

Pride and passion

Switzerland

Homburger

Top professional skills together with an innate sense of client service are vital qualities in a Homburger lawyer, but most important of all is a profound affection for one's profession

There are those for whom being a lawyer is just a job; for others, it's a vocation; and then there are those for whom it is something more – and there's little point considering a career at Homburger unless you fall into this latter category.

“A key element of the culture in the firm is our passion for the profession,” explains managing partner Heinz Schärer. “We make people partners because they like to be lawyers. They have to be top lawyers or tax advisers, they have to have the right personality, but they must love what they do. Then again, in our experience, if you really love what you do, you mostly do it well.”

This prevailing pride and passion among the staff at Homburger, together with the high quality of work that the firm demands, helps foster a team spirit that extends to all corners of the workforce and, according to Benedikt Maurenbrecher, a partner in the financial services practice group, is recognized and appreciated by clients.

“All of our lawyers and tax advisers are part of the team and that sort of culture is promoted, rather than one in which you are encouraged to stand out on your own and attract as much work as you possibly can,” he says. “This results in an even appearance from the outside and the clients like this because they know there is not just one person in the firm who can do things well, but there are many, and they find this reassuring. We like to think that we have strength in depth rather than a few leading lights; although we do have leading lights, it is not our culture to

make them stand out – more to make everyone shine.”

One of the common attributes that helps bind ‘Team Homburger’ is a well-developed attitude towards client care that can be traced back to Eric Homburger who set up the firm in 1957, and which has helped keep it at the forefront of the Swiss legal profession ever since.

“I think historically we may have developed a service mentality earlier than others,” says Schärer. “We know that our services are for the client; we always put him first. Whenever a client calls, he has the full attention of the people who will take care of his problem.”

A team game

Just as the team approach is important on a firm-wide scale, it is also fundamental to the way Homburger deals with clients and advances its service-based ethos. This means that although a partner always takes responsibility for a client's affairs and for each single instruction issued by the firm, he or she also appoints a team of lawyers to deal with the matter, which will include other partners, associates, paralegals and support staff. It is then the partner's responsibility to ensure that the rest of the team are up to speed with the situation, so there will always be someone to take care of things if the partner is busy. One of the added advantages of such a team approach is that it allows the firm to be flexible in the way it deals with clients according to their needs and wishes.

“A new client will usually call up a partner in a particular practice group,” says Maurenbrecher. “This partner will set up a team for the case and in so doing he will assess whether assistance is needed from partners in different practice groups. From then on, the first point of contact will depend on the client. There are those who prefer to have a key portal to the firm and there are others who, once they have been introduced to the team, may well call up other members directly. This is very much up to the wishes of the client. The original contact partner usually keeps an eye on the overall relationship, but is happy to let the client transact as he wishes.”

Once the relationship between client and firm is established, it is then vital to understand and respond to the

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Right:
Heinz Schärer

Opposite page
Far right:
Benedikt Maurenbrecher

Right:
Franz Hoffet



client's enquiries as swiftly as possible. This is an area that is made both easier and more pressurized by ever-advancing technology.

"We react to clients' needs as quickly as is feasible," claims Franz Hoffet, head of the competition practice at Homburger. "We try and get back to our clients the same day and meet their expectations in terms of speed of response. In modern times, clients demand faster response times and our protocols in that area have gradually changed and are constantly being refined. Of course, we try and stay at the forefront of technology; but it is important to remember that you can have all the technology in the world, but if you don't use it intelligently then you won't make it count."

Hoffet goes on to point out that this issue once again returns to the underlying premise that Homburger lawyers must be passionate about what they do.

"I think we work hard to deliver results that are in line with or above clients' expectations, which isn't always simple," he says. "But due to the attitude of our people and our internal knowledge-sharing culture, we are in a good position to deliver the best possible results in the circumstances. Some transactions may fail or you might lose a case in court – this happens to every law firm. But our clients know, and know they can expect, that we have all of these good people available to them, who will dedicate whatever they can to try and obtain a successful outcome."

Planning for the future

The hiring process is, of course, one of the key elements in the success of any law firm and is particularly important in such a close-knit team as Homburger, so a lot of time is dedicated, at partner level, towards recruitment. A hiring committee not only is responsible for selecting and bringing in new talent, but also oversees the nurturing of that talent through associate level.

"The earliest we hire lawyers is in their third or fourth year of law school," says Schärer. "We keep a close relationship with the law schools – they often point us in the direction of particularly good pupils, but it is also good to ensure that the firm's reputation is maintained in the universities."

To this end, the firm also runs associate programmes all year round to give it access to as many candidates as possible. The next entry point for young lawyers is when they have completed their further legal training. At this stage, the committee looks to those with a broad range of educational success and prospective employees should really be aiming to be in the top 5% of their cohort. Homburger also likes its lawyers to have experience of other countries and cultures, so it is also preferable for candidates to have spent some time studying overseas; but this can be addressed with an overseas secondment once they have joined the firm.

"Around half our client base is foreign," points out Thomas Müller, head of the arbitration and litigation practice team. "It is therefore important to remember that people are different around the world: Japanese are different from Germans and so on. You have to be aware of the cultural discrepancies and you have to be able to adapt the way you communicate and approach clients. We expect every lawyer either to have spent some time studying or to have practised abroad. I think the main advantage of this is that you really become aware that these different mentalities exist – and this is a really essential part of being a lawyer later on."

Homburger's young lawyers benefit from continuous legal education in the form of internal seminars, weekly practice group meetings and a shared knowledge database. In client care and handling, as well as training on the job, partners take on the role of mentor.

"We don't have seminars on how to get clients," explains Schärer. "We take our people by the hand and let them experience what it is like to be a partner. So when someone becomes a partner in our firm, they have seen some 10 partners or more in action at first hand. They've seen how they get instruction, how they deal with those instructions and how they prepare a kick-off meeting. We sometimes take a junior into a client meeting and tell the client, 'This is a young guy, he's not on the timesheet, we just want him to be here.' Then the client can say yes or no – but I've never seen one say no. It's what we call apprenticeship."



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Of course, if one is relying on the partners to mentor the associates, as the firm grows it becomes increasingly important that the right people are made partner to ensure continuing high standards of client care. For this reason, a great deal of attention is paid to the development of young lawyers (which falls within the remit of the aforementioned hiring committee).

“You really have to watch your junior lawyers,” advises Müller. “You have to observe how they act in meetings and how they communicate with clients, and these should be among the deciding factors in selecting new partners. If we do that job right and we have the right people out there, then I think we will arrive at the quality which clients expect from us.”

Leading the way

Such has been Homburger's success over the years that it can now claim to be involved in the vast majority of all leading cases and transactions in the Swiss market and it therefore stays at the cutting edge of legal developments in the country. By way of example, following an amendment to the Competition Act in 2004 introducing direct fines, the

firm not only dealt with the first leniency applications, but is now handling the appeal for the first major fine case on behalf of a Swiss telecommunications company in the amount of €200 million.

An easing of restrictions by the Swiss Bar means that it is now possible for the firm to advertise such major cases and Müller acknowledges that this has been helpful in attracting new clients, but he still believes there is no room for complacency when it comes to client care as word of mouth is still extremely important, and as such the firm's reputation for customer service is paramount.

“If I have a friend that I trust,” he explains, “and he tells me that he has a lawyer with whom he was extremely satisfied, I'm bound to think that his recommendation is far more valuable than any ad in a legal magazine. For that reason, we maintain close professional or institutional relationships with our clients and like to keep up to date with their business, but also we maintain good personal relationships.”

That said, the firm still expects its partners to work as lawyers and they are encouraged to do so by a remuneration system that is half lockstep and half performance-based.



Left:
Thomas Müller

“The partners are our best lawyers so we want them to work,” says Schärer. “There are very successful firms out there where the partners don’t work, but just do client relationship – you know: dinner, lunch and so forth... We don’t want that. We think our lawyers are the best in town and we want lawyers who want to work. They’re paid for their own timesheet, not just for playing golf with some chief executive who happens to be in town.”

It should go without saying, but there is one fundamental trait that is key to being the sort of lawyer that makes the perfect partner at Homburger. As Hoffet puts it: “The key elements are skills, personality and love for the profession. You have to be passionate about the work. If that is the case, you will never look to see how late it is in the evening. You will always go that extra mile, because you want to make sure that you have done the best job possible. Of course, you need to have a good education and broad experience and all that ... but if you’re not passionate about what you do, then you’ll never really excel at it.”

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