

Law Firm Leaders: Squire Patton Boggs' Mark Ruehlmann

By Aebra Coe

Law360 (March 4, 2020, 5:46 PM EST) -- Mark J. Ruehlmann is entering his sixth year as chairman and CEO of global law firm Squire Patton Boggs. During Ruehlmann's tenure, the firm has combined with other firms more than once and has grown its footprint significantly.

Here, Ruehlmann chats with Law360 about what it's like managing a law firm with offices in 20 countries, his goals for the firm over the next five years and the trait he values most in a partner.

How has the legal industry changed in the time you've been chairman and CEO, and what has your law firm done to adapt to those changes?

I think one change, clearly, is the globalization of the legal service market. While we have adapted some there, we at least were ahead of some other firms that probably need to adapt more, given our global footprint. We have supplemented that footprint during the course of my tenure. We had a pretty major combination in 2014 with the Patton Boggs firm, which allowed us to meaningfully grow our presence of timekeepers in the U.S. and fill in some empty spots in our global footprint, in the Middle East in particular. And then in 2016, we did the Carroll Burdick combination. Carroll Burdick was a San Francisco-based firm with a huge presence and client base in Germany as well.

What are your goals for the firm over the next five years?

If you look at the last decade for us, we've undergone a meaningful and material decade of transformation, and you're seeing the rewards of a lot of that transformation happening. I mentioned two of the combinations that were part of that transformation. There were a couple before 2014. We had a major one in 2011, which created the platform for our U.S. and European offices. We grew in Australia and Asia between 2011 and 2014. The rewards of that, we had a record year this past year in 2019, and you're seeing strong contributions from all of our major practices that demonstrate that what we've been doing is working.

Looking ahead for the next five years, I think it is important that we continue to drive the firm to a higher performance culture, which we have been doing. It's one of the initiatives we've been addressing regularly over time, but with a little bit of a more heightened focus in the past year or two.

I think it's very safe to envision us being much larger in the U.S. The U.S. continues to be the biggest market for legal services by far. The more timekeepers and throughput you have in the right places in the U.S. tends to result in a better use of the global platform and the ability to serve clients who aren't in the U.S. or have needs outside the U.S.



Mark Ruehlmann
Squire Patton Boggs
chairman and CEO

What does it mean to have a high performance culture, and how do you cultivate that?

A high performance culture to me is a balancing act to not undo some of the cultural glue that holds you together, but it's a focus really on productivity. Higher levels of productivity and higher levels of client service at an excellent level. Things have changed even since I was a young associate. It's a 24/7 environment. Whether you're in the office or not, you're reachable by clients at all times. I think we need to reflect the clients' needs and our willingness to serve them. And it results, for me, in a pursuit of a higher performance culture that means you've got to be available when the client needs you to be available, or have plans in place where someone else can be available.

You talked about the globalization of law. Why do you think it's more important to clients to have law firms in more places now than it used to be?

For a more seamless delivery of services. The theme of our last partners conference was collaboration, and collaboration is really a hallmark of our culture. A global footprint allows you to provide seamless service in multiple jurisdictions, multiple time zones. That, for many clients, is a better solution than hiring a handful of different service providers in different locales.

What are some of the benefits of being incorporated as a Swiss verein?

That's a good question and I'm going to answer it a different way, if I could. Other than the fact that there are tax technicalities to a verein, most of our partners don't have an event happen ever in their careers here that brings to their attention that we are a verein. We are incredibly good at maintaining the key parts of our culture across both pieces of our verein. The verein came into existence for tax reasons to smooth over different tax regimes in different countries and parts of the world. For us, we function in a manner where the verein is virtually invisible to everybody. That said, we follow all of the technicalities that we need to follow. I view it as a device that has allowed us to grow, but does not in any way inhibit the key cultural components.

As a law firm that has been formed as a result of several mergers, what are a few lessons the firm has learned when it comes to integration?

Once you've made the decision to move forward, to me, the most important part is enmeshing the new colleagues in the culture of the firm. A critical component of our culture is collaborating, not only with clients, but with colleagues. Some firms have a sharper-elbowed approach to things and that may in part stem from a compensation system that is more formulaic. Our compensation system is not formulaic. It champions collaboration and identifying what colleagues could help solve client problems. I think the key lesson on integration is it's critical to message loud and clear the cultural components that will be rewarded by the firm. That's not an episodic event. It has to be repeated and reinforced over a sustained period of time.

Beyond compensation, is it just messaging, or are there other ways you can encourage collaboration?

It's really an approach to things, who you bring to a pitch, who you take to a lunch with a client or with a colleague from a different office. Messaging is key, but the messaging alone isn't enough. You have to reinforce it with actual evidence that people aren't just pretending that that's the culture.

What trait do you value most in a law firm partner?

For us, I would say someone who can collaborate with colleagues and with clients. I'll supplement that

with partners who are willing to put the needs of the institution first. The ones who demonstrate that trait tend to be fantastic partners.

What well-known lawyer, alive or dead, would you most like to have lunch with? Why?

One that comes to mind, I was born and raised in Cincinnati and William Howard Taft was the first lawyer to ever be both president and chief justice. There's buildings around town that bear the family's name and I actually knew his grandson Sen. [Robert] Taft [Jr.]. That would be interesting for sure.

--Editing by Aaron Pelc.