

Bowman Gilfillan to increase of offices in Africa

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South African law firm Bowman Gilfillan, which established an office in Botswana in October, is moving quickly to implement a medium-term strategy to have between 8 and 12 offices across Africa.



Bowman Gilfillan gets 1,000 enquiries from Lagos in Nigeria. Image: Wiki Images

The Botswana expansion brings to 5 the number of African offices the firm has.

Law firm growth in Africa has gained significant traction in the past year with a number of leading firms either merging with big international companies, growing associate networks, or establishing stand-alone businesses.

Bowman Gilfillan Africa Group's website link to Nigeria, for example, received close to 1,000 requests for a finance lawyer there in the first quarter of this year.

While traditionally an affair for Parisian lawyers, the firm would like to have an office in Francophone Africa too, as Chinese clients look to buy mines there and to service local clients such as AngloGold Ashanti.

Breaking the referral model

In a break with the referral network model being employed by most law firms expanding into the continent, Bowman Gilfillan is establishing fully integrated offices, which it believes are the optimal structure. The Botswana office adds to those in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

Priority considerations for future expansion include Nigeria, Ghana, Mozambique, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

While some tight regulations in Africa are aimed at protecting local law firms by limiting the ability of foreigners to give advice or gobble up companies under their own brands, head of the Bowman Gilfillan Africa group, Jonathan Lang, himself a UK-registered lawyer, said modernising systems to better accommodate foreigners would be useful, but there are other ways to grow in Africa.

Rapid expansion

Some of the hindrances at the moment include the banning of advice unless it is given by a sole practitioner or from a partnership composed of admitted local lawyers and firms can only bear the name of a current or past partner. Profits or fees cannot be shared with unqualified people, with law societies not shying away from suspending practitioners who flout these rules.

As an example of how fast things are moving, Bowman Gilfillan started with just two people at its Kenyan office in 2008, but has created 68 jobs since then and expects over 100 in the next two or three years. In the context of South African link-ups with international firms, Africa's largest law firm ENS has remained strongly independent, but merger activity has been heating up this year as Africa becomes a popular destination.

Lang said foreign direct investment needs to be supported in Africa, with multinationals wanting to receive the same sort of advice they receive at home.

"It is a challenge for a lot of corporates, but that is the opportunity for us - to provide advice in countries that companies are looking to go in to at a standard that is the same as their home jurisdictions," Lang said.

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