

Miller Thomson's Chair Eyes Continuing Growth at Canada's Largest Midsize Law Firm

By Gail J. Cohen

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Miller Thomson, considered one of Canada's top firms, is "open for business and looking to grow our ranks," says Peter Auvinen, managing partner of the largest firm in Canada serving the midmarket.

Midsize firms are seeing most of the action in the Canadian legal market right now and Miller Thomson illustrates the growth-minded attitude of firms that size. Law.com International talked to Auvinen about his firm's growth, competition from U.S. firms entering the Canadian market, which practice areas are hot and not, and running a firm post-COVID.

Miller Thomson, which has 10 offices across the country—more than any other Canadian firm—has changed a great deal over the past decade, Auvinen said. In the past year, it has revved up its growth mindset, making some large additions (and experiencing some losses). And it plans to add even more bench strength.

In just the last seven months alone, the firm, which placed 182nd in Law.com's 2022 Global 200 rankings, has grown its corporate and M&A group in Vancouver, on Canada's west coast, through the hire of a four-lawyer M&A team from a business law boutique and through the acquisition of boutique corporate commercial firm Zargar Lawyers.

The firm also wants to enlarge its Toronto office head count by about 20%, Auvinen said.

Those numbers are aspirational rather than "hard and fast goals," he conceded. But "you have to be flexible about these things and respond



Courtesy photo

Peter Auvinen, managing partner at Miller Thomson.

to opportunities that present themselves," he added.

Miller Thomson currently has about 530 lawyers split evenly between the firm's advocacy and business law groups.

Auvinen has more than 30 years of experience as a commercial litigation and insolvency practitioner. He was first appointed firm chair in July 2019, a few months before the COVID pandemic hit. It was an interesting time to become chair of a national firm, he said, akin to "drinking from a fire hose." He was reappointed to a second three-year term this year and says it's now all about adapting to a post-pandemic world.

Miller Thomson is "embracing" the hybrid working model with people coming in two or three days a week for the foreseeable future, said

Auvinen. Over the course of the pandemic, a number of the firm's leases were renewed and the firm reduced its space by about 20% overall to accommodate post-COVID work styles, explained.

Practice focus has also changed somewhat since the "high watermark" of 2021, said Auvinen. Lawyers and Canada's economy remain busy, he said, with slowdowns in such areas as capital markets and securities offset by increasing activity in restructuring and litigation.

"Our insolvency and restructuring group [has] really grown out in Toronto, but we've added pieces also in Montreal, in Calgary," he said.

Looking forward, the firm is focusing on technology, including artificial intelligence and gaming, as well as infrastructure and large capital projects sponsored by governments. Sectors such as crypto and cannabis that a few years ago were on fire have definitely declined, he noted.

Auvinen said the firm's sweet spot is the mid-market, with most of the firm's clients private, owner-operated companies with revenues up to a billion dollars. That's the Canadian market segment seeing the most action right now, in particular with U.S. firms such as Cozen O'Connor (No. 100 in the Global 200) and Mintz, Levin, Cohn, Ferris, Glovsky and Popeo (No. 98 in the Global 200) pushing in. Cozen has been steadily adding lawyers in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal since it launched in Canada in June 2021. Mintz, which launched an office in Toronto in March of this year, has said it plans to grow its lawyer head count to 50 within 18 months of the launch and to 75 within three years.

Auvinen said he's aware of, but not concerned about the incursions on the legal market from south of the border.

Still, the U.S. firms have had an impact. In early 2022, a five-lawyer Vancouver team, including

former office managing partner Rory Godinho, left Miller Thomson to join Cozen O'Connor.

Auvinen says he is unfazed.

"We just need to focus on our own business, and we have a fairly attractive proposition," he said.

As the firm's leader, Auvinen said he focuses on providing strategic direction and working with the six other members of the firm executive committee. He described his leadership style as "solutions-oriented," with frequent travel to offices around the country so he can stay on top of concerns in every location.

"I spend a great deal of time thinking about the future and where we should be positioned ... in the short term and the long term," he said. "Things are moving so quickly now. People used to do 10-year planning and whatnot, which I think is almost impossible in this day and age."

Leading a law firm requires a lot of persuasion and consensus-building, he said. "I'm a good listener and I can move things along as quickly as anyone can in a law firm. But it doesn't happen quickly."

He said he's learned a lot since taking the helm at Miller Thomson and has come to terms with the fact that when you're managing a firm, things are never perfect.

"I have personally found it a real growth experience," he said.

So what can he be found doing when he wants to get away from the stresses of running a law firm?

"Pounding nails," he said.

Auvinen, it turns out, is still building when he takes time off, although not building his firm. He and his wife are renovating an off-grid cottage in the wilds of Northern Ontario.

Back when he was a young man, he said, he learned to build.

"It's kind of nice to be back to doing something physical," he said.