

The Ten Firms to Watch in Twenty Twelve



In our first major update of the year Doyle's Guide picks the ten firms we think look set to impact the Australian legal market the most in 2012. Unsurprisingly the entrance of international players but there's also plenty of room for mid-tiers and boutique firms within our list. To keep it simple firms are listed in alphabetical order.

Twenty-twelve will mark the second birthday of **Allen & Overy's** Australian offices which should see just enough water under the bridge to determine the success and market position of A&O's antipodean venture. The firm itself remains positive about progress to date having added capabilities within competition and litigation in 2011. But, at 22 Partners, A&O still has some way to go before reaching its stated goal of 40 partners within three to four years from its launch. That means some heavy senior level recruiting from A&O needs to take place this year.

Blake Dawson's pending integration into the Ashurst network come 1 March should have minimal initial impact. For Blakes though there are lessons to be learned from the "try before buy" international alliance model adopted by Phillips Fox (now DLA Piper) and Deacons (now Norton Rose). The first of which is to minimise personnel fall-out amongst risk averse partners and practice groups. In this regard eyes should be firmly focused on the likes of Blake's market leading employment practice and just how the firm's 20 odd employment partners fit in to an international firm with only two genuine "employment" partners in its fold.

Colin Biggers & Paisley's recognition of the benefits of a multi-state presence and move to merge with Monahan & Rowell is time-warp stuff. Mergers of this type haven't been seen since the early parts of last decade but perhaps Colin Biggers are just the first of the mid-tier firms to re-ignite a trend. Regardless, the merger creates yet another expanding eastern seaboard based mid-tier firm with strong partner drawings and one with an appetite for a greater presence across construction and property.

Freehills ended 2011 by entering into merger talks with UK firm Herbert Smith. There's certainly a host of benefits in Freehills aligning itself or merging with a firm of the quality of Herbert Smith but, as far as international suitors go, we can't help but think that Freehills can do better. Namely by aligning it's top-tier presence with a Magic Circle firm and not the silver kind. If others within the Freehills partnership agree with us then expect then to follow the lead of A&O's 2011 marquee Australian hire, Tony Sparks.

Gilbert + Tobin's 2011 was uncharacteristically quiet for a firm not known for its silence. Sure, the firm announced and completed its merger with Perth's premier boutique firm Blakiston & Crabb but, the merger was all but a fait accompli once a formal alliance was announced back in 2010. It's our tip that you can expect big things from the folks at G+T in 2012. The Perth expansion to us, looked less about capitalising on the energy and resources boom and more aligned to another strategic objective. The new version of Gilbert + Tobin is less now far more likely to appeal to international suitors and the slapping of a big international law firm brand on it would certainly ease the eventual pain of founding partner retirements.

Any firm with a "no dickheads" policy is always one to watch but the spotlight shone a little more brightly on **Hynes Lawyers** after the bulk of the firm's corporate team departed in bitter circumstances. The bust-up saw Hynes go into rebuilding mode and departing partners Glenn Vassallo and Scott Standen launch their own boutique corporate practice, GRT Lawyers. If these two can prosper perhaps the Queensland legal market will finally have the quality boutique firm presence that exists in other large states.

Come 1 March **Mallesons Stephen Jaques'** merger with King & Wood will draw the eyes of the legal observers keen to see just how and if, a merger of a Chinese and a Western law firm can work. There's likely to be more than a few hiccups but, apart from this, the rest is unscripted. A rarity for the legal world.

Behind the quirky marketing and PR spin **Marque Lawyers** plays an important role in Australia's largest legal market principally by keeping the rest of the market very focused on price and the hourly rate. With the good folks at FirmSpy somewhat controversially awarding Marque their Corporate Firm of the Year Award expect even more attention to come Marque's way. This might just be the platform to allow for bigger things.

Middletons' opening of a Queensland office after a merger with longstanding Queensland firm Flower & Hart was all but predictable. Hell, we smelled something back in the middle of last year... <http://www.doylesguide.com/040711-1.html>. What remains to be seen though is the strength of the firm's new Queensland offering. Flower & Hart lost two of its youngest and brightest partners (Gail Black & Katrina Chambers) to Gadens late last year and the firm's revenue and personnel numbers have been on the decline for some time now. Then again – perhaps Middletons national presence will give this Queensland stalwart the boost it needed.

Norton Rose locked in 22 lateral partner hires throughout 2010 and 2011 thereby adding roughly another 10% to its partnership purely through new talent. With big numbers such as these comes not only an initial profit drain but also great expectations. With a new Australian leadership team at the helm, expect Norton Rose to be firmly and aggressively on the radar in every deal pitch and tender throughout 2012.