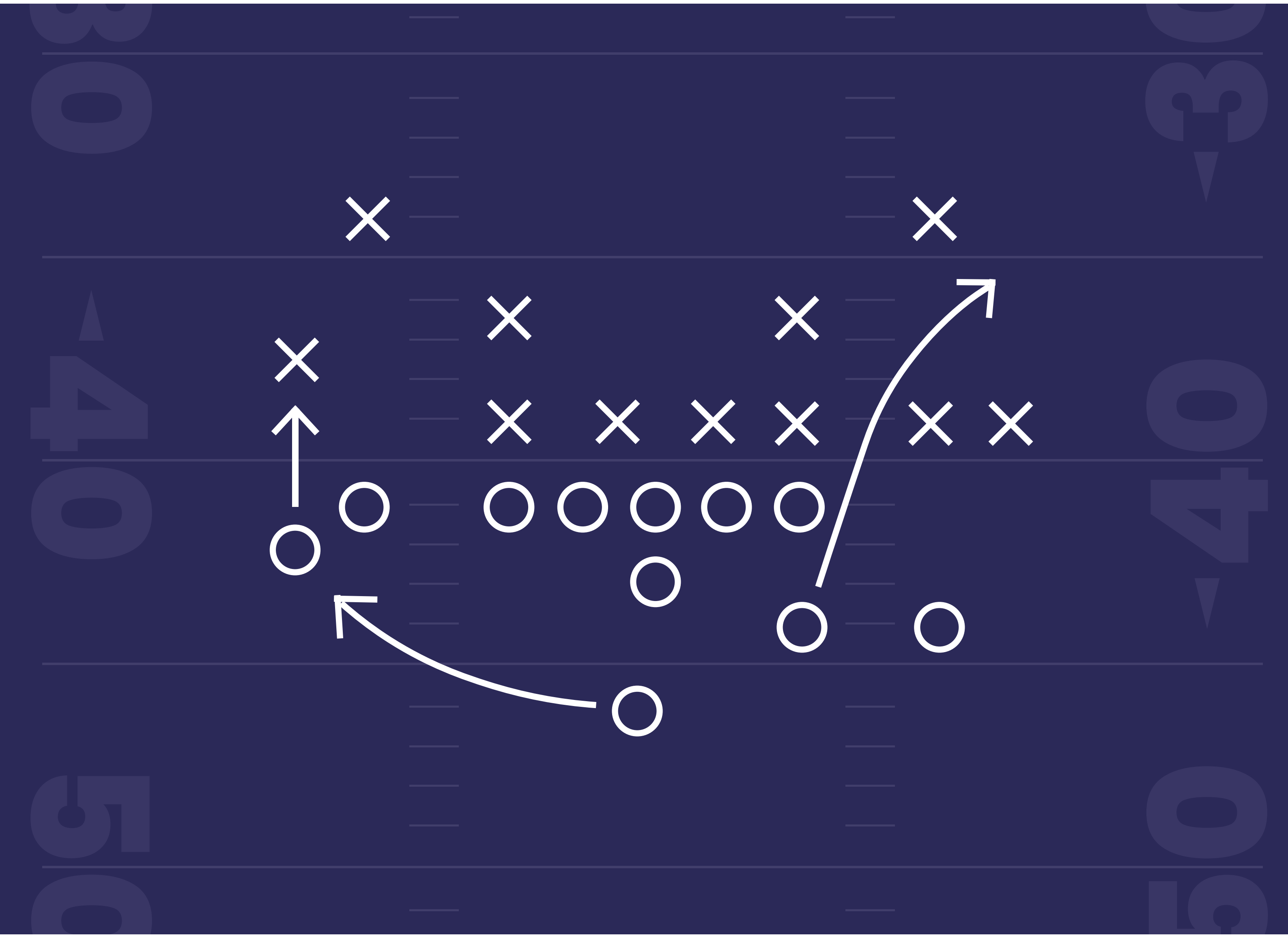
Navigating
Global Growth

A playbook for independent law firms



Contents

Foreword

Mickaël Laurans

In an increasingly interconnected legal landscape, the opportunity for law firms of all sizes to compete internationally has never been more compelling – nor more achievable. The traditional path to global reach, often paved through mergers or office openings, is no longer the only route, if it ever was. Today, firms rooted in a single jurisdiction are demonstrating that independence can be a strategic advantage, not a limitation.

At the Law Society of England and Wales, we have long championed the global relevance of our jurisdiction and the international ambitions of our member firms. We see first-hand how national, regional and boutique firms are leveraging their deep domestic expertise, sector specialism and strong reputations to build meaningful cross-border relationships – all while retaining their autonomy.

This publication, *Navigating Global Growth*, arrives at a pivotal moment. It captures the ingenuity and resilience of domestic champions across 10 jurisdictions, offering a playbook for firms seeking to grow internationally while maintaining their deeply rooted identity. Through networks, alliances, and strategic profile-raising, these firms are not just participating in the global legal market – they are shaping it.

The rise of independent firms with international reach reflects an important aspect of client expectations, where quality, agility, and cultural alignment can outweigh sheer size. It also underscores the value of collaboration over consolidation, and of strategic positioning over physical presence.

I encourage every reader – whether a managing partner, international lead, or strategist – to use this playbook as a springboard. Reflect on your firm's strengths, explore new avenues for cross-border engagement, and take bold steps to elevate your international profile.

The global stage is open – and the time to act is now.

Mickaël Laurans
Head of International,
Law Society of England and Wales

Introduction

Melissa Davis

When I was head of press for the Law Society of England and Wales, coverage of the legal sector could be frustrating. With a thriving specialist legal press in the UK, London was the birthplace of the global phenomenon that is legal directories – primarily the *Legal 500* and *Chambers & Partners*.

Of the 10,000 law firms in England and Wales, the legal media focused predominantly on around 30 of them – the so-called 'magic circle' and its chasing pack. With a couple of exceptions, year-on-year, these global firms added foreign offices to their portfolios.

They are phenomenal business success stories. But from our extensive international work and time spent at events such as the International Bar Association's conferences, I knew that those firms are far from the whole story.

Firms with an international mindset remain the backbone of the international commercial legal market. They are independent of the global giants and focus on their own jurisdiction or region.

This is a hugely dynamic part of the legal market – like their clients, they are outward-looking and entrepreneurial. Many lawyers served time working for the global giants before deciding it wasn't for them: too many conflicts leading to interesting instructions being declined; wanting more control over the business and ways of working; preferring teams of experienced, senior people; or valuing closer client relationships.

Their clients, and the firms that refer work to them from abroad, agree. As Goldilocks knew, some offerings are simply too big or too hot.

But without global offices in scores of jurisdictions to feed them work, these

independent firms must be proactive. Significant time, imagination and skill are invested in building relationships and networks, and in earning a profile that reflects their expertise and service.

The way that is done varies by country and region. The firms we spoke to have been generous with their time – this paper recounts their experiences of building and maintaining the international side of their business, and of finding clients and referring firms who find they are 'just right'.

Melissa Davis
Founder and Chief Executive,
MD Communications

United Kingdom

"We are recognised as one of the top immigration firms in the UK and US and remain ranked in Tier 1 in all the legal directories... What is important to the business, as well as providing top quality client advice and service, is being engaged in and influencing UK and US immigration policy development, the wellbeing of our staff, DEI, engagement in the community and charity work."

Laura Devine, Laura Devine Immigration

- International networking and a consistent presence abroad are key to developing an overseas client base and global recognition.
- Independent firms are often able to respond swiftly and effectively due to their agility and streamlined operations.
- Outreach programmes and networking provide opportunities for continued relationships with contacts, and also encourage a creative culture for internal members of staff.

The UK is the second-largest legal market by value after the US. Liberalisation of its legal market has had several stages, the first coinciding with the City's 'Big Bang' in the 1980s, leading to a rapid growth in the size, revenues and profits of leading commercial law firms. More recently, the Legal Services Act 2007 opened the profession to external investment.

The origins of several global elite firms are the London legal market, which has also been central to the growth plans of leading US law firms, whose presence has intensified the competition for talent, raising rewards to heights unimaginable a generation previously. The UK is a net exporter of legal services and has led on the creation of genuinely international firms.

The concentration of expertise, the quality of the courts and arbitrators, and the importance of the City to global finance have all helped business-focused law firms to weather the shock of Brexit. Indeed, the legal complications caused by Brexit have required good legal advice that was previously unnecessary.

But while the presence of so many global elite firms, and their international chasing pack, makes the headlines, independent firms are in many ways the backbone of the UK's legal economy.

They are the trusted advisers to entrepreneurs, private wealth and, crucially, many inward investors. While they cannot match the newly qualified salaries of the global elite, they do compete on culture, sector knowledge and client service.

Their numbers include many former magic circle lawyers who find independent firms to be a better home for their sector expertise, and who appreciate a greater freedom to shape the business and its culture.

And the lack of a foreign office network is no barrier to gaining international instructions, or to making outbound referrals. Independent firms are highly active in international associations and networks, and in forming bilateral connections.

Michelmores

With three offices in the South West of England, where the firm began, and an office in London, Michelmores positions itself as a 'destination law firm for enterprises and individuals'. Its sector strengths include private wealth, technology, finance, energy and agriculture.

Jonathan Kitchin is a partner in the firm's commercial and regulatory disputes team.

Jonathan Kitchin
Partner, Michelmores

The courts bring instructions to the UK:
Our courts are more progressive and willing to consider the extent to which UK-domiciled parent companies are liable for the acts of their foreign subsidiaries (or agents) abroad.

London's prominence as a global financial hub continues to generate investment disputes, often involving allegations of mis-selling, mismanagement or misappropriation. These types of disputes are increasingly multi-faceted, involving UK or foreign regulatory intervention, insolvency claims or parallel litigation in offshore jurisdictions.

Brexit-complicated disputes:
Enforcement of judgments in the EU has been more difficult and complicated without the ability to rely on the Brussels I Regulation or the Lugano Convention for the automatic recognition and enforcement of judgments.

The UK has been more reliant on a patchwork of overseas local laws, bilateral treaties and the 2005 Hague Convention applicable to exclusive jurisdiction clauses.

However, we expect that now that the UK has ratified the Hague Convention on the Recognition and Enforcement of Foreign Judgments in Civil or Commercial Matters 2019, recognition and enforcement of judgments in the EU will again be a more straightforward process.

On enforcement, clients are perhaps cautious rather than concerned. In most cases, the well-established Hague Convention 2005 for judgments and the New York Convention for the enforcement of arbitral awards have provided suitable alternatives.

It is the cases that have fallen outside of these that have become more complex. Clients and lawyers will now need to explore and test the limits of the 2019 Hague Convention, which also has its own exclusions, including (among others) insolvency, intellectual property, defamation and privacy matters, and interim injunctive relief.

During the last five years, there has also been an increase in the number of sanctioned countries, entities and individuals, so how and where assets are held must always be at the forefront of parties' minds. Therefore, disputes are increasingly subject to careful pre-litigation strategic advice on jurisdiction.

Our London office is key for disputes:
As an independent UK firm, we are able to leverage our London office for the conduct of litigation in the London Commercial Court, or London-seated arbitrations, and the lower cost base of our regional offices in relation to more flexible pricing models, while enjoying the freedom to partner with any overseas firm that has the specialist legal or sector experience the client needs.

We can take ownership of the project management of disputes. Clients with international disputes often need a law firm with core commercial dispute resolution skills, plus the ability to call on a breadth of specialist legal disciplines across jurisdictions – in relation to competition, IP, regulatory or trusts (for example). In our experience, clients value the ability to bring together the best team that collaborates and takes ownership of project management responsibilities. Clients are less interested in whether the team comes from one global firm or a number of independent firms.

English law is an export that brings work to the UK:
UK firms continue to benefit from English law being one of the UK's largest exports, providing commercial parties with transparency, specialist court lists and the flexibility of common law principles.

Also, a lot of investment and financial services business passes through London, with the English language often a 'neutral' choice in international settings. This is a potent combination, which the UK government actively promotes in global trade and dispute resolution. For example, in relation to the establishment of international financial centres.

Our expertise needs to cover new and emerging sectors:
The technology sector is very broad, often presenting investors with high-growth opportunities in digital assets, cybersecurity, healthcare and green investments. These are global trends affecting most geographic regions and generating international disputes. Cross-border disputes and recoveries also stray into how investments are structured through SPVs and trusts.

The increased cost of borrowing and materials has put pressure on margins and fee or profit shares in the real estate sector, generating disputes and renegotiations between stakeholders.

Disputes work is inbound and outbound. Our caseload has a fairly even mix of UK investors who have litigated in England and are seeking recoveries abroad, and international investors whose overseas projects often have no immediate or obvious connection with the UK except for the choice of English law and jurisdiction in their contracts.

We network internationally:
International alliances, best-friend firms and networks are absolutely essential for us, being a key component of both our route to market and competitive advantage in relation to cross-border disputes.

The mainstay of our inbound and outbound referrals is with foreign firms, rather than general counsel (GCs). However, as part of building a relationship with UK GCs, we do refer them to overseas firms to support work, including advisory or transactional work, that does not require our involvement. We anticipate that foreign firms add value to their GC relationships in a similar way.

In working with firms in other jurisdictions, we seek a mix of capability, capacity and culture.

Our lawyers acquire an international outlook:
In our team, lawyers travel overseas to attend foreign-seated arbitrations, for example. However, international cases require specialist expertise. Our team has proactively attended the negotiation of the Hague Judgments Convention, and members of our firm have joined committees of the IBA. This has been a fantastic way to acquire technical knowledge and build relationships with overseas lawyers."

The World Services Group

Gary Assim,
Partner, Shoosmiths

Like most firms, we have always done international work, whether it's cross-border M&A, IP or litigation. However, at the start, it's small and goes unnoticed. Then we joined the World Services Group in 2003 which should have materially increased this type of work but it didn't.

That's because nobody knew us and it took a good few years building up relationships and trust before we started getting any meaningful work through the network. However, once that happened then referrals have been on the increase ever since, and our relationships both in the World Services Group and outside are now mature and strong.

We are now moving to the next level, where we look to expand internationally to serve our clients better. This started with an office in Brussels and will expand further. Watch this space. ”

The World Services Group has 120 members, all independent law firms, covering 150 jurisdictions.

Harper Macleod

Anne Macdonald,
Partner and Head of the Business Development Department,
Harper Macleod

As strong independent law firms, it is vitally important that we lead our firms by clearly setting the horizon of opportunity for our colleagues and our clients. In doing so, we can ensure that we are guiding our firm with transparency and clarity on our strategy and ensuring our colleagues have clarity on prospects for their career progression. This is paramount against the lens of global law firms and the competition for both talent and clients. The unique position of a strong independent law firm cannot be underestimated; they are grounded in their jurisdiction with local knowledge and local networks that undoubtedly provide value to their clients. And being local does not mean being parochial, strong independents are very much on the global stage and can enhance their reach through membership of the IBA and practice-specific associations and conferences, all the while reminding ourselves that 'little drops of water make the mighty ocean'.

Anne Macdonald is co-chair of the IBA Law Firm Management Committee and Management Board member of Harper Macleod, Scotland.

We attend the negotiation of new international conventions, international conferences, take up speaking opportunities on panels and build trusted long-term relationships with other firms.

Our size gives us freedom to experiment:
Large global firms have significant capital resources to invest in their own in-house e-discovery and AI tools. However, I think independent law firms have more freedom to experiment with different providers, introduce clients and larger in-house legal teams to work with those providers direct and adapt to client feedback or market shifts. There is more scope for creativity and cost efficiency.

We communicate our abilities:
We communicate our deep expertise in specialist areas of disputes work, such as cross-border enforcement, IP, reputation management or regulatory investigations, and promote our ability to coordinate cases with our 'best friend' firms overseas and build long-term mutually beneficial relationships with those firms at global conferences and on speaking panels.

Building relations with firms we have a natural affinity with is key. We believe this is reflected in client service and outcomes. It takes years, if not decades, of consistent effort, but it is very rewarding from both a professional and personal perspective, and is great for lawyer development, people retention and succession planning. We also track all inbound and outbound referrals.

Lessons for other independent law firms:
Do not be over-reliant on your 'home' law or language. All firms seeking international work need to demonstrate open-mindedness and an ability to listen and learn about different legal cultures or client service norms in order to communicate clearly and build trust."

Laura Devine

Laura Devine, an English Solicitor and NY Attorney, established her specialist immigration law firm after working in several international firms and one of the Big Four accountancy firms. With offices in London and New York, it has grown to a headcount of over sixty. The firm is dedicated to UK and US immigration, acting for large companies, SMGs, families and individuals wishing to enter the UK or US. Laura has been described by The Times as 'Queen of the Ritzy' in the immigration market when it comes to her firms specialty for providing high quality UK and US immigration advice to a wide range of clients.

Laura Devine,
Managing Partner, Laura Devine Immigration

We are transatlantic:
I have always had a love of America and this continues today. It is a beautiful, vast, diverse country in landscape, culture and people. We were the first law firm in London to offer both UK and US immigration. Client demands highlighted the desire for our UK and US immigration services from the US. So I qualified as a New York attorney and opened an office in Manhattan in the premises of one of my first clients.

The press has since referred to our London and New York offices as a 'transatlantic powerhouse'. Operating from both sides of the Atlantic allows our clients the choice of time zones. This means we are in a position to deliver timely advice with the New York office dealing with late instructions to London and vice versa.

One catch of being described as a 'transatlantic powerhouse' is that it may appear that we only advise Brits going to the US and Americans coming to the UK. Our myriad client base is eclectic and truly global.

Being internationally and professionally present:
I am a self-confessed 'conference junkie'. It all began at the International Bar Association's (IBA) annual conference in 2004 in New Zealand. The IBA is a super arena for building an international name where attendees have access to around 5,000 lawyers from nearly 200 countries.

We remain dedicated to UK and US immigration, choosing not to offer global immigration services as we do not believe it is in our clients interests when we are not experts or qualified in jurisdictions apart from the UK and US . Our preference is to refer non UK and US immigration matters to our 'best friends', many from the IBA around the globe, particularly France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Canada, Mexico and Australia.

I am also a member of the International Association of Lawyers (UIA) and American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA). These organisations also expose members to global markets and offers excuses to travel.

Overseas lawyers generate a large number of referrals for both our offices but business is also generated from our current and former clients, business contacts, Google and AI – in particular ChatGPT. Positive legal directories rankings also result in instructions from law firms and General Council.

Female focused:
We are very much a female focused firm with over 85% of the staff being women. Our glass ceiling was broken in 2023 when we appointed a male partner (we have one male to seven females). Being a female dominated firm, provides for a culture of collegiality, caring and collaboration.

Competition, reputation and directory rankings:
We are recognised as one of the top immigration firms in the UK and US and remain ranked in Tier 1 in all the legal directories. As of October 2025, we have maintained our Tier 1 ranking in all three practice areas (Business, Human Rights and Personal) in the *Legal 500*, as well as ranking in *Chambers and Partners* (Band 1 for Business Immigration, Personal Immigration and High-Net-Worth Individuals) and have the highest number of listed experts in the directories. We have been included in the *Who's Who Legal* as Thought Leaders but we never rest on our laurels. What is important to the business, as well as providing top quality client advice and service, is being engaged in and influencing UK and US immigration policy development, the wellbeing of our staff, DEI, engagement in the community and charity work. We are recognised as the immigration law firm for law firms. We really are high-touch specialists and are recognised for our technical ability and client care.

Awards:
Over the years we have won several awards including the CityWeath Magic Circle Award for 'Immigration Law Firm of the Year', the Legal 500 'Hall of Fame for Immigration' and the LexisNexis Award for Wellbeing, celebrating our commitment to staff welfare and a positive workplace environment. In addition, I won the Law Society Excellence Award for 'Woman Lawyer of the Year' for dedication to immigration law, as well as the Who's Who Legal' Corporate Immigration Lawyer of the year'. We have also ranked in The Times 200 Best Law Firms for Immigration for 8 years consecutively.

Literary lounges and charity work:
I have been accused of running a Literary Guild with a Law Firm on the side. Encouraging reading, an appreciation of literature and literary discourse are commitments I am passionate about. We regularly invite authors from the legal field, as well as politicians, economists, journalists, artists, fashion editors and award-winning fiction writers to discuss their work and fundraise to support small charities of their choice.

Stay agile:
Some large law firms compete in the immigration market, but as a boutique law firm we are recognised as dedicated to immigration law. We are quoted as saying "we do one thing and we do it well". Being small means we are nimble and agile. We can move quickly and take new instructions almost instantly – unlike large firms, where operations can be slower, bureaucratic and faceless. So there's an advantage to being small, though with 60 staff across our two offices, we're not that small."

Payne Hicks Beach

Based in the heart of 'legal London', Payne Hicks Beach is a full-service law firm providing tailored legal advice and litigation services for domestic and international high-net-worth individuals, families, family offices, and commercial clients.

Partner Robert Brodrick is a member of the firm's management board.

Robert Brodrick,
Partner, Payne Hicks Beach

Staying front of mind:
I think probably the biggest challenge is balancing getting the work done with ensuring you are out there enough to be front of mind for people in other jurisdictions.

Most of the international introductions I receive come either from lawyers in another country who need English law advice and cannot provide it themselves, or from private bankers, trustees, and other offshore service providers whose clients need UK advice. To get that work, you need to be the person they think of when something lands on their desk that requires UK input.

Because we are in London and do not have other offices, we have to find reasons to get into the jurisdictions where we want to work. Sometimes that is delivering training for foreign lawyers, or speaking at conferences, but just as often it involves making sure you do not just stick to meetings on Zoom. Going to visit clients and their advisers, and building genuine relationships, is the best route to increasing referrals.

If you do a good job for existing clients and get to know their advisers, that snowballs into more work. I have noticed that this is especially true the further away the jurisdiction is. On the West Coast of the US, for example, those firms do not have many interactions with UK lawyers, so when they find someone reliable, they tend to stick with them.

International firms have gaps in expertise:
Even when US firms have a London office, they are not necessarily providing English law advice, or their London office is only covering very high-level corporate matters. Often, they want help with things that fall below their own thresholds in terms of scale or fees, but that we are very happy to take on. As a smaller firm, provided the client can pay, we do not turn that work away. In fact, our size gives us a competitive advantage for mandates that would not fit a larger multinational firm.

We can choose the firms we need abroad:
We have the ability to put together exactly the right team from any jurisdiction, rather than feeling we must use people from our own offices around the world. For example, an American client based in Los Angeles might need advice on a property deal in France. We can project manage the French team and make that happen, drawing on our network.

RPC

Antony Sassi,
Managing Partner

Independent firms create international strength when they play to their sector and service-line strengths. Deep industry knowledge enables teams to anticipate issues, connect commercial and legal priorities, and deliver advice that stands up across markets and legal systems. For clients, that means practical, commercially grounded solutions. For our lawyers, it means opportunities to collaborate internationally, share expertise, and work on complex cross-border matters.

Much of our work has always been international, and increasingly so. At RPC, we operate as one firm worldwide, linking our sector specialists through our own offices in Asia, international desks and close relationships – both formal and informal – with trusted local advisers. This approach delivers seamless, high-quality support while preserving the independence, agility, and culture that define us. ❞

Antony Sassi is Managing Partner of RPC, head of its Asia-Pacific practice and former President of the HK Insurance Law Association.

We have chosen not to join exclusive referral networks, as they can be restrictive, tying you to a particular group when it is often better to have flexibility. Instead, we are part of smaller, invitation-only groups, such as the Global Elite or Cambridge Forums, which are based around conferences and seminars for specialist areas.

These operate like clubs and are very good for getting to know other senior professionals in relevant jurisdictions, helping foster referrals and build trust. I also focus my international business development on key markets like the US and the Middle East, while colleagues cover the Far East or continental Europe. For private client work, we also have important connections with advisers in places like the Channel Islands and the Caribbean, who add value for clients in the US and the Middle East.

The firm focuses on maintaining good relationships with key offshore jurisdictions and advisers. For the private client world, that means strong links with places like the Channel Islands, the Caribbean, the Middle East and the US. That is a big help in delivering what clients need as their affairs and families become more global.

Directories, rankings and third-party validation helps:
I think all the directories and league tables and things like *Spear's* are very useful. I look at this through a private client lens. The way I see it is similar to booking a luxury weekend away. You'll have a few places in mind and maybe people have recommended them, but you also look for validation from third parties to confirm you've made the right choice. You want the choice to be endorsed by others, because you don't want to end up somewhere that's disappointing. You probably already decided that you're going to a particular place or using a particular adviser, and then you want that decision to be validated. That's where directories, league tables, and awards come in. They help to prove to the client who is already 99% certain this is the right decision that, yes, it's the right choice.

Be outward facing:
I know there are clients for whom I would never have acted if I had not gone out, travelled, and met people in person. If I had just sat in London and focused only on UK work, those opportunities would not have come my way.

For a firm like ours, the bottom line is that doing a good job – delivering excellent work for clients – is the best way to generate more work, especially when working in an international environment. If you perform well for one client and their adviser, they are far more likely to come to you again, or refer someone else facing a similar issue.

Ultimately, trust and reputation are what drive referrals and opportunities across borders, regardless of how sophisticated the market becomes or how much technology changes the landscape."

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Ireland

> Brexit was a seismic event for Ireland's trading relationship with the UK and UK's trading relationship with the EU. It brought both challenge and opportunity for each of Ireland and the UK.

David O'Donnell, Mason Hayes & Curran

- The Irish economy is negotiating current complexities from a position of strength, and the outlook for the professional services sector going into 2026 is excellent
- Brexit positioned Ireland as the English-speaking gateway to the EU, attracting international firms to Dublin
- Investment in innovation and infrastructure are a priority, and support an economic strategy in which foreign direct investment is key

Surely no European economy and supporting legal market has changed more than Ireland's since the late 1990s. An industrial strategy that combined a favourable corporate tax regime with ample EU support for domestic projects that supported growth, combined with a high education base, to produce a boom in property and commerce.

Law firms were at the heart of that development, with lead commercial firms occupying prestige developments in Dublin's remade business centre. The global financial crisis took some of the shine off the 'Celtic Tiger', but Ireland has continued to trade on its position as an EU member, with an economy also enmeshed with the UK in a post-Brexit world.

With the UK now outside the EU, Ireland is the bloc's largest English-speaking jurisdiction.

Ireland's capital has seen international firms opening – Addleshaw Goddard, Bird & Bird, Dechert, Dentons, DLA Piper, Kennedys and Lewis Silkin all have a presence.

But home-grown firms are far from overwhelmed. Professionally, economically and culturally, they are in a strong position, advantages which, like Ireland itself, they are consciously leveraging to survive and thrive as independent firms.

Mason Hayes & Curran

One of Ireland's leading commercial firms, Mason Hayes & Curran has 124 partners and more than 600 staff. Dublin-headquartered, it was created by merger in 1970, and now has offices in London, New York and San Francisco. It has been at the centre of the Irish economy's transformation, with sectoral expertise across financial services, technology, the built environment, energy, life sciences and healthcare.

David is a corporate partner with wide experience of mergers and acquisitions, private equity and venture capital.

David O'Donnell,
Partner, Mason, Hayes & Curran

Brexit is a challenge and an opportunity: Britain is Ireland's closest neighbour and an important economic partner in terms of trade, investment and tourism. Brexit was a seismic event for Ireland's trading relationship with the UK, and the UK's trading relationship with the EU. It brought both challenge and opportunity for Ireland and the UK.

Brexit forced Ireland to focus on other European markets beyond the UK, including Germany, France, the Nordics, Spain and Italy.

Brexit created barriers for UK businesses to EU access and forced UK businesses to rethink European expansion. New regulatory barriers emerged overnight and companies that once operated seamlessly from the UK faced a patchwork of EU and national rules, extra licences and greater scrutiny. The single market remains attractive to the UK, but access has become more complicated.

Post-Brexit Ireland provides a natural alternative to the UK to those international businesses seeking to do business in the EU.

Many UK and international companies established themselves in Ireland post-Brexit to maintain seamless access to the EU. Ireland has increasingly become a bridgehead into the EU.

Ireland offers UK companies something unique: familiar law in an EU jurisdiction. As the only English-speaking common law country in the Eurozone, it removes language barriers and legal uncertainty.

Shared cultural ties matter. Business practices mirror the UK more closely than other EU jurisdictions, time zones align and professional networks overlap. This delivers lasting advantages.

Regulatory efficiency is a draw:

Brexit created greater regulatory complexity for UK companies expanding into Europe, particularly in the areas of data privacy and content regulation. Businesses previously dealt with one set of rules. Now they face up to 27 different regulatory approaches across member states.

Establishing in Ireland can simplify this challenge and hence is an opportunity for the Irish lawyer. Putting the right level of substance in Ireland can, in many cases, allow businesses to be subject to the primary supervision of the Irish supervisory authorities – instead of 27 different ones.

Ireland is a gateway to Europe:

Our firm has worked closely with UK and other non-EU companies navigating European expansion. The pattern is consistent: companies want market access without unnecessary complexity.

Our international offices are central to this approach. In London, we work directly with UK businesses and their advisers across sectors, ensuring cross-border matters move forward efficiently.

New York and San Francisco serve transatlantic clients with European ambitions, while Dublin remains the firm's largest base and resource centre. Clients want advisers who understand both their home jurisdiction and their target markets. Geographic presence facilitates both requirements.

Expansion into Europe usually follows clear steps: incorporating an Irish company, hiring staff, securing premises and building compliance frameworks. We manage these in Ireland and, through a network of local counsel, coordinate the same requirements across other EU jurisdictions.

A surge in financial services deals:

In the run up to Brexit, and in the immediate aftermath, many UK businesses had to find new homes in the EU – particularly in the financial services sector. So, there was an immediate surge in establishments and hence an opportunity for local law firms to attend to the incorporations and advise on structures that can scale into wider EU operations and help to restructure groups as their operations expand.

These establishments are ongoing today as Ireland proves to be a bridge and stepping stone to the EU, with all the ancillary work for legal advisors to include employment and mobility, real estate and infrastructure, registration of EU trademark and EU product and consumer regulation.

UK businesses have established a European presence by acquiring Irish-incorporated companies. Irish law firms then have the opportunity to guide clients through the acquisition process and the cross-border challenges involved.

International Growth Drivers

A sectoral focus:

We have had a focus on six sectors for a number of years, which reflects where we see demand and aligns with our expertise. The regulatory map is not the same for every sector. Technology companies must manage GDPR compliance, cross-border data transfers and content rules. Financial services firms face prudential requirements in addition to conduct of business and operational rules. Life sciences businesses deal with product authorisations, safety obligations and labelling standards across the EU. Energy developers benefit from Ireland's experience in sustainable finance and its role in shaping pan-European energy regulation. Companies in the built

environment sector must navigate planning laws and regulations and supply constraints. There is increasing regulation in healthcare. Our sector focus ensures advice reflects the commercial realities of each market, as well as the applicable laws and regulations.

We see infrastructure as a growth sector, given Ireland's underspending on infrastructure over the last few decades. The Irish Government recently unveiled an updated National Development Plan featuring €275.4bn in public capital investment through to 2035, representing the largest infrastructure spending commitment in the nation's history.

Outbound instructions:

Traditionally, Ireland has had a more pronounced inbound focus, with foreign direct investment dominating. Over the last decade or so, an increased number of Irish companies have displayed ambition to become global players and have scaled their businesses through establishment in other geographical markets, as well as through acquisitions in those markets. This has created more balance in the mix of inbound and outbound work.

Strategy and Profile Building

Ireland abroad:

MHC has offices in London, New York and San Francisco but we remain Irish-law only.

We are committed to being an independent Irish business law firm focused solely on Irish law, and providing Irish law advice to our clients doing business in and through Ireland. Our international offices support that focus by placing us close to our international clients from our largest trading partners, namely the UK and the US. Our offices also allow us to offer our business and legal networks to Irish clients seeking to do business in those markets.

In London, our office has grown organically from a single person 15 years ago to 15 people today. The London office has been a great way to facilitate our lawyers who have a deep connection with that market to operate from there and for them to build closer ties with UK clients and the business community. It also offers our recently qualified lawyers the opportunity to work in that market.

In San Francisco, our focus is on EU tech regulation, especially privacy and AI, allowing us to work in real time West Coast and demonstrating our commitment to providing the services on the ground.

In New York, our office functions as a gateway connecting US clients with our Irish law legal experts and helping our Irish clients connect with the US market.

We raise our international profile in a number of ways.

- Incremental investment over time in our foreign offices
- Directories and rankings (significant time investment)
- Active participation in international networks (IBA, AIJA, industry groups)
- Building legal and business relationships in relevant geographical markets
- Thought leadership and events in Ireland and abroad
- Building trusted sector expertise

If you are providing legal services to the international business market from an independent local law firm, then your network of similar-minded law firms from other jurisdictions is key. Global organisations like AIJA and the IBA provide an incredible opportunity to build that network.

At the end of the day, people buy people – and these platforms allow us to build trust, share insight and form lasting relationships. Organising, speaking and chairing sessions at conferences, as well as working on cross-border projects such as legal guides and publications, can be effective in building a network. It demonstrates expertise while creating opportunities for genuine connection. Everyone is there to build relationships and those relationships are what drive cross-border work.

Our audience abroad:

In broad terms, we would target business clients, law firms and other intermediaries. You need to reflect on the client and the sector that they are operating in, and be able to explain to them why you are a good fit for their requirements.

You also need to have regard to the sector that the client is playing in and the type of legal expertise that they may require. You need to do your homework and work out your message and service offering.

If you have deep sector expertise, then approaching a prospective client directly may be a fast route to execute. However, there is no substitute for a warm introduction to a client through a respected source.

Competition and Differentiation

Staying independent:

We differentiate ourselves from international foreign law firms by being an independent Irish law firm, focusing only on Irish law, with extensive Irish law legal expertise across all the legal disciplines and genuine Irish sector depth and legal bench strength.

Many international entrants may only operate at a certain scale with limited local law capability. Being an independent local law firm means we can build trusted partnerships with foreign law firms that have the capability and expertise to meet our clients' requirements in their markets and they trust us to look after their clients. Unlike an international firm, we have total freedom as to who we entrust our clients to in another jurisdiction.

Maintaining a competitive edge:

We attract and retain top talent and have long-established relationships in the local environment. Independence and local depth of expertise remain highly valued.

An Irish law-only focus:

We believe that clients value what we offer them in terms of independent local Irish law. Clients trust us to support them on their international journey beyond Ireland by connecting them with law firms in other jurisdictions that we believe fit their needs in terms of expertise, sector knowledge, culture and pricing.

International experience:

Our foreign offices give our lawyers international opportunities while staying connected to an Irish law firm. Where our lawyers wish to gain international experience working in other markets, we encourage them to pursue that experience and assist them in identifying suitable opportunities at relevant law firms.

Many of our lawyers return to our firm after their international experience. We also encourage client secondments as they can enhance the learning and experience of what it is like to work outside of the law firm environment.

Firm culture is essential:

Culture is absolutely key. Your people are your greatest asset. Without them, you wouldn't be able to service the work. We strive for an environment where colleagues feel both supported and challenged without burnout.

Our wellness programme is comprehensive and genuine, not a box-ticking exercise. A strong culture of collaboration and a sense of being heard directly underpins excellent client service, allowing us to compete.

Investment and growth:

Growth takes time, patience and realism. We started small, sometimes too cautiously, such as in London with just a consultant, which just isn't the same as having your own people on the ground. The biggest challenge is convincing a firm to invest when the payback isn't immediate. Success requires the right people with an appetite for growth, business acumen and cultural sensitivity to grow a business. My advice to other firms would be: start small, be realistic and focus relentlessly on your people. It's a people business above all else and the right individuals with the right mindset make all the difference.

The origin of referrals:

Referrals from trusted relationships, panel appointments and direct client wins all flow from deep sector expertise and sustained relationship-building."

3

France

"French firms tend to be super individualistic. Further, French clients generally do not want to work with UK/US firms outside Paris. They prefer independent French firms with a French-law focus and strong local relationships."

Christine Blaise-Engel, Fidal

- Paris has a standout advantage in international disputes, in particular as the centre for International Chamber of Commerce arbitration
- International firms with Anglo-American origins have important offices in the French capital, but there is no sense of a 'takeover'
- Leading French law firms report that a distinct culture and regional knowledge means clients expect to use a French firm for matters involving the regions

The second-largest economy in the Eurozone, France also leads the EU politically alongside Germany. Its commercial firms advise on inbound and outbound investment, and significant domestic private and public sector projects and transactions.

France is a significant centre for international commercial disputes, including arbitrations (notably the International Chamber of Commerce is Paris-headquartered), and in 2018 the president of the Paris Commercial Court trumpeted the establishment of an international chamber within its court of appeal in 'a real challenge to the London courts' post-Brexit.

The global firms are there in Paris – Latham & Watkins, DLA Piper, Baker McKenzie, Clifford Chance, Freshfields, Cleary Gottlieb, Linklaters, and Weil, Gotshal & Manges all have substantial offices.

But there is no sense of an Anglo-American takeover. The operations of global firms remain, by and large, smaller than their London offices, and arguably, France's system of multiple regional bars preserves a professional and business culture that is harder to 'crack' than the wide-open legal profession of England and Wales following, in particular, the Legal Services Act 2007.

Gide Loyrette Nouel

Founded in 1920, Gide Loyrette Nouel (known as Gide) is a French business law firm with a strong international dimension. It now has 10 offices worldwide, but its identity is firmly as an 'independent' law firm.

Paris-based corporate and M&A partner Louis Oudot de Dainville explains how the firm has strived to stay competitive by meeting client expectations on service and culture. Clients also value its independence.

Louis Oudot de Dainville,
Partner, Gide Loyrette Nouel

Market position:
Gide has been a leader in its market for more than a century. We offer a unique combination of strength, independence, and a strong local expertise, giving us genuine pre-eminence as a legal advisor on strategic transactions.

Multidisciplinary teams and 'best friends':
Gide can count upon a strong culture of collaboration between its partners wherever they operate. This is one firm operating from different locations with highly integrated multidisciplinary teams. This allows Gide to handle complex matters easily, involving multiple areas of expertise and different jurisdictions.

Key elements of this strategy include a closely monitored network of offices, ensuring presence in key jurisdictions and fostering Gide's growth. We also have an exceptional 'best-friends' network of Tier 1 firms, which have been working hand in hand with Gide on strategic matters for several decades.

Inbound and outbound work:
For outbound work, we are currently working in all parts of the world, including Australia, the US, South Africa and Brazil.

As regards inbound work, we are widely regarded as a strong player in Europe and in Africa.

We are currently putting a focus on the Middle East and North Africa region, where we currently have four offices.

Our offices in North Africa are growing strongly, and we are currently working both in Western and Eastern Africa on a number of transactions.

Leveraging France's position:
Paris is a historic and strategic hub for international arbitration. The presence of the ICC (International Chamber of Commerce), a stable and widely recognized legal framework, and recent reforms aimed at reinforcing France's legal sovereignty all make Paris a secure and attractive venue for resolving international disputes.

European Regulation is important. As a founding member of the European Union, France plays a structuring role in shaping EU law and our teams in Paris and Brussels are working together to offer the best insights about EU regulations.

In economic terms, France's sector leadership is an advantage for us. Many European market leaders are French, particularly in strategic sectors such as aerospace, space, defence, and luxury. France is also at the forefront of technological innovation in Europe, notably in AI (e.g. Mistral AI) and has assumed a stronger role in financial services after Brexit, with two major European supervisory authorities now based in Paris.

Attracting and retaining talent:
To stand out in the battle for talent, Gide has developed a clear and attractive HR proposition. Besides compensation, which is necessarily aligned with our competitors.

We are offering: a stimulating work environment with the opportunity to work on complex and international matters; a structured career path, with mentoring, continuous training, and rapid progression up to the partnership for the best lawyers; a culture that values innovation and individual initiatives; concrete initiatives to improve quality of life at work, including health facilities and extended parental leave; and the appointment of ethics officers, strengthening internal trust and professional integrity.

Smaller firms can succeed:
I recommend attending conferences and meeting international partners from the world over. Also, be pragmatic regarding opening offices depending on clients' needs."

Fidal

Founded in 1922, Fidal has grown to 1,400 lawyers, all in France, and it is a leading French law firm.

Fidal's head of international, corporate, mergers and acquisitions Christine Blaise-Engel sets out the importance of an international perspective to maintain and grow domestic market share.

Christine Blaise-Engel,
Partner, Fidal

Being international is not an option:
Being international is an obligation. To have domestic market share, you must be international. French and European firms must work internationally to attract clients and gain global visibility.

That helps win referrals and grow client portfolios; many clients are international groups that expect cross-border service. Without international reach, firms risk losing domestic market share.

France's market has never been hermetic. Anglo law firms are well established here. There are opportunities for French law firms to win more international mandates by leveraging domestic market leadership and long-standing local relationships. Fidal excels at knowing who to refer clients to and maintains the right networks for our clients.

Sector knowledge matters: Industry expertise is now a pre-requisite for M&A and other mandates. Fidal has built industry credentials and raised its profile through targeted PR, participation in associations, including the IBA and ABA, and industry conferences.

What matters for clients is not only if you can do M&A – they assume you can. What matters is whether you have the industry experience to execute the deal.

Our core areas are M&A, commercial law, tax law, financing and disputes – these remain steady year-to-year. We are seeing growth in important areas, including restructuring, technology, data and intellectual property.

Paris is central for disputes:
Paris is a real hub for arbitration. Arbitration and commercial dispute work are important to France's international practice. That is driven by a more international outlook culturally in France and parties choosing Paris as the seat.

Competing with international firms:
Fidal positions itself as a full-service domestic firm with deep regional reach and strong client relationships, unmatched especially outside Paris.

French clients generally do not want to work with UK/US firms outside Paris. They prefer independent French firms with a French-law focus and strong local relationships.

Importantly, we know that local regulatory insight, cultural knowledge, sector specialisation and established regional presence are highly prized. We know we have wide experience of assisting domestic clients as they realise their international ambitions.

Our strategy is to keep our independence. We are not looking at a global merger, joining broad alliances or foreign office roll-out. Instead, we build strong correspondent ties with major firms abroad. The firm preserves its domestic identity while adopting international practices where they make sense.

Referral relationships and correspondents are important, but Fidal prefers bilateral correspondent relationships and strong reps abroad.

International development takes time; it's not something achieved overnight, and it's not just about speaking English. Attending the IBA once won't deliver results on its own. You need to go regularly to international conferences, like those run by the IBA, build genuine friendships, and be patient.

We invest in PR and communications campaigns, and use structured and consistent external communications to showcase our international activity.

Our people:
Attracting people is one thing; keeping them is another. Seeing an associate improving and progressing is so rewarding for us. We are a French law firm – we keep our identity while giving lawyers international exposure. Fidal attracts globally-minded lawyers by offering secondments, cross-border experience training and active client involvement. French identity is preserved while juniors are trained in international expectations and negotiation styles.

I actively coach my interns and associates, telling them to never delegate something you don't understand; ensure smooth communication with clients and correspondents; and always call if you're unsure about something."

4

The Nordics: Sweden

> At around 4,000 active business lawyers, Sweden is a small market – the same size as a large global firm. So there is great value for us in seeing the Nordics as a whole, and to sell this as a Nordic market.

Emma Dansbo, Cirio

- Nordic countries are able to leverage similarities in law and culture to deliver a seamless service
- Independents are dominant for the full-service law firm offering
- Relatively small legal markets necessitate a strong international mindset – something they share with their countries startups and scaleups

The Nordic legal markets share some common features. While international firms are either present or active, their interest is in specific areas such as large corporate and capital markets deals.

Independent firms dominate for depth, breadth and comprehensive commercial focus.

Cirio

A full-service Swedish law firm with 100 lawyers and one office in Stockholm, Cirio holds itself out as providing 'business law with brilliance and compassion'. Founded in 1918 the firm adopted the name Cirio 100 years later and it seeks an 'active role in a new and challenging era; an era where globalisation and disruptive technologies create significant business opportunities but also complex questions to answer'.

Emma Dansbo is Cirio's managing partner and a member of the firm's private M&A group, with a particular focus with regard to representing founders, investors and other stakeholders in emerging and growth companies.

Emma Dansbo,
Managing Partner, Cirio

Independent firms dominate:

The Swedish market has been quite difficult for international firms to enter, and in particular to establish themselves as full-service firms. Pricing has been a key challenge for them, leading them to focus on, for example, large private equity deals and capital markets transactions or serving their international clients within specific areas.

One market:

Do we market Nordic as one market? – I would say yes, very much so. When I speak about the Nordics, I say that we can serve the region, even if we don't have offices anywhere else but in Sweden. We are also seeing Stockholm increasingly developing as the hub for international businesses entering the Nordic region.

No exclusivity:

We can serve clients seamlessly across the Nordics, where we have a very close relationship with many firms. We don't have any exclusive alliances but good and trusted friends, which can serve as our local counsel – and vice versa.

A Nordic approach:

At around 4,000 active business lawyers, Sweden is a small market – the same size as some of the global firms. So there is great value for us in seeing the Nordics as a whole, and to sell this as a Nordic market.

The Nordic countries have a close relationship, and our legislation, business practices, and ways of working are quite similar. This provides a strong foundation for cross-border collaboration and enables us to effectively serve clients across the region – even with just one office in Stockholm. Of course, this is made possible with the support of trusted partners in the relevant Nordic countries.

Emerging areas:

Life sciences, energy & infrastructure, technology, and real estate are key sectors for our firm. We continue to see strong international interest in the Swedish market — not only within these sectors but also across a wide range of industries.

The Swedish private equity market is highly mature market – both in terms of international players and strong domestic firms. Sweden has also long maintained a very active capital market. Despite the current market slowdown, we continue to see interest from investors.

Private equity is now a very mature market – both international and homegrown. EQT is one of a few Swedish global players.

Born global:

We also have a strong ecosystem around startups and scaleups, and international investors feel very comfortable investing in Swedish entities.

Startups and scaleups in Sweden are often born global — that's simply how businesses need to think in a smaller market. There is also a long-standing tradition among Swedish companies of operating internationally, and many focus on global sales and cross-border business from a very early stage. This means that our clients often require international legal advice. From that perspective, it is of course also very important for us to have good and trusted friends abroad who we know can support our clients when needed.

Some of our associates have an international background – currently China, Germany and the US. It helps to broaden our network and boosts our knowledge in-house.

Quite a few of us are actively involved in the IBA — regularly attending the annual conference as well as smaller events throughout the year, and dedicating significant time to various committees.

Winning referrals:

As an independent firm, you need to nourish your contacts and your network and make sure that you have good relationships. At the end of the day, it all comes down to doing great work, being responsive, and consistently delivering top-quality service — that is what builds trust and makes international contacts feel confident in working with us again and again."

5

Central and Eastern Europe: Poland & Hungary

> The strength of Europe's independent law firms is their freedom to build valuable networks of law firms from other jurisdictions.

Anna Dabrowska, Wolf Theiss and Chair of European Regional Forum

- Participation in associations like the IBA is key for independent firms in Central and Eastern Europe
- Flexibility on price and process are advantages for independent firms
- Independent law firms benefit from the reluctance of international firms to instruct their international competitors in jurisdictions where they do not have coverage

Business law in many Central and Eastern European countries was ushered in by the fall of the region's communist regimes. International firms arrived soon after, though not all have stayed. Clifford Chance's Budapest office parted company and became an independent law firm again (see below).

Nevertheless, businesses see plenty of opportunity at Europe's 'Eastern Wall' – not least, with geopolitical instability front of mind, in the defence sector.

Wolf Theiss, Poland

With 400 lawyers in 13 Central and Eastern European countries, Wolf Theiss is a leading full-service business firm in the region.

Anna Dabrowska is a corporate partner at Wolf Theiss, handling local and international acquisitions and divestments in a variety of economic sectors, including manufacturing, FMCG and technology and private equity. She is also chair of the International Bar Association's European Regional Forum (ERF).

Anna Dabrowska,
Partner, Wolf Theiss and
Chair of European Regional Forum

We have a regional focus:
One of Wolf Theiss' strengths is its regional footprint. We are present only in the Central and Eastern Europe region and apart from one or two other law firms, this makes us unique and very attractive to business partners from other jurisdictions.

It often happens that investors look at the whole region when making their plans, and we are the perfect firm to advise them. I believe we have the ability to provide top quality seamless assistance from lawyers who are very well-grounded in the region. We work well together, and we know the markets.

Benefiting from a strong economy:
Poland is performing quite well despite the numerous geopolitical challenges facing the region. Since our transition to a capitalist market in 1989, our economy has shown consistent growth, even during the financial crisis in 2007-2009, with projected GDP growth of 3.5% for 2025 and 2026. This indicates a strong interest in investment from both local entrepreneurs and foreign investors.

Other robust economies in the region include the Czech Republic and Romania, where sectors such as technology, life sciences, and energy are attracting the most attention.

The new item on the table is defence – interest in all things defence related is growing in all our jurisdictions on Europe's Eastern wall.

Competing with local and international firms:
The downside of working in such a vibrant market is that everyone wants a piece of the cake. Large international law firms also benefit from a larger (and more accessible) client base, as they tend to get work from other offices in their network.

Given that, lawyer associations and alliances are paramount to the future of our legal businesses (if we concentrate on international mandates), and I believe that client service and sector expertise is a part of that as well.

For inbound investment markets (like Poland), strong relationships with foreign law firms are a must, and these law firms advise their clients on who to choose as local counsel. The ability to provide top-quality services to our clients and to show our knowledge of the market (which we can exhibit within the IBA very well) is very often the basis for creating long lasting relationships within our professional networks.

Wellbeing is an important business issue:
It's also crucial not to overlook the people involved. With lawyers' wellbeing being deemed "of clinical concern" according to a 2019 IBA Survey, it's essential to create internal strategies that address the challenges we face in today's professional environment. We need to foster communication among ourselves to support one another and build resilient teams. This approach will not only enhance our experience at work but also improve the quality of our work for clients.

Advice to firms going to the IBA:
Stay persistent. Building a network takes time, and it's important to develop friendships before you can transition into working relationships.

The strength of Europe's independent law firms is their freedom to build valuable networks of law firms from other jurisdictions. The ERF is a very good platform for making connections. We are very active – we organise three conferences every year, we support and participate in conferences of other committees, we have many events at the annual IBA conferences. This provides ample opportunities for our members – who predominantly represent local or regional law firms – to get to know each other and to build relationships that can result in business opportunities.

There are five ERF working groups:
Communication, D&I, Professional Wellbeing, ESG, and Next Gen Law – all aimed at helping members navigate the challenges they face.

We host three annual sector conferences – Automotive & Mobility Services, Fashion & Luxury Law, and Start-Up – all dedicated to gathering top industry specialists.

We follow a principle of not inviting lawyers from other law firms to speak on these panels, and we aim not to have many attendees. This approach allows the participants of our conferences to learn about the primary concerns of their current or potential clients and gives our speakers a platform to discuss challenges with industry colleagues."

Lakatos, Köves & Partners, Hungary

Founded in 1991, Lakatos, Köves & Partners became the Budapest office of Clifford Chance, but the partners separated from the magic circle firm in 2009, and has been an independent law firm 'with an international character' ever since.

Dr. Viktória Szilágyi,
Partner, Lakatos, Köves & Partners

Competing with global firms:
Being a national champion firm in a small jurisdiction, finding and maintaining our place in the market is always on our radar and the methods to battle competition is always part of our broader strategy.

Yes, competing with international firms is difficult, because they have the well-known brand advantage, but in my experience, there are at least three aspects worth looking at to understand the full picture.

First, we often argue that we are more international than the so-called international firms, because we work with hundreds of firms all around the globe, learning to facilitate their firm and work culture. That makes us more adaptable to any client, because we are outside the one-firm-one-process marketing, which makes us more interesting or 'sexy'. And clients and referral law firms come to us because they want to and not because they have to.

Secondly, International firms with no office in our jurisdiction do not refer work to their international firm competitors who are here. We work with and get work from them because we are not competing with them.

Thirdly, we see and hear from clients many times that national champion firms are much more embedded in local society and economy and have a more extensive and deeper market knowledge.

Selling points for national champions:
There are various factors here. First, being independent gives us flexibility in process and pricing, and we find that it is a real value for many clients.

Secondly, international firms find it hard to attract and retain talent, because making them partner within their global structures is difficult.

Thirdly, local offices of international firms often find themselves 'compromised' by their desperate struggle to satisfy 'parent firm' demands . For example, you see them massively undercutting to get work and with that increasing competition in an unhealthy way and/or taking on work that is reputationally dangerous."

6

Southern Europe: Italy & Spain

“Portolano Cavallo differentiates itself from global and other domestic firms with an approach that is industry focused... There is a real value for clients in knowing the industry and understanding its regulatory framework.”

Manuela Cavallo, Portolano Cavallo

- To compete in the emerging economic sectors, firms are concentrating on their chosen areas
- Secondments and academic work can be vital to developing and retaining lawyers
- The presence of international firms can boost referrals

There are well-established international law firm offices in Italy and Spain, our two examples of Southern Europe. Independent law firms have points of competition – for people and for work – but are also referred work, as many international firms are not full-service in their jurisdictions.

Firms with international clients are active in international associations, and encourage their lawyers to gain international experience. Italy and Spain both have strong emerging sectors in the new economies like technology. Independent firms stress that success and differentiation lie in concentrating on chosen areas of practice and industry.

Portolano Cavallo, Italy

Manuela Cavallo,
Partner, Portolano Cavallo

Meeting the international challenge:
Competing with international law firms is a challenge for any independent law firm, considering that big law firms are acquiring smaller firms. But we regard it as a success story to be independent in the Italian market, and to be winning more cross-border mandates.

We focus on creating a very strong relationship with clients, so they trust us for cross-border work even though they know we aren’t part of a global law firm. That extends to trusting us to make referrals to other jurisdictions when that is needed.

Most of our cross-border work, though, is inbound, especially from the US, complemented by our recent hire from a Washington firm.

We have also positioned ourselves as a strategic adviser for Italian clients who want assistance in US.

Mergers and acquisitions dominate cross-border instructions:
80% of our M&A work is for foreign clients on cross-border transactions. Second is regulatory work for TMT and life sciences – as regulated sectors, there is always a need for specialised local advice.

An increasing amount of our litigation, including arbitration, has a cross-border component, involving a foreign client who has a dispute here or with an Italian counterparty.

Taking an industry-focused approach:
Portolano Cavallo differentiates itself from global and other domestic firms with an approach that is industry-focused. That has been particularly successful for tech, digital and media. From there, we have moved into life sciences which has worked successfully. There is a real value for clients in knowing the industry and understanding its regulatory framework.

Directories and associations:
With regard to the directories, you need to be in there. It’s likely that if clients don’t see you there, then that’s a problem. You won’t necessarily be selected for work for your ranking, but if you aren’t in there, you can’t say you’re a leading firm.

Our firm is present and active at events run by the ABA, the IBA, and other bodies and networks. We keep relationships alive with many different firms. To build relationships, you need to meet on a regular basis.

Talent and culture:
We have a strong culture and strong recognition in the market. We offer quality work and clients, but with a very safe and nice working environment.

Law students know this. We invest in internship plans that begin when law students are in the second or third year of law school. Interns come on a regular basis for a few months a year to work in the firm. We form a connection with them and get to know what they are like. They get to see what it means to be a business lawyer, and whether they are best suited to contentious or non-contentious work.

Lawyers who join us know what they need to do to be a partner, so there is a career path that is clear from day one. Secondments to US law firms are often part of that path. We provide non-refundable funds and loans to complete international LLMs, and encourage that – gaining the skills to be an international lawyer.

Our specialised industry focus approach on the Digital-Media-Tech and Life Sciences-Healthcare sectors attracts people who want to work with those sectors. They know they will get to work with top clients in that area.

We offer flexibility:
The big global firms don't have the flexibility we do. For example, we allow lawyers to do a PhD. Big firms can't do that, and our lawyers who do this don't take it for granted.

A number of our current partners have done this and are now also university professors, playing a part in the wider legal ecosystem.

Have a plan:
What has been successful for us is to focus on our plan and execute it with no compromises. Sometimes it would have been easier to let the firm grow and go into energy and other sectors, but the successful strategy has been to focus on our key industry sectors and become the firm to go to in those sectors. We've aimed at getting sector dominance and leadership in our chosen markets."

Roca Junyent, Spain
Founded in 1996, Roca Junyent has grown to become one of Spain's leading full-service independent law firms.

Alex Llevat Felius is a highly experienced corporate partner who holds a number of non-executive board positions for various industrial corporations and holdings.

Alex Llevat Felius,
Partner, Roca Junyent

Independent with an international outlook:
Our identity as an independent law firm is based on combining local expertise with an international outlook. With over 50 partners and 250 professionals across Spain.

We firmly believe in the practice of law as a tool to improve society and strengthen businesses. Our independence allows us to collaborate flexibly with leading international firms, ensuring our clients benefit from both local insight and cross-border capability.

International clients value that we combine the depth of local expertise with the global perspective of an independent firm connected through our international desks. They appreciate our agility, direct partner involvement, and the ability to deliver tailor-made solutions with global reach.

At the same time, our strong commitment to sustainability, diversity, and corporate responsibility aligns with their own strategic objectives, making us not only legal advisors but true strategic partners in achieving both business and ESG goals.

Spain is on the up:
Spain is experiencing some of the most dynamic cross-border opportunities in the technology sector. The Spanish startup ecosystem has doubled in value since 2020, now exceeding €110 billion, and continues to attract international investors in areas such as fintech, biotech, mobility and digital platforms. This momentum is generating a strong pipeline of inbound investment and M&A, where our role is to guide clients through the legal and regulatory landscape.

Beyond technology, renewable energy and the energy transition offer significant opportunities for international collaboration, while dispute resolution arising from cross-border operations is also on the rise.

The real estate and construction sectors are particularly important in Spain, with numerous funds actively investing in property development and tourism-related projects.

With our international desks and extensive experience advising startups, scale-ups, investors, and real estate players, we are ideally positioned to support clients entering or expanding in the Spanish market.

Competing with international firms:
Global law firms are most active in Madrid and Barcelona. The main challenge for Spanish independents is competing with their global reach, brand visibility and resources. Clients increasingly expect seamless cross-border capability, multidisciplinary teams and cutting-edge technology.

However, our independence also gives us an advantage. We can be more agile, offer tailor-made solutions with direct partner involvement, and collaborate flexibly with leading firms worldwide through networks.

The challenge, therefore, is not just to compete, but to demonstrate that we can deliver the same international standards while preserving the closeness, efficiency and local insight that global firms cannot always replicate.

Using the directories and associations:
Our recognition by leading legal directories positions us as a trusted partner, while our active role in the International Bar Association and other international organisations allows us to build strong relationships with leading independent firms worldwide. In addition, our dedicated international desks and frequent cross-border collaborations ensure that peers know we can deliver local excellence with global standards.

Networks, alliances, and professional relationships are absolutely critical for generating international referrals. In today's legal market, reputation alone is not enough — clients and peers seek trusted partners who can guarantee seamless service across jurisdictions.

Active participation with prestigious international associations allows us to build visibility, exchange knowledge, and strengthen ties with leading independent firms worldwide. These relationships ensure that Roca Junyent remains top of mind when cross-border opportunities arise, enabling us to deliver local excellence with global standards.

Looking ahead:
Over the next 3–5 years, Spanish firms will be shaped by several global and regional trends. The acceleration of technology and AI in legal services will demand investment in digital capabilities to remain competitive internationally.

ESG, sustainability and the energy transition will generate cross-border opportunities, particularly in sectors like renewables and climate tech, where Spain is a key player.

At the same time, consolidation in the legal market and growing client demand for seamless global coverage will challenge independents to strengthen their alliances and networks. Those firms that can combine local depth with technological innovation, cross-border collaboration and ESG expertise will be best placed to grow their international practices."

7

The Middle East: The United Arab Emirates

"For newcomers to the region, it is important that our firm has a deep appreciation of the local laws and regulations. We have that advantage. We're often consulted by governments on legislation and we have a strong legislation team that contributed to that."

Samer Qudah, Al Tamimi & Co

- Dubai's success in positioning itself as a professional and financial services hub for the region is now well established
- As the UAE's economy, and those of the region, diversify, energy projects, technology, hospitality, transport and infrastructure are a focus
- UAE firms are increasingly looking outwards, matching the ambitions and plans of their clients

A strategic hub in the Middle East, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Dubai in particular, in many ways exemplifies the professional space occupied by independent law firms.

Unlike its neighbours, Dubai is not a major oil and gas producer. But it has positioned itself by design as a regional hub for finance and professional services, with growing opportunities in the diversifying economy of the region.

Its economic strategy has three key legal components: a relatively liberal professional regulatory environment; international business zones, such as the Dubai International Finance Centre (DIFC), governed by its own international business-friendly regulatory regime; and business disputes facilities that support such activities, notably the Dubai International Arbitration Centre (DIAC).

To compete with, or win referrals from, the regional concentration of global firms now resident in the UAE, independent law firms must show capabilities in all three.

To their benefit, as the UAE's economy has diversified into areas such as energy projects, technology, hospitality, transport and infrastructure, so international demand for domestic legal advice has increased.

The UAE's lawyers must reflect the region's political risks in their legal risk assessments, which means government and regulator knowledge is indispensable.

Hadef & Partners

Hadef & Partners is a long-established UAE law firm with an outstanding, diverse team of about 115 lawyers in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.

Managing partner, Sadiq Jafar, discusses the UAE's importance as a regional gateway, together with the firm's central role in the development of the UAE's legal regime. He also addresses the firm's independent ethos and its strategies for building a profile to attract and retain high-calibre people and clients.

Sadiq Jafar,
Managing Partner, Hadef & Partners

Operating in a diverse market:

The UAE legal market thrives on diversity – international firms bring global reach, while domestic firms like Hadef & Partners offer something irreplaceable: generational knowledge built in parallel with the development of the UAE.

We've evolved with the country since 1980 and helped draft more than 250 UAE laws. Our founder served as Minister of Justice. This represents institutional knowledge of the UAE's legal framework from the inside, understanding the policy intent and values that underpin the law.

Our strength in the local courts is a significant differentiator. Our market-leading team of Emirati advocates holds rights of audience in all UAE courts and tribunals. When complex disputes require a litigation strategy that combines legal excellence with deep cultural understanding and courtroom experience, this local strength makes a significant difference.

Rather than viewing international firm presence as competition, we see collaboration. We regularly work alongside international practices when matters require UAE law expertise or multijurisdictional coordination. This serves clients far better than any single firm could alone.

Our role is to set the benchmark for locally-rooted excellence while maintaining a global perspective – contributing not just to individual client success, but to the UAE's broader ambition as a global business and legal hub.

Winning cross-border mandates:

The UAE's ongoing transformation into a global business hub creates natural opportunities for domestic firms to win cross-border work – but only if we leverage what makes us genuinely distinctive.

The UAE sits at the crossroads of East and West, making it a natural hub for transactions connecting the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. When international deals flow through the UAE – whether structuring investments, establishing regional headquarters, or coordinating multi-jurisdictional projects – clients need local counsel who can navigate UAE law with precision, while understanding the broader regional context.

Inbound investment:

As foreign investment into the UAE continues to grow across sectors from real estate and infrastructure to technology and sustainable energy, international clients need trusted local advisers for the UAE components of their global strategies.

We regularly advise multinational corporations and international law firms on the UAE aspects of cross-border M&A, joint ventures and major projects. Our deep market knowledge and relationships make us the natural choice for sophisticated international clients who want more than competent advice – they want genuine insight.

Our 45 years of experience advising federal and local government entities gives us a significant advantage in regulatory-heavy cross-border transactions.

When deals involve energy projects, infrastructure development, or sectors requiring government coordination, our institutional relationships and understanding of how policy is made and implemented are invaluable.

Maintaining our independence:

Our independence is strategic. By focusing exclusively on the UAE rather than managing a global network, we invest entirely in being the best at what we do – delivering sophisticated UAE law advice to international standards.

Remaining independent allows us to maintain our Emirati identity, uphold UAE values, and make decisions solely in our clients' best interests while regularly collaborating with global firms. We work with international firms when clients need multi-jurisdictional support, partnering with best-in-class practices worldwide on client need, as opposed to organisational obligation.

After 45 years growing alongside the UAE, we're a UAE institution with deep community roots and dedication to this nation's success.

Our independence allows us to take the long view and invest in training the next generation of lawyers. For clients, this means undivided attention and clear loyalty. For our people, it means careers where UAE excellence is the priority.

Investing locally:

Being Emirati-founded and deeply rooted in the UAE creates trust, knowledge and connections that cannot be replicated.

For government entities and local businesses, our heritage matters. We understand UAE values and policy objectives because we've helped build them. This makes us natural advisers where cultural understanding and government relationships are essential.

For international clients, our home-grown status is desirable and valuable. And being a home-grown champion also carries responsibility. We invest in training the UAE's legal profession, support our communities, and contribute to the nation's development. In a market with a strong international firm presence, being a national champion is a competitive advantage.

Cross-border instructions:

Corporate and M&A work generates the most cross-border instructions. That encompasses international investors acquiring UAE businesses, foreign companies establishing regional headquarters, and cross-border joint ventures – they all require sophisticated local counsel.

We also advise prominent family businesses on succession planning, governance structures, and international investments – work that demands both technical excellence and cultural sensitivity.

International high-net-worth individuals investing in UAE real estate create significant demand. The UAE's attractiveness as a destination for global wealth, combined with Dubai and Abu Dhabi's world-class property market, drives a continuous need for expert legal advice on acquisitions, structuring, and asset protection.

Disputes are equally important, particularly international arbitration. Our strength in both arbitration and UAE courts – navigating DIFC/ADGM tribunals, international arbitration, and local courts – is a key differentiator when complex commercial disputes involve foreign parties.

Competing with international firms: Domestic firms understand how policy is developed, regulatory decisions are made, and government priorities evolve. This matters enormously in transactions involving infrastructure, energy and public-private partnerships.

Litigation presents another natural advantage. The firm's rights of audience in the UAE courts, combined with our deep understanding of judicial processes and the domestic legal culture, are essential for handling high-value and complex disputes.

Maintaining and building a profile:

Our international profile is built on work quality and strategic visibility. We maintain top-tier rankings in all major legal directories, reflecting consistent excellence recognised by clients and peers globally.

Our directory rankings and conference presence reinforce credibility, which translates to increased referrals from international law firms and direct engagement from multinational corporations.

We've cultivated strong relationships with the world's leading international law firms, who regularly engage us for UAE law expertise on their global transactions, regulatory and contentious requirements. These referrals have continued for over 45 years because our work product consistently meets international standards.

We participate actively in global legal conferences, ensuring visibility within the international legal community and staying connected to developments in cross-border practice. Such platforms allow us to share our UAE expertise and reinforce our positioning as the go-to domestic firm.

Talent and retention:

The culture of the firm is based on genuine relationships, mutual respect, and a supportive environment where people feel valued beyond their billable hours. This leads to loyalty and happiness. Our lawyers work on significant matters from early stages, develop deep expertise and build lasting relationships with clients and colleagues.

We invest in our people's long-term development, provide clear progression paths, and maintain a culture where everyone's contribution is recognised. The close-knit atmosphere and collaborative spirit distinguish us from larger, more corporate environments.

While we strive to remain competitive on remuneration, our retention advantage comes from providing a workplace that people appreciate, and in which they genuinely want to work and remain.

An international outlook:
Our recruitment strategy achieves the objective of having an internationally experienced and sophisticated team. Many of our lawyers trained and practiced in leading global jurisdictions before joining Hadef, bringing that experience and perspective with them.

Our diverse workforce – speaking multiple languages and drawing from a broad range of legal traditions – ensures we maintain international standards and understand how global firms approach transactions.

This diversity of background reflects the UAE's business and social environment, and enriches our practice without requiring lawyers to leave and return."

Al Tamimi & Co

UAE-headquartered Al Tamimi & Co has offices across the Middle East and North Africa: Bahrain; Egypt; Iraq; Jordan; Kuwait; Morocco; Oman; Qatar; and Saudi Arabia. It is a commercial firm with a significant disputes offering.

Here, its head of corporate structuring, partner and former managing partner, Samer Qudah, sets out the firm's competitive advantages, the shape of its referrals, how it is meeting the 'war for talent' and its approach to branding.

Samer Qudah,
Partner, Al Tamimi & Co

Market position:
We're quite unique in our setup. We combine the local roots with the regional and the global experience. Our people include local practitioners, regional talent from leading Arab firms, and Western lawyers who came to us from international firms. That mixture is something you wouldn't find in any other firm and it puts us in a completely different position compared to both local and international firms. Local firms don't have that depth of expertise. And when it comes to the international firms, they're not a full-service law firm like Al Tamimi.

For newcomers to the region, it is important that our firm has a deep appreciation of the local laws and regulations. We have that advantage. We're often consulted by governments on legislation and we have a strong legislation team that contributed to that. Because of our relationships with key stakeholders, we can do things that others may not be able to do. Newcomers see us as the leading firm in opening doors for them.

Clients prefer to have a firm that will advise them on how to do things, draft agreements, and go with them to court when necessary. We have the strongest dispute resolution team and not many firms have this right of audience across all the panels – the DIFC and common law jurisdictions, the Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM), or the local courts.

We work with many international firms, and either we handle the dispute resolution work or they affiliate themselves with other local firms, but the majority don't have that in-house capability.

Facing growing competition:
Traditionally, international firms were here for project-type work, not the local work, and we used to get lots of referrals from those firms.

But since COVID and due to a change in market dynamics, some have shifted their models and started doing a broader range of work. As our size and capabilities have grown, we are now seen as competitors by some of the international firms we used to get referrals from.

Referrals:
We have capabilities across 10 jurisdictions and 17 offices, which is important for referrals, because many of our clients do business across the region and many mandates have a Saudi element.

Our regional offering is a particular advantage when it comes to foreign direct investment (FDI).

It's hard to put an exact number on the balance between direct and referral work, but our business model is based on investing heavily in the markets where we have offices and building relationships with big players, family businesses, and government entities.

We're not heavily reliant on referrals, but cross-firm referrals are a significant part of our client base. We also have a 'key client' programme to proactively develop those relationships with law firms to ensure a steady volume of work.

Identifying growth sectors:
Certain sectors are 'hot' and growing. Energy is definitely one. We're building our capabilities there with new hires and developing our team's skillset.

Renewable energy initiatives, especially solar power and emerging hydrogen fuel projects, are also fuelling expansion as the country focuses on decarbonisation.

Technology is another one, particularly with AI and digital transformation. Education is also very relevant to our region and we're probably the only firm with deep experience in the education sector, assisting leading universities and schools relocating or expanding into our region. The UK is a key source of referrals here.

Tourism, events and sports are becoming more relevant, especially in the UAE and Saudi, but other jurisdictions are also getting busier with infrastructure and hospitality projects.

The UAE's cross-border growth is primarily driven by key sectors such as large-scale infrastructure and mega projects, including developments like Palm Jebel Ali and the Dubai Metro, which attract significant international investment.

Finally, the increasing complexity of cross-border transactions is boosting demand for specialised dispute resolution and legal services, particularly in construction and energy, further solidifying the UAE's position as a leading hub for regional and international collaboration.

Competing for talent:
The interest from global firms in this region has significantly increased. This means there's a war over talent – especially in places like Saudi, where 'Saudisation' creates a real challenge and talent is in short supply, so people jump ship for salaries.

For us, talent retention was never a reactive approach – we proactively kicked off the Al Tamimi Academy for the development of our team members, which is very attractive for retaining talent.

We've revisited our salary scales, increased them, and now we're very competitive. We have a strong brand and a clear career progression path.

Attracting lateral hires used to be a challenge, but now we've managed to recruit a number of partners from leading international firms, which puts us in a very competitive position.

We also have a modern, flexible partnership structure to make it easier to attract top lateral hires and compete on pay scales.

Brand, profile, and thought leadership:
We invest significantly in having a specialised, capable in-house marketing and business development team.

Our leading publication, *Law Update*, is taken seriously as thought leadership and reaches an audience across the globe.

We participate in, and organise, both global and local conferences to build our brand and profile – such as the IBA, as well as specialised practice events like for shipping in London. We have in-house market desks for China, India, Korea, and Africa that strengthen our brand and ensure a steady flow of work.

Al Tamimi consistently achieves exceptional rankings in respected legal directories such as Chambers Global and Legal 500. In 2025, it secured 31 top-tier rankings across multiple jurisdictions and practice areas, including "Regional Law Firm of the Year," and national recognitions in the UAE, Jordan, Qatar and others.

This recognition attests to the firm's legal excellence and elevates its profile among global clients and peers.

Our clear message is that our strength lies in the firm's ability to deliver practical, commercially driven legal solutions, supported by rights of audience in local courts, which is something most international firms cannot offer directly.

As the largest law firm in the region by headcount, Al Tamimi offers the scale, continuity and responsiveness that many multinationals and local businesses require, while retaining an independent identity that enhances its agility in navigating regional legal systems and regulatory environments.

Maintaining relationships:
We believe in the value of relationships – with key stakeholders including governments, consultancy firms, private equity, law firms and our regional peers. Those relationships help strengthen our brand regionally and maintain our ranking as the leading firm in the region. The key is to become a market leader in your areas of practice and to continually invest in people and relationships."

8

Africa

> To develop a reputation within the African continent, given its size, we have worked hard at building relationships with good firms in smaller jurisdictions.

Alan Keep, Bowmans

- Leading law firms are in close competition with international firms in the global 'war for talent'
- The importance of outbound investment from Africa is increasing
- Diversity is a stand-out strength for Africa's legal communities

Historically, Africa's jurisdictions have been a target for inbound investment. That is still a hugely important pattern for its law firms as professional enablers for that investment. But as economies develop, outbound investment is increasing. Lawyers are having to become adept at growing areas like technology, innovative finance and infrastructure projects with the power to transform economies.

Through all this, lawyers' knowledge of local and regional culture, political risk and regulation is key. Collaboration and partnership are the watchwords for Africa's commercial law firms.

Bowmans

South Africa-headquartered Bowmans has offices in five other African countries: Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, Tanzania and Zambia. The firm works closely with its Bowmans Alliance firms in Ethiopia (Aman & Partners LLP) and Nigeria (Udo Udoma & Belo-Osagie). These are two of the leading corporate and commercial law firms in their jurisdictions.

Bowmans also has a non-exclusive co-operation agreement with French international law firm Gide Loyrette Nouel that provides clients access to assistance in Francophone West and North Africa.

Alan Keep is the firm's managing partner, based in Johannesburg, and is a specialist in corporate and tax law.

Alan Keep,
Managing Partner, Bowmans

There is great potential:
The African market is growing fast. The continent is a complicated place in that there are French- and Portuguese-speaking places. Bowmans' focus is on the sub-Saharan African and English-speaking world. Although many of the economies come off a lower base, they have great potential and are growing.

Bowmans has aimed to use its sophisticated base in South Africa and Kenya to then grow into other hubs and follow clients to where they are seeking growth.

In regard to the international market, the scale of the legal market in Africa remains quite small, but we are seeing quite a lot of growth and interest in some sectors. Our real challenge is to make sure we can take the potential of our people and make sure we can deliver at international standards.

Growth is client-centric:
Our approach to growing in Africa was very much a client-centric one. We always had a strong international reputation in South Africa and have been asked by clients to manage services elsewhere.

We opened offices in places where it made sense to do so from a client and synergy perspective. Practically speaking, that means a primary focus on English speaking parts of the continent.

There is quite a focus on hubs in Africa – South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Morocco and Egypt are the big economies.

In many places, there are not a great deal of experienced lawyers on the ground and you really need people with a commitment to invest in training talent. Essentially, as we have grown, we have built that capacity and made it a lot easier to leverage. Our people investment is huge.

We have gradually, as with most firms growing internationally, got better and better at identifying the right people to go into business with, but always kept close to a client-centric business case. Our clients know we have the skills to service and look at other jurisdictions. We focus on whether Bowmans will be attractive to clients in the market, as opposed to a 'flags on the map' strategy.

To develop a reputation within the African continent, given its size, we have worked hard at building relationships with good firms in smaller jurisdictions.

A focus on diversity:
I've found it a very enriching experience being managing partner. The diversity prevalent across this continent is amazing. I've found many people from very different cultures and backgrounds who buy into what a top-end firm wants to do. We have an open, friendly and collegiate culture. The lesson has mostly been around adapting to diversity and learning from it.

It's great to work with people with very different perspectives on things from countries that have trodden a different path. That gives us real knowledge of local conditions. We try to focus on that, to know local laws and how to navigate courts and regulators and states where they are, which an international firm without arms and legs will always struggle to provide.

Investment is now outbound as well as inbound:
Historically, our firm built its reputation on inbound work, where people invested in Africa. We always had a big multinational client base and relationships with international law firms who often introduced them.

But the South African business environment is more sophisticated than most in Africa and as result, South African corporates and banks and financial institutions and tech companies have grown outside of Africa, and we get the opportunity to follow them.

Infrastructure and energy sectors have been particularly hot in the last few years. There is a big energy crisis in South Africa and the wider region. There is a lot of international interest in solving that problem.

Another big area is financial services – banking, insurance and fintech. Mining and metals also remain significant for us. Private equity is becoming increasingly important.

Tech is changing the world, and Africa, though behind the developed world, is no exception. Google, Meta, and Amazon are here in a big way, building data centres.

We work with international firms. A great strength for Bowmans is knowing the global premium firms well. They are great sources of work. The African market doesn't command the fee levels of New York and London, so those firms are really looking for partnership with us. They have learnt to trust us to deliver for their clients.

Talent:
You are going to lose talented people who want to cut it in big legal markets, but some will come home with their families later on. On a net basis, it's a leakage and we just have to work around it, making sure we train and develop more people so we have enough.

The type of legal work that is available in more developed African markets is good. Industry is growing, the firm is growing and prospects are improving.

On the downside, the currency is weak and the attraction of the global elite is significant. It is a big factor, but we lean into it – we have to watch for the talent pipeline.

Profile building:
We invest in directory rankings and in thought leadership articles. You have to hit the spot and make sure people read and follow those things.

To attract inbound work in a jurisdiction where people don't have matters every day, you really do try to get out there in every possible way. If you are front of mind with multinationals and big global firms, then when something comes up in south or east of Africa, they will remember us.

Be bold and ambitious and get out there. If you are a smaller firm, as long as you have some level of credentials, if you are strategic and think carefully, you should just get out to the market using your talent and build connections. Invest in being outward-facing."

9

North America:
USA & Canada

> Don't underestimate the value of being a good, collaborative firm that's easy to work with – if people enjoy working with you and know you're high quality, that can contribute to a successful international strategy and profile without necessarily having to build a bunch of offices.

Matt Cockburn, Torys, Canada

- As the US-origin global elite expand and push up fees, opportunities are opened up for independent firms who are focused on domestic advice and international referrals
- For independent firms in the US and Canada, a presence at international associations and spending time in target jurisdictions is a key investment
- An international strategy helps deliver domestic success

The US is the world's largest legal market, and as its elite firms have grown globally, they have challenged or set the market for lawyer salaries and partner rewards. But their focus on the highest yielding matters – and fees – has opened up opportunities for mid-market, independent US firms who have shown they can have a thriving international focus based on referrals and collaboration if they invest time and resources in building the right relationships.

Canada may be a smaller economy, but that has been an incentive for Canadian businesses, and law firms, to have an outward facing attitude. The relationship with the US economy is a dominant consideration, but Canada's domestic policies, notably its intention to become an 'energy super power' are fuelling inbound interest in its economy.

Nixon Peabody, USA

The law firm Nixon Peabody is a US-only law firm. It collaborates with companies, regulators, funders, and industry leaders to foster connections that help our clients form alliances, identify opportunities, and minimize risks.

In its own words: 'We help shape evolving legislation and track key trends affecting our clients' industries to protect them from changes in the political, economic, and social landscape.'

It has offices in 11 US cities, and Hong Kong, London, Shanghai and Singapore.

David Kaufman is Nixon Peabody's Director of Global Strategies.

David Kaufman,
Director of Global Strategies, Nixon Peabody

We are US-centred:
We are comfortable in our own skin as a US-centred firm. We don't pretend to have offices all over the world, and never sought to open lots of offices.

Instead, we rely upon great relationships with law firms around the world. Rather than open an office that is the 54th best office in Stuttgart, we'd rather work with the best office in Stuttgart.

There is value in the legal networks. We've been a member of TerraLex for 26 years now, a global legal network of over 23,000 attorneys. We've realised, you get out of it what you put in.

We are an entrepreneurial firm, and give partners breadth to do their thing. We give them the chance to use firm networks. If someone has a relationship with other firms, we're not going to stand in the way of that, and we see if people can develop new relationships with firms.

We have a firm-wide global brand. Our aim is to be a great resource for a wide range of firms around the world that need help in the US. We may not be global, but we are very internationally sophisticated. We understand cultural differences and recognise that how to operate globally is not like operating domestically.

Wealthy UK firms have spent hundreds of millions of dollars to enter the US market. But it's interesting that Allen & Overy had to merge with Shearman & Sterling to get any traction. Osborne Clark is an interesting example of a firm that has done well as a presence in the US.

The US market is segmented:
Tech sector people come to California and Silicon Valley. Media businesses go to Los Angeles. Chicago is interesting – a lot of mid-size industrial companies have operations Midwest. Houston is important for Latin America-linked work.

To compete with firms like Baker McKenzie and DLA piper, which we do domestically, we must provide clients with a global service, the best firms in foreign markets, and working closely with them. If you don't have a relationship, you can't make it seamless.

TerraLex is an important part of our global strategy, but there are other firms we work with. We like to allow our attorneys to work with who they want.

Successful referral relationships:
Expertise is table stakes. The harder part is establishing how you work together. Good communication is key – let us know what's going on with the client. That's especially the case in a transaction where the referral team doesn't have direct involvement with the client. In a referral matter, our job is to make you look good.

Trust is something that takes years to develop, but it can be lost in an instant."

Arnall Golden Gregory, USA

Arnall Golden Gregory is an AmLaw 200 full-service business law firm with 200-plus lawyers based in Atlanta and Washington DC. The Washington office has a particular focus on regulatory work and white collar crime.

Atlanta-based Sean Fogarty is the firm's managing partner.

Sean Fogarty,
Managing Partner, Arnall Golden Gregory

Our referral opportunities have increased with the globalisation of the AmLaw 100:
That global model doesn't translate well into most non-US jurisdictions, and we are hyper-focused on taking advantage of this. For many clients and referrers, their constantly increasing prices are an issue. Our rates are more commensurate with the top rates outside the US.

We are primarily talking with larger UK-based firms that don't have a US presence. We're focused on conveying the sophistication of mid-sized firms.

M&A predominates:
Most of our international mandates involve mergers and acquisitions transactions or the establishment of manufacturing operations in US. We have significant work around privacy, life sciences, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and immigration, though the balance changes with changing US policy.

The balance of our international work is two-thirds inbound and a third outbound.

International credibility:
Our international credibility comes from a couple of different places. For example, we have 13 native German speakers, a number of multi-jurisdiction licensed attorneys and a Korean speaking attorney. Korean is the third most spoken language in the state of Georgia! We have language and local custom credibility in different jurisdictions where we have a lot of existing clientele and have expansion opportunities.

We are very active in the IBA and have been for many years – investing in growing our international capability and networks is something we are committed to. Our most valuable network is UK based, plus a strong showing in German-speaking countries, South Korea and Central America.

Talent and culture:
Our attorneys are active and willing travellers and spend a lot of time overseas. They are investing in referral networks and other global organisations. They are able to walk the walk and don't just pay lip service to international legal work.

Our attorneys can leverage their language skills, and we want to make sure they are supported in using those skills to find the right business development opportunities in other jurisdictions. We sometimes house foreign lawyers in our offices for a period. Foreign law students also spend time with us.

Using associations to raise the firm's profile:
We have had two recent past chairs of the ABA international law section, in addition to various committee level leadership positions in the IBA. That has been valuable from the perspective of being out in the legal community as international lawyers focused on international brand building.

Our attorneys do a lot of speaking at events, primarily through other law firms and accounting firms, investment banks and other members of the client service ecosystem. Most of these are outside of the US.

In the US, with an accountancy firm, we co-host an annual event called Springboard to Europe, which is primarily an opportunity for European companies in the US to get a better understanding of issues they are dealing with.

How to focus internationally:
The main thing we've learned over the last decade is that it's a big world out there. As a 200+ lawyer firm, we can't be everywhere.

Our lessons for independent firms are: figure out what you're best at, have the best relationships, have language credibility, and build a committed group of partners who can focus on your chosen jurisdictions. You need to get out there – others can't validate your strengths from thousands of miles away."

Torys, Canada

Business law firm Torys was founded in 1941, and retains many of its clients from those early days. It has grown to 430 legal professionals, including 250 in Toronto, 60 in New York, 50 in Calgary, 25 in Montreal and 25 in Halifax.

Matt Cockburn is the firm's managing partner.

Matt Cockburn,
Managing Partner, Torys

A gateway to the US: The genesis of our New York office was to support Canadian clients as they expanded into the US. We've been very fortunate that they used us through this growth. What we've become very good at in that office is serving our Canadian clients well on certain things, but there are a lot of things we don't do, and we recognise that our clients will want to use other firms for that work. We stick to what we're strong at, where we have a deep client relationship, and we recognise where things are outside our expertise or capacity, ensuring clients are well served by others where needed.

In New York, we're especially strong on the capital markets side for Canadian clients, who are often cross-listed. Also, the funds side, co-investments, and private equity. We're also very good at cross-border tax, cross-border lending transactions, and cross-border employment issues. Major New York firms can be both competitors and collaborators.

International firms:
In Canada, there are a few global firms – Dentons, Norton Rose, DLA Piper – but we have not seen the influx of the very large US or European firms that other markets have had. Our approach is to focus on high-quality work, building generational relationships with our Canadian clients, and being regarded as respectful and professional by everyone we work with. We pride ourselves on being good collaborators and treating people with respect.

Cross-border work:
There's always been a heavy flow from the US. But what we're experiencing at the moment, especially with our government's focus on infrastructure and energy, is a lot of interest from European investors – especially in the renewable energy sector. We've also seen consistently high interest from Australia and China.

Our client base is made up of sophisticated investors and acquirers, and these clients see periods of uncertainty and disruption as periods of opportunity.

With the federal government focusing on building infrastructure and making Canada an energy superpower, there's going to be a lot of interest and investment here – not just from our own aspirations as a country, but also as other countries figure out the new global trade order.

Changes in client expectations:
Almost everything clients do now has some sort of international component. Very few deals are 100% domestic Canadian – almost every deal has a US, European, or Asian element. I don't think this will lead us to start opening other international offices – doing that is extremely difficult and expensive, and most major markets already have a wealth of established firms. What we do instead is make sure we have strong relationships with trusted firms around the world, so we can offer our clients seamless, high-quality service wherever they need it."

We don't have formal alliances:
All our firm-to-firm relationships are informal. While we don't have any formal alliances, in the last three or four years we've made a deliberate effort to organise and tend those informal relationships. For example, if I travel to meet firms in England, I send a reporting note to our business development team so that the next Torys person in that city knows who to talk to and what we've discussed. By keeping a rhythm and consistency to those visits, we've seen work flow more steadily in both directions.

For a Canadian firm, creating a formal network or alliance is risky – it's easy to cut yourself off from other relationships and opportunities.

The IBA has been very productive for us in building our relationships with international firms. It's a great vehicle, and this year, with the IBA in Toronto, we're devoting enormous energy to it. It's a big moment for us and for the city."

Talent and culture:
For young people, the opportunity to work on international projects is highly energizing and exciting, whether that's physically working abroad or just collaborating with people from around the world. We have a programme where our students can start as associates in our New York office. Most are Canadian, but they get a chance to live and work in New York if they wish.

We've done international secondments, and as we continue to build international relationships, we're looking to do more of this. Sending associates to other firms and cities not only benefits their development but also strengthens our global ties.

If you look at the legal cultures of Toronto, Montreal, Calgary, and Vancouver, you'll find small, collegial communities where people treat each other with respect. I think that's a unique advantage when we expand internationally. Canada's legal market, for a population of only about 40 million, is highly sophisticated and globally oriented. The sophistication comes in part from partnering with Canadian clients doing complex work all over the globe.

Be easy to work with:
I'd advise independent firms to never lose focus on quality and client relationships. Those have to be front and centre as you build an international profile. Don't underestimate the value of being a good, collaborative law firm that's easy to work with – if people enjoy working with you and know you're high quality, that really can contribute to a successful international strategy and profile without necessarily having to build a bunch of offices."

10

Offshore

> We are proud of the work we do in our communities, whether that is legal work or support through our local sponsorships. However, we compete in the global market at the highest level. We are known for providing world-class offshore legal counsel to clients around the world and consider the UK, the Middle East and the Americas to be core geographic markets.

Jason Romer, Collas Crill

- Offshore jurisdictions must now offer more than advantageous tax regimes to compete, with the importance of governance, compliance and transparency increasing
- Expertise in fintech, Blockchain, and digital assets has made some jurisdictions international centres of excellence
- Membership of international associations and a regular presence in key jurisdictions are a priority for offshore law firms

The unique character and position of offshore jurisdictions mean referrals are two-way – onshore national and global firms need offshore advice and expertise to complete deals, handle disputes or complete rescues and restructures; offshore firms, with a client base that is strong on wealth management and its connected business affairs, are able to return the favour.

The private client work for which offshore jurisdictions are known has changed. There is an increased stress on regulation, compliance and transparency. Jurisdictions increasingly compete on service, reputation and the ability to provide strategic advice.

Collas Crill

With offices in BVI, Cayman, Guernsey, Jersey and London, Collas Crill is a leading offshore firm. Its legal services span banking and finance, corporate, dispute resolution, funds, insolvency and restructuring, private client and trusts, real estate and regulatory. Jason Romer is the firm's group managing partner, leading 35 partners, 94 lawyers and 244 staff.

Jason Romer,
Group Managing Partner, Collas Crill

A locally based global firm:

Our local markets in Jersey, Guernsey, Cayman and BVI are incredibly important to us. Each of our finance industries are based locally – the requirements of economic substance have required us to act even more locally, but our markets, perspectives and often clients are global.

We are proud of the work we do in our communities, whether that is legal work or support through our local sponsorships. However, we compete in the global market at the highest level. We are known for providing world-class offshore legal counsel to clients around the world and consider the UK, the Middle East and the Americas to be core geographic markets.

Irrespective of where our clients are located, they tell us time and again that it is the way we manage our client relationships that sets us apart from our competitors. Technical excellence is a given for clients; it is our ability and willingness to 'go the extra mile' that really adds value. This, combined with a high level of care and humanity, is what clients need, want and should expect from us.

Referrers are also partners:

Our relationships with UK/US law firms are key and we value them greatly. Whilst referrals are important, we also see these law firms as partners in presenting a comprehensive legal offering to the market – we often need to send our clients their way to offer the full onshore-offshore solution between us. The increasing sophistication of global families and the continuing rise of family offices has led us to develop more direct relationships with families, not only for 'traditional' private client work, but for corporate and investment structuring and regulatory advice. The consolidation of the offshore corporate and fiduciary services market now means that many of those companies are international corporate entities – although we are maintaining our local relationships, we are also developing relationships with general counsel internationally.

Explaining offshore is a first step:
If counsel or investors are not familiar with the offshore world, then our first role is to inform and to help those individuals or clients understand where offshore fits in. We are really a conduit for international business – the nodes in the international finance world that are tax-neutral and as frictionless as possible.

Once a prospective client understands how they might best use an offshore financial centre, then it is about finding the best one for their needs. Our work then is done – through this process, we will have demonstrated our expertise and down-to-earth approach to business, which very often leads to an ongoing and long-term relationship.

Focus on what we're good at:
Our take is that being the biggest doesn't always equate to being the best. Only one firm can be the biggest and they are not necessarily the best across all offshore jurisdictions and all areas of the law. As a firm, we are pretty clear: we don't want to do everything everywhere. We focus on what we are excellent at and clients appreciate that focus and clarity. We are cautious about rankings unless provided by credible independent organisations (we avoid pay-to-play).

Collas Crill is not a member of an international network of independent firms. We do, though, join networks specific to core legal specialisms or regions that are key for us; this may also include sponsoring events and roundtables in those jurisdictions. We tend to prefer to partner with firms with similar approaches and who share our values on a bilateral basis.

Quality creates the best brand:
It remains the case that the best business development is doing excellent work for the clients that you have; they will always be your greatest brand ambassadors. Brand visibility is also important, but brand perception more so.

We have always had a distinctive brand, and success is about ensuring that it reaches and resonates with clients – existing and prospective – and helps them understand what they can expect from us. This isn't just about how we position ourselves on our website and in PR, it's about how we show up in meetings and how we conduct ourselves day in, day out. That consistency of experience is key. For us, it is a commitment to building deep relationships that help to build a business long term.

Future planning:
Collas Crill is focused on resolving disputes and the growth and protection of capital offshore. The increasing complexity of international families and the need to protect, grow and deploy private capital to meet an increasing range of needs means that these families require a broader range of legal services. We have corporate, financing, funds, structuring, litigation, regulatory, governance and trust specialists working closely with those who own and deploy private capital and with their advisers. Much has been written about the great wealth transition – from one generation to the next and to those who want to deploy their capital in very different ways.

Be present:
While membership of international networks and attendance at networks are important, there is no substitute for 'being present' in a key jurisdiction on a regular basis. It is important to develop relationships with other independent domestic firms in these jurisdictions to leverage each other's networks and expertise.

From my perspective, it is about knowing who you are and what you offer to clients – and then shouting about it confidently and clearly. We all operate in local markets but are all tied into the global marketplace – we cannot be just local or just global. It is about knowing your place in the market and being clear about that – to clients and to your people."

Harneys: from offshore to global

Established in the British Virgin Islands (BVI)in 1960, Harneys is now a global offshore firm, advising on BVI, Cayman Islands, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Jersey, Bermuda and Anguilla law from 11 offices worldwide.

Global managing partner William Peake explains how the firm partners with elite onshore law firms to advise on some of the most complex cross-border transactions.

William Peake,
Global Managing Partner, Harneys

We don't compete with onshore:
We flex our expertise through decades of being the market-leading firm in the BVI and are really conscious of making sure we direct our clients to the best jurisdiction for their commercial interests and requirements.

Although we are based in the same locations as many of the world's leading onshore firms, we are very much not in competition with them. The Linklaters, Freshfields and Jones Days of this world are a key source of work, and we are really lucky to work cheek to jowl with firms of that pedigree.

Referrals are two-way
We are often contacted by clients looking for onshore advice, which gives us an opportunity to refer work to the onshore firms we work with most closely.

Relationships with onshore firms in New York, London and Hong Kong are critical to sustaining our work. Their importance cannot be understated and we are very conscious that our peers also offer excellent service and the onshore firms have plenty of options. It's why we have such a keen focus on making sure we spend as much time with those firms as possible – both on deals and socially.

Branding and visibility:
The best advertising any firm can do is to perform their job to a really high standard consistently. We also use LinkedIn effectively to raise our profile and connect with our target market.

We are very much a global firm and have never struggled with a perception issue. This is largely due to the majority of our lawyers having had experience at magic circle or international firms.

Facing the competition:
I think it's simply the amount of choice. There are so many fantastic, high-calibre offshore firms. We need to be clear on what makes us different and what makes us a compelling partner. To my mind, it is based on us being good, decent folk to work alongside and we see ourselves in partnership with onshore firms to achieve the best possible result for a client in the most cost-effective manner.

We are asked to pitch for most major restructurings and dispute resolution matters on the basis that we have a proven track record and an exemplary global team.

Our bench strength is deep and we work alongside our transactional teams to unravel the most complex matters imaginable. It's exciting and fast-paced work that we do not take for granted. I am acutely aware that clients have options, and the key for us is to make sure they phone us first.

International disputes are a healthy mix: We have seen a huge amount of minority shareholder litigation in the last five years and those valuation cases remain.

Shareholder disputes also bubble up in times of economic volatility and uncertainty.

Get the basics right to succeed:
I think the key is not to over-engineer. Do your job well consistently, retain and recruit talent, and don't underestimate the importance of focusing on a culture that makes your firm a good place to work.

A lot of my content on LinkedIn is to demonstrate that we are a firm made up of humans who will be good people to work with on matters that will inevitably have moments of acute stress. I think firms should think more about flexing the EQ they have in their ranks. ”

Overview of Lessons Learned

There is a well-established playbook by which the very largest law firms seek to go global – it involves high-profile mergers, heavy investment in setting up foreign offices, and major overheads in the form of the apparatus needed to run such operations, and to hold the firm together as one.

That has proved the right formula for firms that now compose a global elite, and has grabbed the headlines, and our attention, as it has happened. Their rewards have been phenomenal.

The independent firms that have contributed to this report show that this is not the only way, or even the desirable way, for all to thrive. We detected a growing confidence among these firms who have realised a number of things.

The first is that to thrive as a domestic or regional business-focused firm, it is important to have an international outlook. This needs constant attention and investment, not least investment of time.

That investment needs to be a long-term commitment. Several reflect on the fact that turning up at an International Bar Association or American Bar Association conference or event does not immediately lead to work from the connections made. But when they keep turning up, it does. The same is true of connection building visits to jurisdictions they hope to win referral work from.

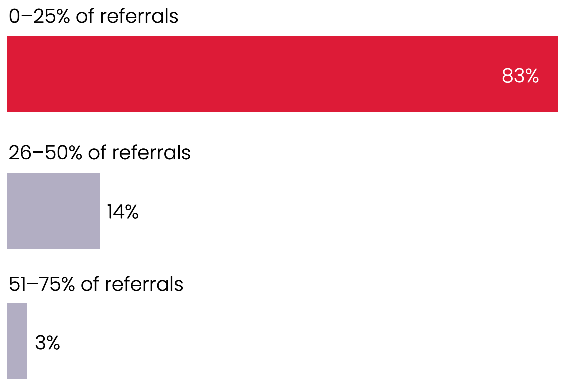
Sherrards Solicitors, London

Paul Marmor,
Co-Chair of IBA Law Firm Management Committee & Head of Litigation

To compete in the international legal sphere against global law firms is about being able to offer clients a much more hands on solution, which is bound to be a much more value based agile option to justify a change in approach. The key is demonstrating international connectivity i.e. being part of a global alliance or network of law firms and/or establishing niche foreign desks and in parallel ensuring that lawyers develop personal relationships through global legal associations such as The IBA. But it's vital when developing an international strategy, and I think this is key, to put the strategy at the core for attracting and retaining talent to ensure they have an interest or speciality that can complement the thinking and then making sure that as many people as possible can work on such projects. Our talent must have a world-facing outlook in their DNA. ”

This isn't just anecdote. For this report, we asked firms involved in the IBA's European Regional Forum for their experience in this regard (see graph below). The vast majority, 83%, could point to up to a quarter of referrals originating with IBA involvement. For 14% the figure was even higher at 26-50%. (None reported over 75%.)

Proportion of international referrals that come via IBA committee involvement or connections.



Secondly, it is clear that the global elite leave gaps in the market. Depending on the jurisdiction, that may be through a narrow focus on a few practice areas; a lack of local cultural or regulatory knowledge; or through a fee level that is out of reach for clients.

A third lesson is that because the firms we spoke to focus on being good collaborators who are clear about their areas of excellence, they inspire loyalty among international clients and law firms who refer work from other jurisdictions.

Again, that is not just anecdote. We asked the IBA's ERF lawyers the question (see graph opposite). 91% noted that many international clients have become repeat clients. All affirm the importance of their link to other independent law firms abroad, reporting that many instructions came via this source.

Almost a third confirm that international law firms leave gaps in the market because of conflicts. And clients clearly switch to independent firms, with 62% stating they have clients who have previously used international law firms in our jurisdiction.

A fourth lesson is that, following a good connection being made, many clients or referring firms seek the reassurance of some external validation when looking at a firm for the first time. In many jurisdictions, that means that directory rankings are at the very least something of a 'hygiene test. Firms don't have to be top-tier, but they need to be listed. Awards are helpful, as are invitations to speak at events as experts.

Finally, all went to great lengths to stress the quality of their work. That takes in not just black letter law advice, but also responsiveness and service, and being collaborative professionals who people enjoy doing business with – looking forward to the next set of instructions they can send, and appreciating referrals and recommendations that flow the other way.

Independent law firms, this report shows, can be globally focused from their own jurisdictions.

What does your international client make up look like?

Cuatrecasas

Isabel Gandoy,
M&A Partner and International Lead at Cuatrecasas and Officer at European Regional Forum

For independent firms rooted in their local markets, the ability to build and sustain strong relationships is not just an added value, it is the cornerstone of international growth. Clients today want trusted advisors who can combine deep knowledge of their home jurisdiction with a truly global outlook. That trust is built person to person, through networks, alliances, and the credibility that comes from showing up consistently on the international stage.

At Cuatrecasas, we have seen first-hand how a reputation for collaboration and relationship-building creates opportunities well beyond our borders. It allows us to serve our clients wherever their business takes them, while staying true to our identity as a leading Iberian firm. For domestic firms looking to raise their profile internationally, the message is clear: invest in relationships. The law is increasingly cross-border, but relationships remain deeply human and it is those human connections that open doors, attract referrals, and ultimately enable independent firms to compete confidently on the global stage. ”

International Bar Association

Sara Carnegie
Director of Legal Projects

Connection plus curiosity plus knowledge equals power. Small and medium-sized independent firms – those with under 50 partners – are hugely important members of the IBA, representing 44% of our global group membership. While most are based in Europe and Latin America, we are seeing growing interest and engagement in other parts of the world, notably Asia and the Middle East. The involvement of local firms ensures that the IBA remains truly representative of the worldwide legal profession, to further its aim of being the global voice of the profession. This is critical both in terms of reach and substance. These firms provide local expertise, cultural understanding, and first-hand experience of the challenges facing justice systems around the world, particularly at the community level. Their voices add authenticity, innovation, and a practical perspective to the IBA's policy and project work, and are also crucial in its capacity-building initiatives. The IBA, in return, provides smaller firms with an international platform to enhance their visibility, credibility, and access to a global network of peers and collaborators. This relationship is symbiotic: local firms help shape the IBA's agenda with grounded insight, while the IBA amplifies their role and influence on the world stage. ”

Afterword

Jeff Davis

As a client, it's encouraging to see the thought, time, and enterprise that independent law firms contributing to this report have invested in collaboration, service, and relationship-building — both with clients and with one another.

One of the critical roles that I, and other general counsel, bring is rooted in knowing which firm is best suited for the work at hand. For organisations with needs as complex as ours, that often means working with a combination of global firms, national and regional specialists, and independent practices. Whatever the mix, what matters most is that our firms excel at collaboration — with us as clients, and with each other.

Trust is fundamental to these relationships. We place significant reliance on our firms not only for their expertise but for their judgment.

It's heartening to see the degree to which the firms featured in this report are investing in relationships, in understanding how to work effectively together, and in building connections with clients and with the global legal elite.

My ask of our firms is straightforward: understand our goals, be responsive to them, stay attentive to our relationship, bring deep sector knowledge, and tailor your advice and ways of working to fit our particular needs.

The independent sector appears to be approaching this challenge with confidence and purpose — equally deserving of our attention as the larger international players we instruct, and demonstrating that a strong domestic or regional focus can go hand in hand with an international outlook.

Jeff Davis
General Counsel,
Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan

Our International Growth Team

Melissa Davis
CEO

Linsay Leslie
Partner & Head of International

James Hayhurst
Partner & Global Marketing Director

Louise Hood
Partner & Head of PR

Katy McEwen-Smith
Communications Director

Stephen Revell
Non-Executive Chairman

From our head office in London, MD Communications operates worldwide as a global, award-winning PR, brand and reputation consultancy helping law firms in single jurisdictions or across multiple markets build standout international brands. Founded by Melissa Davis in 2010, we design and deliver growth strategies that enhance visibility, reputation and referrals.

Having attended IBA conferences for over 15 years, we've built extensive global networks that we actively share with clients. Our support spans PR in target markets, media engagement, promotion of new offices and teams, client development, sector and industry strategy, conference profile-raising, rankings, awards and LinkedIn strategy – helping firms achieve lasting reputational advantage.

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