



Insights from Womble Bond Dickinson's Chair and CEO on Transatlantic Growth

This month we interview Betty Temple, the Chair and CEO of Womble Bond Dickinson US, a roughly 1,000 lawyer firm formed through a 2017 combination of US-based Womble Carlyle and UK-based Bond Dickinson. In this interview, Betty discusses the strategic drivers behind transatlantic growth, lessons learned, and key takeaways for firms considering international growth opportunities.

What factors led to the decision to pursue a US-UK merger and resulted in the combination which created Womble Bond Dickinson?

From a US perspective, strategic plans prior to 2017 had emphasized the importance of expanding our capabilities to meet the needs of international, multi-national, and global clients. The firm's active participation in industry, trade, and business associations reinforced the prominence (and growing complexity) of our clients' business activities on an international stage. We found that even some of our smallest clients had international needs (often in Europe), and we found that approximately 1/3 of the clients who account for 80% of the firm's revenue had physical operations in the United Kingdom. Additionally, we observed the growing importance of international trade within the firm's existing domestic markets.

We also saw that there was an entire client base beyond our borders who were expanding into our markets and needed trusted advisors to help them navigate the US environment. Our colleagues in the UK similarly saw the growing importance of US businesses on their domestic markets, and as the two firms began to learn more about each other (first via a strategic alliance and later via the UK-US combination), we found that we occupied similar positions within our respective markets and offered a similar value proposition over other competitors. Best of all, the respective cultures and values of the two firms aligned exceptionally well. With so many internal and external similarities, we saw an opportunity to take our shared value proposition onto a much bigger stage with larger consequence and greater impact.

What have been some of the biggest opportunities and achievements created through the combined firm's transatlantic platform and practice?

There are so many anecdotes that highlight collaboration and unique value for our clients, it's hard to single them out. Shortly after the US and UK firms announced our strategic alliance (a step we took before combining to become Womble Bond Dickinson), the Brexit referendum shocked many leaders around the world. When we were first planning the combination, we could never have imagined the importance of that event and the impact it would have on our clients' businesses. Through the various twists and turns of Brexit, the importance of the UK's relationship with the US (and vice versa) has taken on a new level of strategic significance and our ability to supply our US clients with real time insights from those in our firm who could track and interpret events as they were unfolding was extremely valuable.

Additionally, over the last few years, we've seen a lot of changes to both the regulatory environment and the threat environment for data privacy and cybersecurity. Being able to send people from the US to the UK to learn how regulatory frameworks like GDPR are being applied in practice and how to advise clients to meet the demands of an evolving environment has been a great success for the firm.

We've also been able to handle some significant cross-border M&A transactions that have fully leveraged the capabilities of both our US and UK teams. We may not have been able to win this work without the combination and we certainly couldn't have done it as seamlessly.

But, if I had to highlight our greatest success that, I think, really sums it up, the combined platform has really helped us to step onto a bigger stage with a better brand. And the proof is in the numbers. In the decade prior to 2017, Womble's US revenue was basically flat, and we had hit what some would call a glass ceiling in how we were perceived by clients. Since the combination, we have added 5 new US offices and over \$60m (20%) in annual US top line revenue and similar percentage gains in US Revenue-per-Lawyer and Profit-per-Equity-Partner. Domestically, we have moved from a regional to an increasingly national platform. This transformative change has enabled us to take a new story to the market and enabled us to attract some amazing talent that we would never have been able to have access to prior to the combination.

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What have been some of the challenges and how has your firm overcome those challenges?

I think many firms in growth-mode experience this, but one challenge has been to help our partners stay abreast and informed of all of our various client service initiatives and growth efforts in order to be able to effectively connect the dots between clients' needs and the firm's expanded capabilities. As the firm continues to add strong new talent across our markets, we have had to develop more robust systems to connect people – this spans everything from creative use of technology to maximizing our approaches to internal teaming.

Early on in our combination discussions, we identified the need to find ways for our lawyers to work together. We looked at lots of options, but ultimately, we decided the best path for integration was to focus on what our clients were focused on—their businesses and their industries; so, we have relied on a sector or industry team strategy as the primary vehicle for integrating our transatlantic capabilities and our primary vehicle for going to market. Our sector leaders on both sides of the pond have been actively working together to communicate the full range of the firm's offering to clients, and these sector leaders have played an important role and done a terrific job in bringing lawyers from both sides together to act as one team.

Of course, another challenge has been the sheer logistical limitations to UK-US travel during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, our lawyers enjoyed in-person programs which fostered integration. For example, one of the programs we established allowed associates to have a 'foreign exchange' like experience where a group from each country was able to spend time in the other country and learn about the practice of law and the business of law from an entirely new perspective. So we miss that, and we look forward to starting those types of collaboration programs up again as soon as we can. However, the fact that everyone has been operating via video has also created opportunities. Given that we had already integrated our communications systems, in some respects, the pandemic eliminated distance as a barrier to working together (because I think all of us have learned just how much can be done remotely).

What do you see as some of the emerging opportunities or areas of focus in joint US-UK work over the coming year?

The 2007 UK Legal Services Act has dramatically transformed the competitive landscape in the UK over the last several years. In many respects, I suspect US law firms will eventually experience similar changes to those which UK law firms have already experienced. Seeing the way our UK colleagues have organized and optimized their operations for efficiency to compete in a more liberal marketplace has been instructive for those of us in the US, and it has reinforced the importance of continuing to expand our 30+ year history in various service lines and business units for technology and non-legal/near-legal services (collectively, we call these business units WBD Advance). Understanding those market forces and our own history has led us to double down on our focus on leveraging technology, offering non-traditional staffing models, and a process orientation to clients with superior levels of efficiency. Together, our combined firm has built unique capabilities to offer clients innovative approaches in service delivery, and we see tremendous opportunities to grow these capabilities over the coming years to respond to changing client expectations around efficiency, technology, and staffing.

What advice might you offer to domestic firms considering a global combination?

It sounds routine, but developing a deep understanding of the business case and the strategy are primary. The decision has to be grounded in the needs of key clients with a long-term perspective. If firms approach this thinking only about generating referrals or focusing on first year revenues, it won't be successful.

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