



LEGALINK

INTERNATIONAL BUT PERSONAL

Gary Jones

— Weightmans

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Weightmans

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Are there any particularly relevant or interesting deals you would like to share? Do you have an example of work with a Legalink member?

In January 2015 we were asked by an international market research client to obtain data protection and regulatory advice in 23 foreign jurisdictions. We were able to source 18 firms from our Legalink network. One of the biggest challenges was the different complexity of the answers in the various jurisdictions; the questions could have had a straight forward answer in one jurisdiction and very complicated in another, even within the European Union where the rules are supposed to be similar.

Pricing is also a challenge. The range of quotes from Legalink members was extremely wide; from say a thousand pounds, to about ten thousand pounds. Some firms in Legalink offered to do it for very little effectively as a favour to Weightmans which is not necessarily what we were seeking. Although you are obliged to do the best for your client in obtaining the most appropriate fee, you also want to be fair to your Legalink colleagues – so the challenge is to strike a fair balance.

If we were repeating the exercise it may have been better for us to produce a template response based on English law with the level of detail expected and to submit that to the Legalink members with a note of the fees that would be expected assuming the level of detail to be similar as under English law. This would then have enabled Legalink firms to respond on costs based on this whilst allowing higher or lower fees to be quoted if the local law was significantly more or less complicated.

Is there any change you would like to suggest in Legalink or with respect to Legalink conferences? Do you have any idea for further business development?

I would reconsider the extent to which we should consider inviting professional and client guests to conferences, specifically with a view to introducing them to the network. I have at the moment a potential new client that has business in about ten or twelve jurisdictions around the world and would prefer to find someone who would manage that process rather than having to individually instruct firms in each jurisdiction.

The challenge is whether or not we as a network are able to provide a solution which is

relevant or better than solutions provided by global firms with offices in all of these jurisdictions. Can we compete with those firms? I believe that the opportunity for a client to attend a conference would be quite a powerful tool enabling them to meet multiple recommended firms in a short space of time. In my opinion even the global networks would not be able to offer this.

I was thinking about how to manage a process of cooperation with multiple Legalink members for a single client on non contentious matters. The Legalink model normally assumes that the client would contract directly with Legalink firms in the different jurisdictions. However clients are increasingly looking for a one stop shop with one firm being responsible for the delivery of all of the advice regardless of jurisdiction. We have historically subcontracted bulk UK work to permitted subcontractors in Scotland and Northern Ireland when we did not have the capacity to handle the work. In those cases we would accept primary liability and seek indemnities from the Scottish or Northern Ireland firm. However in those cases the work done, legal systems and indemnity/insurance position would be very similar to England. Having such an arrangement outside the UK would be more challenging. Within Weightmans we have an online facility that enables certain clients directly to access our systems , documents and advice given. At present we do it for our own matters but we could do it for matters referred to Legalink members as well.

It would be interesting to know how other Legalink members actually manage referrals and what is their practice and experience.

How do we, as a network, market ourselves as being able to provide a comprehensive solution in competition with the global firms?

We are promoting the fact that we have known each other over a long period of time and have a history of working together. If a client works with a global firm, that firm may be obliged or at least biased to refer to its own offices even if that office may not be the best for the client in the particular circumstances. Captive offices of global law firms are also not necessarily motivated to do the best job. I believe that the Legalink ethic to help Legalink colleagues and the fact that we are not an exclusive network works in the clients' favour. However in Legalink we have to keep working on these issues and try to develop further marketing tools to market to clients.

What is recent news in your firm? Is your firm growing?

This year we announced record turnover of £89.2m, an increase of £2.2m on the previous year's result. We recently opened an office in Glasgow, Scotland; we have now about fifteen lawyers there. This summer will see us open our second office in London

at Exchequer Court 33 St Mary Axe London EC3. In July 2015 we merged with the long established Leeds firm Ford & Warren which now means that we have commercial offices across the UK in Birmingham, Glasgow, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, London and Manchester. Turnover in the year 2015/ 2016 will exceed £100m.

Profile raising through quality work has been a key strategic initiative for the firm. In the last year, we achieved record rankings of 112 specialisms and 169 individual rankings across Legal 500 and Chambers UK Directories. We act for over a quarter of the FTSE 100 and have enjoyed a period of good growth over the past year with the benefit of key hires and winning new clients.

We have acquired new clients such as Thomas Cook, Arnold Clark and EDF Energy. We have also seen in the last year success in renewing contracts with clients such as MIB, AIG, Liberty, Royal Mail Group and AGEAS.

Is any particular practice area worth highlighting in the moment?

As a firm our largest practice area is still in insurance and complex work in international shipping and litigation. The mergers with Mace & Jones in 2011 and Ford & Warren in 2015 continue to increase the strength in depth of the firm in mainstream commercial work.

The challenge continues to be growing and managing our position in an increasingly competitive market; ensuring we provide the same high quality services at often lower rates, whilst balancing our profitability. The way that we deal with that is by staying ahead of what clients expect with a huge investment in information technology in order to produce cost savings.

Which practice areas can you mention in terms of cross-border work with other Legalink members?

Legalink is our only international network. We use Legalink primarily for our commercial work such as cross border mergers and acquisitions, commercial litigation and advice for UK universities and colleges establishing overseas joint ventures and branches. Weightmans joined Legalink following its merger with Mace & Jones in 2011. Prior to the merger Weightmans had numerous relationships with foreign law firms dealing with international litigation principally in specialist insurance and marine matters. Those relationships still exist but we would be willing to use Legalink firms if member firms could demonstrate expertise in those areas.

What are the areas that the members use your firm for?

We tend to receive instructions on international litigation, property matters and cross border mergers and acquisitions.

Did Weightmans ever consider joining another network in terms of adding another network to your international relations?

No. Not to replicate Legalink.

Our principal focus is to be able to source overseas legal advice and to provide a service to our clients. I do not think it is a realistic strategy for any large UK law firm to become a member solely to obtain work referrals. Most foreign law firms already have relationships with firms in the UK and membership of additional networks by itself is unlikely to produce additional inbound referrals. We do have relations with overseas firms outside of Legalink mainly in insurance and shipping but we are not members of any other formal network.

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Thank you.