Believe it or not, patent attorneys are hot. An overhaul of the patent filing system, coupled with bidding wars for corporate patent portfolios such as Google Inc.’s recent $12.5-billion deal for Motorola Mobility Holdings Inc., is lifting the glamour quotient of a legal specialty long considered a backwater and largely ignored by big, general-practice firms.

With intellectual property driving corporate value, a boom in patent work is helping law firms weather weaker practices. "You got it—absolutely," says Angelo Bufalino, chairman of the intellectual property practice at Vedder Price P.C., "a lot of times, patent lawyers were looked at as second-class citizens." The hiring has continued more in IP than in other fields," says Kent’s dean, Harold Kent, who estimates that nearly 1 in 3 students has the technical training to become patent lawyers.

The closely watched changes last month in patent law will assign rights to applicants who are first to file, regardless of the timing of the invention. This will spur demand for IP lawyers, just as the scramble for mobile phone patents has, by raising the stakes associated with patent portfolios.

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Demand also has picked up for IP practitioners. "There’s a lot more people moving from big to firm than ever before," says Michael Warnecke, 70, a partner specializing in IP at the Chicago office of Seattle-based Perkins Coie LLP.

In August, for example, Thomas Flarsik, 54, and two colleagues joined the Chicago office of Washington, D.C.-based Sterteoe & Johnson LLP from Chicago’s largest IP boutique, Brinks Hofer Gilson & Lione. "Citing cross-selling opportunities with Sterteoe’s corporate and insurance industry practices, Mr. Flarsik says, "The goal is to work with other clients we could not get exposure to." Carl Icahn and other activist investors have been stirring the IP pot by prodding Libertyville-based Motorola Mobility and other smartphone makers and suppliers to unlock the value of their technology assets.

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