyers. The 240 respondents included 38 percent of the country's 250-largest law firms.

Some 44 percent said they used contract lawyers in 2010, and 59 percent said they will either do so this year or are considering it. Sixty percent said they expect the increased use of contract lawyers will be a permanent trend, up from 52 percent last year.

Lori Carpenter, president of Downtown-based recruitment firm **Carpenter Legal Search**, said firms, in general, use contract lawyers for projects when they're not certain of whether the work will continue.

"Instead of hiring permanent associates, they're hiring people who used to be associates at other firms who lost their positions in the contract attorney positions," Carpenter said.

She said some of these lawyers are able to segue from contract to full-time posts.

"We're seeing more of that than we have in the past," Carpenter said. "With firms uncertain of the stability of the work, they don't want to bring someone on if they can't keep them busy."

But she said more local firms have increased full-time hiring this year and she has not noticed an uptick in contract lawyer use.

Ryan hasn't noticed competition for contract lawyers hurting **Eckert Seamans'** ability to find the talent it needs.

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"Some of it is a function of how we treat them, which is very professionally, and we compensate them quite fairly," Ryan said. "It's also a function of the economy. The legal market has been on the buyer's side for a while, and we understand that some firms may be trying to get into this segment. But we've not had tremendous difficulty in securing the contract lawyers we need. We think this model is far beyond mass tort and that we can apply it to securities litigation, patent litigation and even long-scale labor projects."



Senior reporter Patty Tascarella covers banking, finance, legal, marketing and advertising and foundations at the [Pittsburgh Business Times](#).

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