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While getting his solo law practice off the ground, Wesley Johnson supplements his income with temp work for LawyerLink LLC. Photo: Erik Unger

From this week's Focus

Contract jobs a viable way to stay afloat

By: Dee Gill January 05, 2009

Attorney Wesley Johnson has his own law office in downtown Chicago, a solo practice he started in 2001 when the mid-sized law firm he was working for folded.

But about half his income lately has come from temporary work at LawyerLink LLC, a Chicago-based legal staffing agency with offices in the Sears

Tower. LawyerLink pays him by the hour as a contract attorney for its clients, typically major law firms that need extra manpower during big cases.

Mr. Johnson is happy for the hours. "Right now, I look at it as something I do while I get my practice off the ground," he says. "It pays the bills."

Temporary jobs, formerly the exclusive territory of receptionists and data-entry personnel, are now an option for almost every type of professional.

These jobs typically pay less on a per-hour basis than accountants, information technology, medical and other professionals would earn in salaried jobs, but they bring cash to otherwise unemployed or underemployed workers and offer more flexible schedules.

"If someone wants to start at 7 and be home by 4 for their kids, I applaud that," says Jennifer Bertoglio, founder and chief executive of LawyerLink. She says about half of the 74 attorneys working in her offices have chosen to work serial temporary jobs rather than salaried positions.

Will temping help the laid-off professional find a new permanent job? Not likely, according to several executive recruiters. "It's a death knell if (potential employers) see that on the résumé," says Gary

D'Alessio, president of Chicago Legal Search Ltd. "Every time I get someone with contract or temporary project as their last job, my reaction is, 'Why couldn't they get a permanent position?'"

Mr. Johnson has no illusions that his contract work will get him a job at a big law firm. But that's not what he's after.

With the temp job covering his bills, he can walk down the street at the end of the day to his own office and concentrate on building that business.

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