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## 'Talent Wars,' AI Tech At Top Of NJ Firm Leaders' Minds In '25

By **Jake Maher**

Law360 (January 2, 2025, 8:01 AM EST) -- As 2025 kicks off, the battle for retaining and attracting legal talent at New Jersey law firms – and not losing attorneys to larger players – is at the top of firm leaders' minds in the Garden State.

Keeping associates around long enough to become partners has become harder than ever before, as out-of-state firms, especially from New York, move into the state and siphon off talent with bigger salaries, leaders told Law360 Pulse. Meanwhile, those same forces are also making it harder to add partners via lateral hires, putting the squeeze on New Jersey firms.

"If you were to say to me, 'What is the one thing that keeps you awake at night more than anything,' it is that," Peter Torcicollo, managing director of Gibbons PC, said in an interview. "It's the talent wars."

Most firm leaders reported a solid, at least, year in 2024 and generally bright prospects for 2025, but running a law firm remains a complicated business. Hiring and retaining talent is a concern, as well as adapting to what artificial intelligence can offer lawyers and navigating a year in which a new presidential administration will take over and New Jerseyans will choose a new governor.

Law360 Pulse gathered Torcicollo and three other leaders in the state — John Ursin, managing partner at Schenck Price Smith & King LLP; Angelo Cifaldi, president and managing director of Wilentz Goldman & Spitzer PA; and Joe Lubertazzi and Joe Boccassini, chairman of the executive committee and managing partner respectively of McCarter & English LLP – to hear what challenges are on the horizon for Garden State firms in 2025, and how they'll face them.

### 'War for Talent'

New Jersey managing partners across the board said hiring and retaining attorneys, both at the associate and at the partner level, was the most difficult it has been in recent years in 2024, and unlikely to get easier in 2025.

Law leaders said larger New York City firms are increasingly opening satellite offices in New Jersey and expanding their search for clients nationwide. Meanwhile, the possibility of working from home is cutting into New Jersey firms' advantage in terms of convenience over firms in the city.

"There's definitely a trend there where we used to have a lot more barriers to regional pressures," Ursin said.

Taken together, the result is a "war for talent," Boccassini added.

Cifaldi said that at Wilentz, the problem has manifested itself partly in a struggle to keep associates onboard long enough for them to turn into partners.

"The trend is, a lot of them come, they get trained, and then they get poached by the ultra-large law firms who, frankly, throw a ton of money at them, and you can't blame them for leaving," Cifaldi said.

Cifaldi added that the market for lateral hires of partners with solid books of business is also harder than it has been for the same reasons.

The result for 2025, New Jersey managing partners said, is a rethinking of how to make their firms attractive places to work.

At McCarter & English, Boccassini and Lubertazzi said they are doubling down on the firm's culture and the career opportunities it can offer in the long run.

"We're trying to do our best to think long-term to offer a value proposition to both partners and associates to say, you can go somewhere else and maybe make a little more money in the short term," Boccassini said. "But what we offer is a unique culture, a special opportunity for young associates and senior associates to become partners, and for partners to become real owners in the enterprise."

Other managing partners said the question of how to retain top attorneys has merged to some degree with questions about what a post-COVID workplace should look like, as they seek a balance between attracting talent with flexible work policies and encouraging in-office attendance.

Torricollo, at Gibbons, said the trade-off is sometimes stark.

"We've had lateral interviews and you can see sometimes just from across the table when you tell people that there's an expectation that they're in the office, it's almost palpable that they're like, 'Well, then this isn't for me,'" he said.

Ursin said at Schenck Price, firm leaders have pushed hard for attorneys to return to the office, but spent much of 2024 thinking about how to make the workplace a more inviting place to spend time.

Picnics, yoga and spinning sessions followed by beer or cocktails have become a part of the solution, Ursin said, as well as, above all else, paid lunches. He said, "the value of paid lunches cannot be overstated."

Ursin said in spite of the challenges in hiring, his firm's experience shows the answers are relatively simple, if not always easy.

"I'm not losing sleep over that because I think we can effectively combat it," Ursin said. "You have the right culture, and you recruit from the right areas, and you make your workplace a place where people want to come and work."

## **Politics, State and National**

With the new Trump presidential administration taking over in January and the race for New Jersey's next governor taking place in November, politics appears to have the potential to be a minefield for legal leaders.

They'll have to help clients prepare for new regulations at the federal level and help them navigate what is shaping up to be a fierce election year at home in New Jersey, but managing partners who spoke to Law360 Pulse said that by building bipartisan connections and putting effective internal screening policies in place, they're preparing themselves well.

At Wilentz, for example, Cifaldi said the firm represents the state and municipalities in various matters and does work on bonds and land use matters, raising the risk of running afoul of campaign finance laws or alienating clients by getting too involved in politics. The firm is traditionally considered a Democratic one but has many Republican partners as well, Cifaldi said.

Accordingly, the firm's in-house ethics experts screen political contributions its attorneys make and keep a close eye on situations where the firm may host an event featuring politicians.

"Everything is screened," Cifaldi said. "We try to be ultra-careful because there could be potentially a lot to gain, but potentially a lot to lose."

Ursin at Schenck Price said he's more concerned about helping clients prepare for the effects of the 2024 presidential election than the potential effects of the governor's race, as the firm is "politically

agnostic."

He pointed to developments like an injunction from a federal court in Texas in August blocking a plan from the Federal Trade Commission to bar noncompete clauses in employment contracts, and more recently, an injunction on Dec. 3 from a Texas federal judge blocking the Corporate Transparency Act.

"We were gearing up to file hundreds of Corporate Transparency Acts filings in the month of December, and that stopped dead today," Ursin said.

Ursin said those rulings may have been influenced by the direction the incoming Trump administration is expected to take. Preparing for 2025, therefore, means staying flexible and being able to keep clients up to speed on fast-paced changes in the political landscape.

"Since the election, almost on a daily basis we're talking about regulations of things that we think are going to change," Ursin said.

On a tactical level, the governor's race in New Jersey offers some opportunities for firms in the state.

At Gibbons, Torricollo said the firm has built a strong government affairs practice in Trenton with good relations with both Democratic and Republican politicians.

The firm has enjoyed close connections with the administrations of Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy and his immediate predecessor, former Republican Gov. Chris Christie, and with other administrations stretching even further back, and plans to have preliminary meetings with all candidates running for governor by the time the primaries begin.

Lubertazzi similarly said McCarter & English is not exclusively aligned with either political party, and on top of that, the firm has used hiring to get an advantage in election work: In August the firm hired Stephanie Olivo, the former head of compliance at the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission, to beef up its practice advising on campaign contributions and other issues.

Whichever way things head, the firm is ready, Boccassini said.

"It's impossible to tell how it's going to go, and we're not really in the business of trying to do that," he said. "What we're in the business of is trying to make sure that regardless of which way it goes, we are prepared to react and help our clients do that."

## **Leaders Divided on AI**

Managing partners in New Jersey agreed artificial intelligence is a technological advance to watch – but as for its uses in the law, opinion was split.

Ursin saw changes on the horizon in the near future.

"I am certain that AI will significantly impact the practice of law. It's going to impact the structure of our firm," Ursin said. "The second thing is, it's not five years away. It's much faster than that."

Some practices will be affected differently, Ursin and other managing partners cautioned. Practices involving more personalized counseling and negotiations, for instance, are not as likely to change.

Practices with significant amounts of rote work, however, could be in line for significant change. Cifaldi said he has found useful applications for AI in processing and pulling out relevant information from large volumes of medical records in large mass litigation that he handles.

"Although we've not been using it without checking, it is remarkable," Cifaldi said.

At Wilentz, Cifaldi said the firm has an internal committee looking into the applications of AI, and said he foresees firms in New Jersey and beyond needing to take similar steps to see how AI can be integrated into their work.

"It's something I think every law firm is going to have to grapple with," Cifaldi said, "because if it

operates properly and is handled and used appropriately, I think it could result in cost savings and servicing the clients better, and we have an obligation to understand it and use it within the limits of the technology."

Toricollo said Gibbons has found uses for AI in tasks like sifting through lengthy deposition transcripts to create a timeline of events, a task where AI can improve significantly on the time it would have taken an associate to complete it. Other AI tools are helping with legal writing in areas like proofreading and checking legal citations.

"It's enabling our attorneys to be more efficient and therefore more productive with how they're spending their time," Toricollo said.

He also said client opinions on AI have come almost "full circle:" In the early days of AI, outside general counsel guidelines would prohibit attorneys from using AI, but as time went on, clients began allowing firms to use AI as long as firms cleared it with them first, and outside general counsels are now in fact requesting that firms use AI to save time on certain kinds of tasks.

Other managing partners were more cautious about where AI might fit into the way law is practiced. Boccassini, for instance, said he is not sure that AI has advanced to the point that it is useful to most lawyers in general, noting examples of attorneys being sanctioned by courts for filing AI-produced briefs with fake citations.

"We're approaching it like we approach every other change that comes," Boccassini said. "We take a thoughtful, conservative, measured approach. We try to make sure that we are on the cutting edge, but not getting out there ahead of things."

--Editing by Linda Voorhis.

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