



The History of U.S. Firms in Mexico

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Editor's Note: *The authors of this post lead the Latin American team of Major, Lindsey & Africa, a legal recruiting firm. It is the second in a four-part series on the changing legal landscape in Mexico that Big Law Business will publish in the coming days.*

By Jeffrey Liebster and Joshua Dull of Major, Lindsey & Africa

The Mexico City legal market has long been dominated by indigenous law firms, but in recent years, we have witnessed an evolution in the legal services industry where key Mexican practitioners have come to embrace the idea — and reality — of globalization and consolidation. Historically, Mexico has been a very fractured market where firms rarely reach a size where they can truly be labeled as institutions.

In fact, as of today, Mexico City has more than 25 million people, and only three firms with more than 100 lawyers. There are many reasons for this phenomenon, but the conventional wisdom joked about by many local lawyers when describing the lack of an institutionalized market is, “There is not enough room on the door for everyone’s name!”

Further complicating the dynamics in this market consisting mainly of dozens of small offices bearing the names of many of the country’s top practitioners is the acceleration of the influx of global full-service law firms. The first firm to establish a presence in Mexico was Baker & McKenzie, which established an office in 1961. Baker has since expanded throughout Mexico with offices in five cities and remains the largest firm in Mexico in terms of head count. White & Case opened its doors in 1991 and has long been perceived as having one of the strongest local law offerings in the country. That same year, Curtis, Mallet-Prevost, Colt & Mosle opened an outpost in Mexico City.

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Haynes and Boone has had a strong presence in Mexico City since 1994 and in recent years, the firm has acquired three lateral partners and their teams in Mexico City.

In 2008, Chadbourne & Parke acquired the Mexico City office of Thacher Profitt. Jones Day entered the market a year later by combining with a top domestic boutique. Jones Day, now at 43 lawyers in Mexico, is growing its ranks, looking to reach levels of critical mass and become full service. Curtis has chosen to grow more selectively, and Chadbourne has experienced defections to other global firms in recent years that have significantly decreased its ranks in Mexico City.

In the past seven years, DLA Piper, Greenberg Traurig, Holland & Knight, Hogan Lovells, Spanish giant Gaurrigues, and others have opened offices with varying strategies. All have announced plans to keep growing in response to the demands of current clients and their desire to attract new clients.

Hogan Lovells' entry into Mexico made the biggest splash when it combined forces with Barrera, Siqueros y Torres Landa, an 80+ lawyer full-service domestic firm, which created Hogan Lovells BSTL. It was a landmark deal in that Hogan became the first global law firm to unite with one of Mexico's few truly institutionalized law firms. Among the key motivations was each firm's anticipation of the impact of the reforms in the energy sector, as the state monopolies in the oil and gas and electricity industries were legally dissolved.

There are now 12 global firms with offices of varying sizes and capabilities in Mexico City. As the market continues to evolve and more multinational investors, developers, financiers, and operators arrive, entry by more global firms is inevitable.

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About the Authors: Jeff Liebster and Josh Dull lead the Major, Lindsey & Africa Latin America Law Firm Group. Founded in 1982, Major, Lindsey & Africa is the world's largest and most-experienced legal search firm. The Latin America Team has played a vital role in transforming the law firm landscape in Mexico over the past several years, including facilitating many recent transactions, most notably the acquisition of BSTL, an 80-lawyer, full-service institutional law firm by global giant Hogan Lovells. Jeff is a NY-based partner of MLA. He works with firms, practices groups and partners on a strategic level in NY and around the world; assisting with mergers, office openings and placement of individuals and groups of lateral candidates. Josh, based in Miami, has assisted clients and candidates with office openings and high profile lateral partner acquisitions by global and regional firms in Miami, New York, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Bogota and Caracas. Most law firms, if not all, are vitally interested in what is happening in the market.