A global concern

International

DLA Piper

DLA Piper is now one of the biggest firms in the world, but it still has ambitions to offer the same exacting standards of first-rate client care on both a local and truly global scale

DLA Piper's rapid growth through merger in the last few years has catapulted it into the higher echelons of the legal tables, in terms of both size and revenue. That a firm which has experienced such a meteoric rise should win an award for global client service levels is testament to its vision of building a legal services organization that can serve all its clients on an equal and truly global basis.

"The last five years or so have been terribly exciting," says Steven de Keyser, a partner in the firm's Brussels office and strategic projects director at DLA Piper. "Where five years ago we were mainly a UK-based firm, or an east coast US firm, or a west coast US firm, we have now built a broad infrastructure, a network of offices with people of similar strengths and characteristics. Our culture is strong and the people we attract are similar to ourselves.

"Having quality lawyers across all the jurisdictions in which we operate who view the market in a similar way creates a whole new dimension in the services we can offer – not just on a local or regional level, but on a global basis. That is where we have a duty now, to work with our clients and make sure that these strengths we have developed on a mainly local basis are maintained and that we are also able to add value through the quality of our global relationships. This is really only just starting."

The uniformity of DLA Piper's offer is central to its plan and de Keyser insists the importance of this cannot be understated. He believes that the firm's lawyers and offices share the same genetic code when it comes to their obsession with client care.

"We have a similar DNA in terms of how we think," he claims. "Wherever we are, we are fanatical about exceeding our clients' expectations – not just in terms of technical advice, but in terms of taking their issues to heart and building a close relationship.

"All of our lawyers, and particularly the partners, are extremely committed to understanding the needs of their clients and if you talk to our clients this is something they really value from us. They'll tell you we are not just good technical lawyers, we're good at being very responsive and exceeding their expectations; and we are also very pragmatic, focused on the business and understand the issues that impact on their objectives. That really is engrained in the DNA of everyone who was with one of our legacy firms and we look for people who share this approach when we are recruiting."

The immediate question that must then be asked is how a firm – particularly one with the sheer scale and geographic scope of DLA Piper – can maintain this standard of lawyering across the whole organization? How can the firm be sure that every lawyer's genetic code, if you will, is on message?

Clarity breeds consistency

"Our brand, what we stand for and how we deliver solutions to clients, is key to our success," says de Keyser. "Following our merger in 2005 we recognized that we needed to communicate how we differ from others in the market and support our vision to be one of the leading global business law firms. 'Everything matters' captures our perspective and personality and appears on most of our material and our website. But it is more than just words – we differentiate our firm by serving our clients in a way that goes beyond their requirement for legal services. It is our commitment to understanding all their needs that helps to communicate what clients can expect from us, no matter which lawyer they are working with. Our people understand how important it is to be technically excellent and pragmatic when looking after clients' needs. This

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Right:
Steven de Keyser

means paying attention to detail when it comes to client care. Everyone in the firm has a role to play, as often it is the small things that clients remember and value."

"Obviously, consistency is important to us and we have various programmes in place to achieve this," acknowledges de Keyser. "But actually, the most important thing is to communicate the kind of firm we are and what it means to serve our clients when we take people on board. People are then very aligned to what we want to do. It's at this time that we screen and make sure that we have the right people.

"Any number of firms that go through mergers but want to maintain the way they have historically done things, if they're not careful, can suddenly discover that they need more consistency, so they have to then try and persuade people that they must focus on certain values. That is a massive change process, and we are not in that change process. Although we've grown very fast and have been very ambitious in what we did, this is where Nigel Knowles, Frank Burch and Lee Miller [the firm's joint chief executive officers, and former managing partners of legacy firms DLA, Piper & Marbury and Rudnick & Wolfe, respectively] have been extremely smart. Working alongside others, they select who we take on board and have therefore made alignment as low risk as possible – so actually the exercise becomes a very positive one, rather than one of change management."

While thoughtfully designed training programmes are in place, and an increasingly complex technological armoury is employed to ensure that staff have all the support they need to toe the company line, it seems that the recruitment process – and in particular, the clarity that is such an enduring feature throughout – is the decisive factor behind the firm's coherent attitude.

"It's about making sure that everybody who joins the firm knows exactly what is expected of them, where we want to go as a firm and what the key drivers are," says de Keyser. "If you bring people on board because they do 2,000 billable hours and they have millions of fees generated from clients, and you get all excited about that, that's fine – but that's only where it starts. This is because those people very often have very clear views about what's made them successful and how they work. If their thinking is not aligned with the firm's thinking, that could be a nightmare. We want to make sure that everyone really believes in what we are trying to achieve as a firm, and the fact that we've been able to attract great people from great firms has led me to believe (and I may be biased here!) that our vision is quite sympathetic in terms of how lawyers today think. They want to operate and evolve their careers. I interview a lot of the partners who we take on board and I am always impressed by how these people see our firm as an opportunity."

At the next stage, a number of systems have been set up to ensure that once a new member joins the firm, good communication is maintained with all of the other lawyers, with the principal unit being the practice group rather than the regional office.

Vertical matrix

"We train by group rather than by office," says Catherine Usher, who is regional managing partner for London. "The groups get together every year and, although we do very little black-letter law training, a lot of attention is paid to client care and the cross-jurisdictional aspects of looking after clients. It's an expensive business, but you have to do it if you are going to live the dream, which is a truly global law firm that gives seamless service."

In addition to the annual, larger group meetings, the local heads from each of the practice groups also meet on a regular basis to discuss any relevant developments. Usher has noticed that the way the firm is structured around its practice groups has helped the smaller regional offices to progress very rapidly.

"That's one of the great things about working within a vertical group matrix," she explains. "When you run a

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multi-site organization you have to decide at the beginning if you are going to be local, in which case your first loyalty is your office, or configured around practice group. And about 15 or 20 years ago, we decided that our first loyalty is to our group and that has been a very effective strategy. It means our lawyers are never limited by the size of the office that they are in. A small office may never hold a great wealth of expertise in every legal area, but when the lawyers in that group have the rest of their practice group to call on, it becomes easier. If a corporate lawyer in Vienna has an issue concerning a client, she can contact one of her colleagues in another jurisdiction because she knows them as well as someone in her office. This is particularly true of the projects and infrastructure group, because of the experience in the United Kingdom with the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). We are now doing PFI deals all over Europe, and it is much easier for them because we can give them templates and tell them how it works here and they adapt it to their local market."

Turning to the way the firm manages client relationships, the overriding responsibility lies with one single client partner who heads up the team of lawyers working for that client around the world. The relationship partner controls all aspects of the firm's ongoing relationship with that client and coordinates all team meetings, determining their frequency and deciding in each case whether an actual physical meeting is required or whether a video conference or conference call will suffice.

As mentioned, this system relies heavily on the technology at the firm's disposal and Usher agrees that modern communication advances have boosted DLA Piper's progress.

"There is no way we would have been able to have done it without the information-sharing technology," she says. "The speed of communication has definitely allowed this explosion of professional services and we have to keep up with all the latest advances. There's more and more need for v-rooms, for example, although even they've become quite commonplace now."

Among the most important of these resources is the firm's intranet, which holds detailed information on clients and is invaluable for DLA Piper's goal of seamless global service.

"Each client we deal with has a page on the intranet," explains Steven de Keyser. "Each of these pages follows a systematic pattern so anyone within the firm can access information on a particular client: what we know of them, protocols we have in place for dealing with them and how we work with them. All the fine details of how the client wants things to be done: how they want bills to be issued, how they want interaction to happen, whether they want summaries of what we do, and so on. We ensure that the

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Left:
Catherine Usher

ground rules of the client relationship are retained at length and discussed in detail. This means that whichever offices our clients interface with, we are able to respond exactly to their needs. They are on everybody's laptop – there's no secret hiding place anywhere or people who own all the knowledge; it's readily available and anyone can tap into it. This is, in a very client-specific way, how you can manage the expectations of the client and ensure consistency seamlessly across borders."

Regular check-ups

Another responsibility of the relationship partner is to maintain regular contact with the clients themselves and ensure that all the firm's promises are being kept.

"The client partners are expected to go and see each of their clients formally at least once a year," says Usher. "But most of us do it more than that. We conduct a formal review of the relationship to find out whether the firm is fulfilling expectations. It isn't just a review of the transactions we've done for them – it's really where are you going, what are you doing and trying to gain a deeper understanding of their industry concerns and issues."

As a final measure, independent surveys are conducted as frequently as possible to ensure that the firm is performing as well as it would wish, and that its ideas regarding seamless service and the consistency of its message never get lost in such an immense corporate entity and giant of the global legal scene.

DLA Piper

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