

A SPECIAL REPORT

A Wall Street Firm Bets Big in Washington

White & Case reports a 22 percent jump, the biggest increase among large metro firms.



BY BRIAN KATKIN

White & Case may be known as a Wall Street firm, but it's put down strong roots in Washington.

The D.C. office has steadily inched up the Legal Times 150 rankings, leaping six spots in 2008 to number 29. The firm reports a head count of 165 lawyers, a 22.2 percent jump over last year—the largest increase among law firms with more than 100 lawyers in the Washington area.

And the D.C. office is growing at a far quicker rate than the firm itself. The number of lawyers at the D.C. office has gone up 65 percent since 2004, and it's still rising. Meanwhile, the firm has posted steady growth overall, but its five-year increase is 29 percent—less than half the growth rate of the D.C. office.

The firm hasn't had any big mergers, but has made prominent lateral hires to grow the Washington office. Andrea Menaker, the former chief of the NAFTA arbitration division for the U.S. State Department, and William Kirschner, the former head of Goodwin Proctor's India practice, both joined in April. Menaker, who has represented the Philippines, Uzbekistan, and the United States, works in the international arbitration practice. Kirschner is a member of the firm's merger and acquisition and India practices and has advised AIG and Deutsche Bank in transactional matters.

On Monday, three McDermott Will & Emery partners—Jack Lever, Shamita Etienne-Cummings, and David Tennant—officially joined White & Case's intellectual property practice.

Also, the D.C. office has a strong retention rate, losing only two partners since 2004, neither to another local law firm. Victor DeSantis, the D.C. office's managing

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partner, and other partners in the Washington office say the international disputes and litigation practices, always strong spots for White & Case, have been growing quickly in Washington.

“There are a lot of good lawyers in Washington and

it's a very competitive market," DeSantis says. "The main challenge for us is to bring something special to the clients—our expertise and international reach—that allows us to address their needs in ways that others can't." The D.C. office represents clients from more than 10 countries, including Bulgaria and China.

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'A MEASURED APPROACH'

The D.C. office is home base for some of the firm's biggest practices, including litigation and antitrust. George Terwilliger, whose clients have included former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, runs the firm's global white-collar practice from D.C., and D.C. partner Mark Gidley oversees the global antitrust/competition practice. D.C.'s Carolyn Lamm, the president-elect of the American Bar Association, is a member of the firm's partnership committee.

Sam Alberts, a partner and chair of the D.C. office's financial restructuring and insolvency group, says the firm's expertise in international cases and experience balancing different jurisdictions attracts clients and makes for interesting work that keeps partners happy. "That added level of complexity makes the work interesting," he says.

Alberts, himself a lateral hire from Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld in 2004, says the firm has a heavy vetting process for lateral hires, something that helps the firm's successful retention. Prospective hires meet all the Washington partners and the management board in at least one other firm office. "It's not the fastest process," he says, "but it's very effective."

The office has picked up big new clients, including France's Natexis Banques Populaires, Amway Corp., and energy company PSEG Global. And last year, a White & Case team led by Gidley and D.C.

partner Christopher Curran won a major antitrust case for Stolt-Nielsen S.A., a Norwegian shipping and seafood company. The case was the first to enforce a written promise not to prosecute under an antitrust amnesty agreement.

MORE GROWTH

DeSantis says the firm has had a burst in countercyclical work, such as bankruptcy litigation, that's buffered the impact of the economic downturn. For instance, Alberts says his financial restructuring and insolvency practice has recently started working with creditors on issues related to the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy.

"We're busier and busier, and the reality is we'll be busy for some time," Alberts says.

The firm generated a total revenue domestically and internationally last year of \$1.36 billion, a nearly 16 percent jump since 2006, according to *The American Lawyer*.

White & Case doesn't have a public policy practice, though a few lawyers appear on scattered lobbying reports, and they say they now do little regulatory work. Alberts says that could change as Washington takes a more active role in regulating the financial sector.

"We've got to see what shakes out of this bailout program ... but it might be an opportunity to grow in a new direction," he says.

And growing, of course, means more lawyers and a higher head count. DeSantis won't speculate on next year's growth numbers, but says the firm still sees "a lot of opportunity for further growth." Alberts is blunter: "Frankly, I'd be shocked if we weren't over 200 by the end of this year."

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