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King & Spalding Seeking Global Mandates from Sydney Office Launch

By Christopher Niesche

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Global law firm King & Spalding won't compete with Australian firms for domestic work following its entry into the Australia market and instead will focus on cross border matters for multinational clients, said Darren Gardner, managing partner of its Sydney office.

In the first entry into Australia by a major law firm in close to a decade, King & Spalding opened an office in Sydney this week with Gardner and four other partners, and plans to cautiously hire more.

The firm's Australian office will not focus on winning in-country mandates or being included on domestic panels.

"We make no secret of the fact that we're not coming here to try and compete domestically. We are well aware that that would be—even by us—regarded as somewhat of a fool's errand, given the quality of the firms and the number of lawyers and the relationships and how this market works," he said.

"We're here not to disrupt, but to supplement and complement the market for what we're doing more on a regional and global basis as part of our practices."

Courtesy photo

King & Spalding, Sydney Partners:

Gardner said the firm won't try to be all things to all people but will instead focus on complex high-value work where King & Spalding is strong globally: disputes and international arbitration; regulatory and investigations; public and private transactions; energy; and human capitaland compliance.

The firm is a single partnership and organised around practice groups rather than locations, with lawyers in several offices potentially working on a matter.

The firm had already been drawing on its global practice groups to service multinational Australian companies operating and transacting offshore and multinationals in other jurisdictions wanting to operate or transact in the Asia Pacific.

Courtesy photo

Darren Gardner, King & Spalding;

Nonetheless, Gardner expects benefits from its new Australia office because it is geographically close to Asia and in a more friendly time zone—two or three hours behind Singapore and Hong Kong and an hour or two behind Tokyo, depending on the time of year.

The firm plans to hire more partners, and while Gardner said it has no specific number in mind, it won't be a firm with 50 partners in Australia. It will hire when the opportunity arises and is open to hiring partners with experience in cross-border transactions; cross-border litigation; projects and infrastructure; and human capital and compliance.

King & Spalding has been quietly trying to recruit partners in Australia for the last year or so, with very limited success, and Gardner acknowledged that it will be difficult to find the right lawyers.

"It'll be a difficult task. The right people always want to stay where they are, and their firms want to keep them," he said. "And they're the people that we would always want to hire."

But, he said, King & Spalding is well recognised around the world, although less so in Australia, and could pick up ex-pat Australian lawyers who want to return home as well as partners already in Australia.

"The more familiar folks are with what we do, and the more they work with us, the more opportunities there'll be, both from a matter perspective and at a recruitment level," Gardner said.

The plan to open an Australian office has been five years in the making and Gardner said he has observed the way other U.S. firms have entered the market, although he did not name any.

"We've looked at what others have done, and that's why we've landed on the model that we've landed on, and I think that's why it's taken five years," he said.

Hogan Lovells shuttered its Australian office earlier this year, less than a decade after entering the market aiming to capitalize on the country›s thriving energy, natural resources, financial institutions, and infrastructure sectors.