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Morgan Lewis plucks group of Fulbright & Jaworski partners

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The Houston office of Morgan Lewis & Bockius LLP, a Philadelphia-based international law firm, has scored a major coup, taking six intellectual property and litigation partners from Fulbright & Jaworski LLP and the head of King & Spalding LLP's Latin American practice group.

The seven attorneys tendered their resignations on Jan. 2, and will begin work at Morgan Lewis on Jan. 7, according to Brady Edwards, head of Morgan Lewis' Houston office.

The move is the first major splash for the local office, which opened last January after Morgan Lewis acquired boutique firm Edwards, Burns & Krider LLP, which was headed by Edwards.

But it's not the first time Fulbright has lost an attorney to Morgan Lewis. In October, Fulbright litigation partner Winn Carter left for Morgan Lewis, and recently senior counsel litigator and tax attorney Clay Rogers left Fulbright to join Carter.

"While many of our attorneys have made their careers here, others choose different paths," Mike Conlon, Fulbright's managing partner in Houston, said via e-mail in response to this week's resignations. "We wish our colleagues well."

Carlos Treistman, former head of King & Spalding's Latin American practice group, which is based in Houston, will handle foreign transactions for Morgan Lewis in Houston, with a focus on Central and South America. King & Spalding representatives were not available for comment.

The IP group from Fulbright bolsters a practice area that has been strong on both coasts for Morgan Lewis, and aims to capitalize on the heavy volume of patent litigation filings in Marshall.

"Given the high level of intellectual property litigation in the Eastern District of Texas, it is a piece we were interested in getting in place in Houston," Edwards says.

Morgan Lewis has followed a standard expansion protocol since its arrival in Houston a year ago, making small moves before picking off a significant chunk of a practice group on the way to establishing a significant market presence.

"The goal is to reach that critical mass of 25 lawyers," says Robert Roland of Associated Counsel of America, a legal search firm. "It's almost impossible to do anything with a few lawyers. You have to reach critical mass to get business and clients."

In Dallas, where Morgan Lewis has had a presence since 2004, the firm recently broke the 20-lawyer plateau with the addition of 11 labor and employment lawyers from Baker & McKenzie LLP, a Chicago-based firm.

With 11 partners in the Houston office as of Jan. 7, and the total number of local lawyers approaching 20, Edwards won't comment on any ideal number for growth, and says Morgan Lewis is managed by practice group demands, not office size.

MOVING TARGETS

Houston has long been fertile ground for powerful, homegrown firms such as Fulbright, Baker Botts, Bracewell & Giuliani LLP, Vinson & Elkins LLP and Andrews Kurth LLP. As such, they have been hit hard.

Although some say all the Houston firms are vulnerable -- even previously untouchable firms like Baker Botts and V&E -- Roland says it's not easy to get a partner to jump ship.

"Most of them are making really good money and they're so busy they can't come up for more," he says. "There are firms here that have talked to dozens and dozens of high-profile partners and haven't been able to snag one yet."

Roland says some firms are offering partners annual salaries and bonuses of between \$1 million and \$2 million.

"They have a lot of power coming into this area because the big Houston firms are just recently breaking \$1 million in profits per partner," he says. "They have a lot of purchasing power."

Fulbright attorneys joining

Morgan Lewis:

Paul Krieger, head of intellectual properties practice;
Lucas Elliot, partner, intellectual property litigation;
David Levy, partner, intellectual property litigation;
Rick Rambo, partner, intellectual property litigation;
Erik Hawes, partner, intellectual property litigation; and
Hugh Tanner, partner, litigation, tax.

Carlos Treistman, head of King & Spalding's Latin American practice will also join Morgan Lewis.

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