

A commitment to care

United States

Fulbright & Jaworski LLP

Fulbright & Jaworski has long commanded an impressive reputation in its home market, but a concerted effort since the turn of the century has seen it become a major player on the international scene without losing sight of its unparalleled dedication to client service

As one might expect from a firm that bears the name of one of the great US lawyers of the 20th century, there is an unstinting dedication to the highest-quality legal work at Fulbright & Jaworski. Very much a figurehead of the firm and still in the memory of many of its partners, Leon Jaworski was Bobby Kennedy's special assistant attorney general in a landmark desegregation case against Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett and the special prosecutor who effectively brought down Richard Nixon's presidency.

While Jaworski's example sets a benchmark for lawyers at the firm, Fulbright is equally committed to client service, which is taken just as seriously as the firm's prestigious past. And Fulbright's partners believe that it is the firm's ability to provide first-rate legal services while maintaining such high levels of client care that sets it apart from its rivals.

"I'm not so naïve as to think that our competitors don't make similar statements about themselves, so we have found that in addition to being the best – which we truly are – we provide first-rate service and we provide it in a way that our clients genuinely appreciate," says Linda Addison, a Fulbright partner since 1984 and member of the firm's executive committee. "We understand our clients' pressures; we understand their goals; we understand that they don't like surprises; and we let them know how important they are to us. Mostly, we become their trusted

advisers, whom they can turn to when they have problems that need solving."

These may seem like bold claims, but at Fulbright there is a firm-wide commitment to client service that underscores every transaction.

"I think striving for excellence in the client service area really drives much of what we do," explains Michael Irvin, the head of Fulbright's global energy practice. "I joined the firm in 1975 and I've seen it develop and evolve. We're not committed to becoming the biggest law firm in the world or to earning the highest profits. We're committed to being the best lawyers – particularly in the client service area. Pretty much everything we do puts the client's interests first."

It's all about the team

The mechanism that underlies and facilitates this quality of client service is not unique to Fulbright, but the firm has refined the client team concept greatly and allocates vast resources to ensure that everything runs smoothly.

"The thing about the client team is that it does a number of different jobs," says Steven B Pfeiffer, the chair of Fulbright's executive committee. "It is a mechanism for sharing information among busy people who are dedicated to excellence in their own practices and may therefore inadvertently overlook opportunities to collaborate. It helps institutionalize relationships, which takes some of the pressure out of the differences between personalities that can arise in any part of life. It also provides a kind of institutional memory, making things more efficient. When we bring young men and women into the firm, we can put them on the team, which is a repository of our institutional knowledge – not only the scope of the client relationship, the kinds of things we've been working on and their financial aspects, but in many cases the folklore too."

Spearheading each client team is a relationship partner and a 'coach'. Usually there is only one relationship partner, chosen through a collaboration between the firm and the client, who acts as a conduit to that client, coordinating contact and correspondence. The coach will rarely do any work for the particular client, but will ensure that the team is meeting regularly, that they have a plan in place, that the

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Left:
Steven B Pfeiffer

Opposite page
Clockwise from top left:
Jeff Blount
Lista Cannon
John Lonsberg
Michael Irvin

people in charge of implementing that plan are carrying out the task and that they're showing some success. In essence, the coach's job is to ensure that the team concept and approach are something everyone is pursuing.

The team will then be made up of partners and associates who work with that client from all of the different practice groups within the firm's global offices. The size of teams varies greatly, from five or six people to 30 or 40, depending on the size of the client. However, this is just the starting point.

"There is no way we as lawyers could effectively do everything the firm does for clients without an extensive, very capable support staff," says Michael Irvin. "We have people behind the scenes researching, identifying, developing areas that the client may be particularly interested in. They pull together information about the client's activities or operations around the world for the benefit of the lawyers, and they also pull together information that may impact the client's operations in certain areas that it might not be aware of."

The investment pays off in consistency, says Lista Cannon, the head of Fulbright's London office.

"Client care is essentially founded on consistency," she says. "It is consistency in delivering the work in a timely and efficient way. If you lose consistency, you can be a very good lawyer, but you will lose the edge in the very difficult and competitive market where you need to compete. Fulbright continues to make an investment that is very, very deep in infrastructure support because it provides consistency."

Face to face

To ensure the client teams are working as they should, regular client visits are arranged so senior partners, who are not involved in the teams, can meet with the clients and find out how the firm is performing.

"We don't take the people who do the work for the client with us on these visits," explains Pfeiffer. "We go and, instead of just thanking them, we ask how we are doing and what we can do to improve. We often get people saying: 'Thanks for coming. We really like A, B and C, but we're not sure that D is the right person for this part of our

legal needs.' Or they might say: 'We like what you're doing, but we have an issue with the way you're billing.' We can then get the teams involved in the review of the information we get."

Such has been the success of the firm's dual commitment to quality legal advice and client care that Fulbright has grown from a base of about 200 lawyers in the mid-1970s to more than 1,000 at present. While much of that growth has occurred within the United States, there has also been a great deal of expansion overseas, but always in line with the firm's core strengths and a desire to build on them.

"We are not a firm that tries to be all things to all people and in all markets," explains Jeff Blount, co-head of Fulbright's international department and the head of the Hong Kong and Beijing offices. "We're very much focused on things that we do particularly well in places where we think there is a need to have groups on the ground. That is why we are in China, the Middle East and London. All our practice areas are particularly focused on those markets – energy, financial and disputes."

Fulbright takes a strategic approach to growing its presence in emerging markets and making the most of international opportunities. The root of the firm's global growth was almost entirely due to Fulbright's desire to service its US clients in overseas jurisdictions where they were active.

"In 2003, it came as a real surprise to most of our partnership that at that time about a third of the firm's income came from foreign-sourced clients," says Mark Baker, Blount's fellow head of the international department and co-head of the firm's international arbitration and dispute resolution practice. "We're at the point now where probably 50% of the matters that we handle have no US connection at all. To me, that's the sign that we've turned a corner. We are a truly international player."

Exciting times

Baker points out that Fulbright lawyers are now doing deals that would have been merely a dream in decades past.

"We now have lawyers from the Hong Kong office helping



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a Chinese national oil company buy properties from an Italian national oil company in South America, with due diligence going on in all three places, and all of a sudden turning up an issue that deals with the enforceability of an arbitral award in Argentina as having key meaning," he said. "All the dispute lawyers get brought in to sort out the treaty-related issues and to basically handicap the liabilities. That's really exciting stuff!"

While Fulbright's international business may have grown out of the desire to service clients, and the international experience of its lawyers can only benefit its clients further, there is always a concern that as a firm grows, it becomes harder to ensure that its traditionally high standards of client care are maintained. This is not an issue that is lost on Fulbright and one the global firm overcomes by ensuring that there is always an experienced hand at the helm of new offices.

"It's tricky in any business to keep the core values as you grow internationally," admits Blount. "One of the reasons I was sent out to the Asian offices, 14 years ago now, was because the firm felt that to be effective in far-flung markets we had to have our own people to instill the firm's culture and to grow our businesses. We've done that in London. We've done that in the Middle East. We've done it in all our offices."

John Lonsberg, the head of Fulbright's Middle East practice, believes that the firm's domestic and international

growth and client satisfaction are due to the time Fulbright lawyers take to establish real relationships with clients and to express how important the clients' goals are to the firm.

"A wise friend once shared this advice: 'Never forget, when you are dealing with a client, that a client doesn't care how much you know until a client knows how much you care,'" Lonsberg says. "You have to understand a client's business objectives and there are times when you have to deliver the tough news that there isn't a way to accomplish something in the manner the client would like. However, there are ways we can help them come up with a strategy that will ensure their business objectives are met."

Investing in the future

Fulbright also takes great pride in the training it gives its young lawyers, in terms of both formal training and its continuing legal education programme, which it also provides at no extra cost to the in-house legal departments



Far left:
Stephen C Dillard

Middle left:
Linda Addison

Left:
Mark Baker

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of its clients. (The firm does this on a local basis so clients don't have to travel to keep up with the latest developments.)

“On the disputes side, our young lawyers go to the States and go through the trial advocacy training programme for which Fulbright is renowned,” says Cannon. “It has had an enormously beneficial effect on them. First, it connects them with their contemporaries and other young lawyers. Second, it gives them insight into one of the core strengths of the firm. I would say that one of the exciting things about being at Fulbright today for the young people is the fact that we are building an international business and the firm is going to another level. Young lawyers want to be involved in that. They see it as a great opportunity.”

But there is also a desire to encourage young associates to learn by doing the job, particularly in regard to client care.

“There is also a mentoring programme, where associates are assigned mentors,” explains Stephen C Dillard, the chair of Fulbright's global litigation practice. “In the litigation department, the mentor's responsibilities include providing the associate with a checklist at the end of designated time periods in his or her professional development. Some of these things will include, for example, going on a client visit, or being part of a team that went to meet with a client to discuss a new matter or to try and get new business. I've been with the firm for 36 years and there is more action and contact between our

clients and our associates than at any time in the history of the firm.”

Ensuring that there is the opportunity to learn and an appreciation for learning is vital, given that the legal practice is one in which all lawyers – even the most seasoned – continue to improve throughout their careers.

“Practising law is intellectually very stimulating and people continue to gain experience and knowledge with each matter,” says Addison, adding that it is not just the associates who can benefit, but also the partners, the firm as a whole and, by extension, the clients, given that they ultimately benefit from the obvious relish that Fulbright's lawyers take in their work.

“I've been trying cases for 31 years and I learn something from every single case that I try,” Addison says. “That's one of the things that makes this such a delightful and interesting way to make a living. We continue to learn and continue to teach each other. Those who are more senior feel a sense of responsibility to make sure those coming through have access to opportunities and training, that will enable them to continue the wonderful legacy of this firm further into the millennium.”

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