

Full steam ahead

Norway

Wikborg Rein

Wikborg Rein has grown into one of Norway's leading law firms. Today it is the largest legal practice in the country and skilfully combines an all-round excellence in corporate law with quality client service

Wikborg Rein began life in 1923 when lawyer Erling Wikborg established a one-man office in downtown Oslo. His first clients were in the maritime law and marine insurance business, and it was in this industry that the firm built its reputation. He was joined at the end of the Second World War by Alex Rein, a fighter in the Norwegian resistance who entered the practice after a stint prosecuting war criminals. Rein was made partner in 1945.

The maritime sector continued to be the mainstay of the firm through to the 1980s, when it began to diversify, but it was right at the end of the last century that Wikborg Rein experienced its fastest growth. Between 1999 and 2002 the firm expanded by around 50% and it now services a number of industry sectors.

"Most Norwegian law firms are quite small," explains Per Ristvedt, the firm's managing partner. "We have grown to our current size because we have a huge shipping base. However, while shipping and offshore work is still important to us and our shipping and offshore work accounts for about a quarter of our revenue, we also do an awful lot of corporate work and banking finance work, which jointly account for around 50% of our income." The remainder consists of litigation and other work, says Ristvedt.

Wikborg Rein is now the largest firm in Norway and the only one with a widespread overseas presence and international focus, thanks to its offices in the world's major

ports, such as Singapore, Shanghai, Kobe and London.

"A lot of our clients, particularly the foreign ones, come to us because they know we are international," says Ristvedt. "True, we have only around 20 lawyers abroad, which in the international context – compared to a London firm – may not be that many; but taking into consideration that Norwegian firms rarely have offices abroad, it's actually quite a number. Also, the fact that at any time there are 20 of our lawyers in foreign offices, and that we rotate the staff who are out there, means that we have a lot of people at our firm with international experience, and that is something that clients are looking for."

Paying attention

But it is not just the international experience that attracts clients to Wikborg Rein. The firm has also established a deserved reputation for its client care, which Ristvedt believes is due to the fact that the firm's lawyers are expert in prioritizing their work so that all of their clients feel that they are receiving their full attention.

"I think that some clients may feel a little intimidated when they approach a big law firm," he says. "The most important thing, in my view – and this is what we try to tell our lawyers – is that every client needs to feel special. He needs to feel that he has the most important case. If you can get that, and I think we do, you can turn the possible hesitation about dealing with a large firm around. The client will walk away and think he has made an amazing breakthrough: 'I know they have bigger clients, but they treat me like I'm the king and add value!'"

This ability to make a client feel special and appreciated has allowed the firm to cultivate close and enduring relationships over the years – something that is vital in order for any law firm to grow and prosper. It also provides valuable experience across the various business areas in which the firm operates as its clients go through the usual high and lows.

"We have a number of longstanding relationships with our clients," says Jarle Erik Sandvik, the head of the energy and natural resources group, who has been with the firm for around 13 years. "This means we've known those

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clients for a number of years and when you've worked with a client for that long, you've shared their ups and downs and you establish a certain amount of trust and a certain amount of loyalty. When we work with our established clients, we now have a very well-developed professional relationship, in the sense that we can basically tell them what our opinion is and not necessarily worry that it's not what they want to hear, as they know that we have their best interests at heart. We talk to them about everything – not only their legal problems, but also all of the different implications of any given situation. I'm very proud of this closeness to our clients and our orientation towards them. That is maybe our hallmark, and I see it as a privilege, as well as an obligation, to work in this way."

Early learning

One of the reasons that Wikborg Rein's lawyers can form these bonds with clients and are so comfortable with the high standards of client care expected of them is because they are introduced to this sort of interaction from a very early stage in their legal development.

"The way we work is that as soon as we retain an associate and they have demonstrated their capabilities, they are then channelled directly into client work," says Sandvik. "We let them work very closely with the client from an early stage. We let them go to all the meetings and they are exposed to the client from the start. So there's a lot of on-the-job training and, to return to the previous point, this is made a little easier when you have long-term relationships with some clients. You get into a relationship and you grow as that relationship develops. In my field, the energy sector, some of the relationships can also get quite complex, so each is – in effect – a sort of university training course."

In addition to these informal 'university courses' undertaken by the firm's young lawyers, there is also a more formal, basic training that must be undertaken by all employees.

"We have something that we call the Wikborg Rein business lawyers' school," says Finn Bjørnstad, a partner based in the firm's Oslo office. "This is something all of the younger associates have to go through. It deals with all aspects of work here, including the handling of clients, but

Right:
Jarle Erik Sandvik

Opposite page
Far left:
Per Ristvedt

Near left:
Finn Bjørnstad



the main focus is on competence development and on shaping the young ones into the kind of attorneys which the firm and our clients prefer.

“That is compulsory for all associates who start here and consists of 10 modules each of four hours. The various modules include topics that enable Wikborg Rein’s young lawyers to understand the business more quickly and learn the ins and out of being a skilful and successful lawyer. A lot of the resources we use are internal and the school is personally supervised by the firm’s managing partner. Top professionals are used to train the lawyers, with the main purpose of attaining excellent service in all aspects for the clients. We had one session last week with someone talking about presentation techniques, which is a very important aspect of client care, as they are the ones that get most of the benefit.”

The right tools

To help the firm’s more experienced lawyers once they have finished their formal training at the firm, there is also something known as the ‘lawyers’ toolbox’, which was developed through a number of discussions with clients aimed at providing lawyers with an outline of the things they should be thinking about when dealing with clients.

“We have developed this lawyer’s toolbox and it is something we have tried to instil in all our lawyers,” explains Per Ristvedt. “In order to find what we needed to include in the toolbox, we talked with our clients about rates, service standards and things like that, and we came up with a few areas that we thought we should concentrate on. These include the superb delivery of legal service; the demonstration of legal knowledge and the demonstration of industry knowledge (understanding the client’s business); visibility and availability; an understanding of how value can be created for the client; ensuring that all future strategy is decided with the client; and the strategy to create an action plan with the client and to comply with it.”

The lawyers’ toolbox is not the only initiative the firm has undertaken to examine how it can improve the service it offer its clients. It has also hired external consultants to look at how to bring in more business to the firm and, more

importantly, how to maintain and develop the client base that it already has.

One area that has been flagged up by the firm’s external advisers concerns the potentially delicate subject of approaching new clients and being proactive with existing clients.

“You really shouldn’t be afraid to approach new clients about prospective work and certainly not when these clients are already on your books,” says Ristvedt. “There’s a huge potential for advice and assistance that the client hasn’t asked for and, for some reason, the lawyer is normally reluctant to suggest it. We have tried this and the response has been very good – as long as the clients understood that this was something that could add value to their business, there was no problem.”

“If we approach a client in this way, then it is to offer a solution to a particular problem,” explains Bjørnstad. “If you are not working with a client, you can’t bother them with lunches and dinners all the time, trying to sell your services. But we do try to push work, in the sense that if we see a development in a particular area and think it can help a client or potential future client, we’ll tell them because it is in their best interest. We really need to have a strong case for what we are trying to show them, and then we’ll go to the client and tell them we have noticed a development in a particular legal field and we will have a presentation for them, or a small seminar. We are now doing that regularly. These are things that we know the client needs and appreciates.

“That said, we do try and build up personal relationships with our clients, something that is made a lot easier here in Norway as it is such a small community. It’s very different from working in Asia or London; here we only have around four different banks, not 40.”

Playing it down

When it comes to cultivating these relationships away from the professional environment, it is generally agreed that there is little time for excessive socializing – and certainly nothing of the sort of scale one might see in New York or London, with their glitzy cocktail soirees.

“It really is much more low-key here,” says Sandvik.



“Clearly, we do things on a bilateral basis as we don’t see a reason to expose our client relationships to a party. But on that basis, when they are here we take them to dinner and we look after them the best we can. It’s cultivating the soil really, and we know the clients well enough to know that they wouldn’t be very happy if we made too much of a fuss. But they also reciprocate and invite us out, which we are of course happy to accept.”

And just to show that all the research and procedures undertaken in recent years have not been for show, there are cold, hard facts to back up the firm’s success, in addition to kind words from clients. “It appears that 2007 will be the first year that a Norwegian law firm has exceeded Kr500 million (\$92.3 million) in revenue,” says Ristvedt. “And it is Wikborg Rein that has done it.” He goes on to point out that what it all comes down to is ensuring that the clients know they are getting value for money.

“As long as the clients get value for money – in large transactions and large cases which we are involved in – the lawyers’ fees aren’t part of the problem. We have to deliver. People have to feel that they have received top-quality service; that the lawyer has paid attention to them; that they’ve received advice when they needed it; and that everything was as clear as possible. If they can use our advice and we give them the value, then there’s no problem when they get the invoice.”

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