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EVEN AN OPENING
FOR A RIVAL.**

FIGHTING FOR INDEPENDENCE

GLOBAL REACH, REGIONAL FOCUS

The top 10 Ontario regional firms are proud of their mid-market positions but say that doesn't mean they can't serve clients around the world.

By Robert Todd

Opportunities have certainly opened up for Ontario's full-service regional firms in recent years. Since *Canadian Lawyer* last ranked them along with their Quebec peers in 2006, two of the top three have moved on or out. The top firm, McMillan Binch Mendelsohn LLP, has rebranded itself as McMillan LLP and combined forces with Lang Michener LLP to join the national crowd. And who could forget the March 2007 dissolution of the once-formidable Goodman and Carr LLP, which placed third in the 2006 rankings? "I think that's to our benefit," Torkin Manes LLP managing partner Jeffrey Cohen says of these departures from the mid-market. He says the hollowing out has made it easier to identify the clients his firm is

chasing, and better tailor its services and marketing efforts to them. "We've stayed the course. We know who we are; we understand where our limitations are, and we don't worry about what we can't do. We focus on what we can do."

At a time when plenty of noise is being made by global law firms eager to shake up the Canadian legal services

marketplace, WeirFoulds LLP managing partner Lisa Borsook suggests firms should consider their bread-and-butter specialties when deciding which format to adopt. "I certainly don't need a national platform to do litigation in the Superior Court or the Court of Appeal, or for that matter the Supreme Court of Canada — they're all located in Ontario," she points out. "The same

How we did it

Canadian Lawyer asked lawyers and in-house counsel from across Canada to vote on Ontario's top full-service, regional firms. They were asked to rank their top 10 firms from a preliminary list, with a chance to nominate a firm that was not included on the list. Respondents' rankings were based on firms' regional service coverage, client base, notable mandates, service excellence, and legal expertise. To be considered in the vote, firms were required to have offices only in the province of Ontario and offer a wide range of legal services. The final rankings were determined through a points system, in which firms were rewarded on a sliding scale for the number of first to 10th-place votes received.



is of course true for the government-related and property development work that we do.”

WeirFoulds’ expertise in the corporate-commercial area is an exception to that rule, but Borsook notes that most of the firm’s clients are either based in Ontario or have a principal Canadian office in the province. “Having a regional focus without a national cost structure works well for all of our clients,” she says. “And for those of our lawyers who want to practise, say, in municipal law, it doesn’t really do them a bit of good to have a national cost structure.”

While each of the firms selected by their peers to be one of Ontario’s Top 10 Regional Law Firms draws work primarily within the province, many are looking elsewhere when it comes to growth. Aird & Berlis LLP managing partner Eldon Bennett says all firms are taking a step back to consider whether the perceived

momentum toward internationalization is accurate. He believes law follows business, which clearly continues to grow beyond national borders. Therefore, says Bennett, “I see us increasing our cross-border presence, and increasing our cross-border marketing.”

Cassels Brock & Blackwell LLP is another Ontario firm looking abroad. Managing partner Mark Young says his firm wants to take its dominant position in certain industries, many of which are global in scope, and use them as leverage to strengthen other areas of practice. “A takeover bid in mining is not really any different than a takeover bid in telecommunications,” he notes.

It’s clear that each of the firms profiled below has its own approach to the practice of law. What they all share is a primary presence in Canada’s most populace province, and a track record of impeccable performance.

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Pallett Valo LLP (pallettvalo.com)

Total Lawyers: 29

Office: Mississauga

Core Practice Areas: business law; commercial litigation; commercial real estate; construction law; insolvency and corporate restructuring

Key Clients: Parmalat Canada Inc., GE Commercial Distribution Finance Canada, Peel District School Board, Zurich Insurance Company Ltd., Stewart Title Guaranty Company

Notable Mandate: represented Robert Murphy Architect Inc. and Gray Wave Resources Inc. in the Ontario Court of Appeal’s May 2010 ruling in *Murphy v. Sally Creek Environs Corp.*, a leading case on the duties and conduct of trustees in bankruptcy, helping largely overturn a Commercial Court ruling

Star Alumni: John Pallett, a member of Parliament from 1954 to 1962; Sidney Valo, a founding director and CEO of the Greater Toronto Airports Authority; Thomas Santram, vice president, legal, at Cineplex Entertainment LP; Robert Wasserman, director of legal services for Canada and Latin America at Starbucks Coffee Co.; Suzanne Michaud, senior advisory counsel at RBC law group; Maria Tassou, vice chairwoman of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board

Affiliations: close relationships with firms in other jurisdictions

The Firm: Established as Pallett & Pallett in 1948, this firm merged with Milman Valo in 1980 and changed its name to Pallett Valo. It started out with a focus on residential real estate before shifting to an emphasis on commercial real estate. That move made way for expansion in other business-related practice areas. The firm has embraced an organic growth strategy over the past decade, adding strength by holding on to top articling students and junior associates. It’s also recently benefited from several key lateral hires, many of them alumni returning to the Pallett Valo fold.

Managing partner Anne Kennedy suggests her firm punches above its weight due to a simple formula: compile a stable of lawyers that offers services on par with those at large firms. “That allows us to provide a very high level of service to our clients, and as a result we have some very sophisticated clients,” says Kennedy.

Voters praised Pallett Valo’s construction law and insolvency groups in particular. One said the firm deserves to be high on the list due to its “breadth and depth of experience, practical approach, and unparalleled commitment to client service.”



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