

Law isn't adding jobs like other sectors

While nation's unemployment rate dipped in November, the number of jobs added in the legal industry was stagnate.

By Casey Sullivan

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The nation saw nonfarm payroll add 120,000 jobs in November and the unemployment rate dropped to the lowest level since March 2009, but job growth in the legal industry remained sluggish as only 100 jobs were added nationwide last month.

According to the data compiled by the U.S. Department of Labor, legal jobs rose from 1,112,900 to 1,113,000, a fraction of a percentage point, ending up with 3,400 jobs less than the amount the industry had at this time last year.

Since 2010, the shaky economy has triggered legal jobs numbers to remain unstable, rising and dipping on a month-by-month basis, but only staying between the margins of 1,109,000 and

1,116,000 jobs.

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As more of those firms find support by joining with bigger and more profitable firms, and as the brightening economy prompts increased legal demand, legal insiders are hopeful that 2012 will prove more fruitful for law firms than 2011.

"Most firms are either doing modestly better or they're flat from 2010," said Altman Weil consultant Bill Brennan. "But there are a minority that

are well-positioned, and they've navigated these turbulent waters from proactive management decision making [mainly layoffs]. They are enjoying record years and they are taking advantage of that by picking up lawyers at law firms whose profits are really low."

But recruiters say even though law firms might be more financially stable come 2012, they don't expect the years of unencumbered growth and spending by firms to return.

"The mass fluctuation in the global economy is leaving most entirely uncertain as what will happen in 2012," said recruiter Larry Watanabe of Watanabe Nason LLC, looking forward to next year. "Firms will be cautious and approach the New Year conservatively."

And for headhunters, that means more of the same scrutiny they've endured this past year as law firm managers vet laterals more diligently, afraid to take a false step that might threaten the firm's stability, according to recruiter John Jameson of The Jameson Group.

"That has certainly had the effect of making my job as a recruiter much difficult," Jameson said.

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