

## Small and medium-size firms look to alliances to gain global presence - and compete with the big names

By Alex Hutchinson

When a multinational firm approached Toronto immigration lawyer Sergio Karas late last year with an urgent problem - two employees who needed to get to China post-haste - the request seemed an unlikely one. Though the Argentinian-born Karas speaks six languages, Chinese is not one of them, and his one-man boutique firm doesn't have a global infrastructure to draw on.

But such requests were exactly what Karas had in mind when he helped launch Visalaw International in November. Billed as "the first worldwide alliance of immigration lawyers," the network started operations with an agreement of mutual help and referrals among specialist immigration law firms in 11 countries - including China.

"I contacted the Chinese law firm, based in Beijing, and they made arrangements for the appropriate paperwork, while I took care of the consular matters here in Toronto with their direction," Karas recalled.

The rapid resolution of the problem is an example of how some small and medium-size law firms are gearing up to match the global service provided by their larger competitors - and evidence that, from a corporate perspective, the immigration law business is no longer just about getting workers into the United States.

"As clients become more and more global, I think the demand for law firms to be able to deal with their global immigration issues is something that's going to increase fairly dramatically over the next few years," said Greg Siskind of Memphis, Tenn.-based Siskind Susser Bland, the U.S. member and co-founder of the Visalaw International alliance.

Formed after two years of discussions, the alliance currently has member firms in Canada, the U.S., U.K., Australia, Italy, Japan, China, Germany, Brazil, South Africa and Argentina. For Karas, most of his referrals so far have come from the U.S. and British firms, with a few from other countries such as Italy. The firms in Asia, China in particular, have been receiving a large number of referrals, Karas said. "There's a lot of work going that way."

Some inquiries are more difficult to field than others - like the request for information on work permit requirements in Mozambique. "I contacted my South African office, and they weren't sure there were any requirements," Karas said. "And they didn't know who to talk to."

To widen their reach, the alliance is in negotiations with several firms in areas where it is not currently represented, such as Russia. "We're striving to recruit at least one alliance member from every country in the world that we can," Karas said. "But obviously we need to satisfy ourselves that the quality of their work is up to the standards we require."

While the Visalaw International alliance is focused specifically on immigration law, other alliances between mid-size full-service firms are becoming more common. Like Visalaw, these alliances tend to forbid referral fees, and emphasize the use of alliance members as a source of courtesy advice - which may or may not



David Garner's firm Alexander Holburn Beaudin & Lang LLP recently joined the Law Firm Alliance.

result in a referral.

For Alexander Holburn Beaudin & Lang LLP, a 65-member full-service firm in Vancouver, this has been one of the major benefits of joining the Law Firm Alliance, a group of 41 firms in Canada, the U.S. and Europe.

"We've put the Law Firm Alliance icon on everybody's (computer) desktop, and we've got handouts that all the lawyers have in their office with quick contact numbers for all of the firms," said David Garner, the firm's managing partner. "We've tried to make it as user-friendly as possible, so it's very much like just phoning up someone in your own firm."

A typical query for Alexander Holburn was from the U.K. firm representing a textile manufacturer who wanted to know more about NAFTA rules. "We answered the question, and that eventually turned into a file," Garner said.

Joining an alliance is not for everyone, Garner noted: "It depends where you want to place yourself. We don't want to become a national firm, so in order to give our clients and our lawyers the kind of reach and depth that they need, these sorts of connections are becoming more and more necessary."

This trend is also noticeable internationally, for instance in central and eastern Europe, where the rapidly changing conditions and large number of jurisdictions make any cross-border business a challenge.

Recently formed alliances include the seven-country Central European Law Offices, the 10-country South East Europe Legal Group, and LAWIN, which covers Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

After just a few months of operation, both Karas and Siskind say they've seen an increase in business thanks to the Visalaw International alliance — and they've also been able to provide their clients with better service. "We had a major entertainment client who was taking a show to various countries — a couple of spots in Europe, Chile, Argentina, Brazil ..." Siskind said. "Within a day, we were able to find a good firm in every one of the markets that they needed to look at."

Uniting their efforts in outreach and business development is also a priority for the alliance, Siskind said, and the members firms are collaborating on a global handbook on immigration that will appear later this year.

What distinguishes Visalaw International from other alliances, Karas said, is its narrow focus on immigration law. And unlike competing "global" immigration services, all members of the alliance are lawyers, rather than marketers or brokers who simply contact a foreign lawyer for a handling fee.

Also, most of the alliance members know each other from meetings of the International Bar Association and other organizations, which helps to ensure the quality of service. "The problem with the big ones is that they are alliances of big firms, and they don't really know each other," Karas said. "We're not just a referral network. We're much more than that."

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