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NEWS

Taking Big Leaps in Head Count, 'Show Me' State Law Firms Aggressive in Growth

Several Am Law 200 law firms with roots in Kansas City are quickly attracting talent and clients across the U.S.

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Law Firm Mergers



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Editorial



Am Law 200 law firms have been on a growth spree this year. But a handful of law firms from the same state have taken expansion to another level, completing multiple mergers, opening offices in new locations and even engineering the largest group lateral move in recent memory.

That level of competitiveness from big firms with Kansas City roots, including Polsinelli, Lathrop GPM, Husch Blackwell and Spencer Fane, shows the great growth race is being staged not only by the largest global firms but by domestic firms throughout the Second 50 and into the Second Hundred. It also highlights the benefit of having Midwest operations to attract client work across the U.S.

As billing rates continue to reach new heights across the industry, being able to service work that originates in more expensive markets with a significant part of your base in the heartland helps, noted Michelle Bigler, a legal recruiter and founder of MB Attorney Search, which specializes in recruiting in Kansas City and St. Louis, among other markets.

“That’s pretty consistent, and I think clients recognize the flexibility of the rates is attractive. If I can have as sophisticated of work done in New York as someone who is based in maybe Columbia, Missouri, or wherever, or Kansas City, they’re gonna go for the lower rates,” she said. “They’re going to recognize the cost-benefits, the savings. And that is definitely a pillar of how many of these firms are developing clients, recognizing ‘We have the expertise, it doesn’t necessarily matter where they’re located.’”

She also pointed to the health care and tech sectors in Missouri as growth contributors for these firms.

Lathrop GPM, No. 169 in the Am Law 200, is one of the latest native Missouri firms to significantly expand, announcing a [merger last week](#) into Northern California that could help the firm jump roughly 20 spots in the Am Law 200 rankings, increasing revenue by around \$60 million and head count by about 25%.

Spencer Fane, already the [fastest-growing firm](#) in the Am Law 200 over the last five years, [merged into Santa Fe](#) at the start of August. The firm, No. 142, teased further growth in the Mountain West and Southwest in the upcoming months. It’s been on an impressive run of growth since 2018, adding nearly 200 lawyers, 11 offices and completing mergers in

Houston, Nashville, Salt Lake City, San Jose and Santa Monica.

Polsinelli, No. 60 in the Am Law 100, also completed one of the largest group laterals in recent memory this summer, planting a flag in Philadelphia by adding 47 lawyers, including 30 partners, from Holland & Knight. It also became the first Am Law 100 firm to open an office in Park City, Utah, one of the corridors of that state's tech ecosystem that also includes Salt Lake City and Provo. Polsinelli has jumped 53 spots in the Am Law 200 since 2013, tied for the third-most of any firm during that time span.

Husch Blackwell, No. 82, announced in the spring that it will open an office in Nashville this year, mobilized by additions of lawyers in the region via The Link, the firm's virtual office. In fact, the firm's CEO, Jamie Lawless, noted in a statement Friday that the move was a "proof point" of the virtual office because it "served as a catalyst for initial growth in the area due to increased client demand and proved that a brick-and-mortar office would benefit both clients and the firm."

Firms across the country and throughout the Am Law 200 are looking to expand their footprints, noted Bigler, the recruiter. But getting their start in Kansas City is part of the equation for each of the aforementioned firms, she noted.

"Each one has their own reasons for the growth, but I think for a middle-market city like Kansas City, there's a lot of opportunity to attract talent because the city is a fantastic city," she said.

"The cost of living is lower than some of the big cities like Chicago and New York. The talent is there. Attorneys view it as a city where they can have a sophisticated life, a sophisticated practice, and yet, still tuck their children in at night," she added.

Analysts said every firm has an increasing imperative to grow but without altering its culture. Everyone is grappling with that puzzle, said Kent Zimmermann, a law firm consultant with Zeughauser Group.

"It's kind of like everybody's climbing a ladder, and they want to go to the next rung, wherever they are on the ladder," Zimmermann said in an interview. "And even though one firm may be way down and one firm may be way up, they're both trying to get to the next rung, with the next rung being enhanced size, profitability, more dominant market leadership in areas of focus, without changing culture too much, and while maintaining or enhancing quality and consistency."

Missouri Competition

While there's some competition between the Missouri firms, particularly in practice areas such as intellectual property, litigation and financial services, "you don't see a whole lot of heavyweight fights," noted Rich Bracken, a Kansas City-based consultant and founder of Unstoppable Solutions who also worked for multiple Big Law firms with roots in the area.

"There's like a noncompetitive rivalry," he said in an interview. "We always want to be really good, but you don't see a lot of toe-to-toe battles as much as you would see in the coastal cities, or Chicago or Miami."

Spencer Fane chair and managing partner Pat Whalen said in an interview earlier this summer that he struggles to pinpoint specific rivals and peer firms because of the firm's "immense diversification" across practices and geographies.

"[S]ome of my partners do not feel like Am Law 100 and to some extent even Am Law 200 firms are the primary competitors, while others are almost exclusively on the other side of deals and cases with Am Law 50 firms," he said in July. He added in a statement Friday that his firm has "embraced a growth mindset" focused on improvement and "a willingness to lean in even at inconvenient times to seize on what has become a proliferating set of opportunities."

Bracken said some of the things that typify firms in this area are an entrepreneurial spirit and strong leadership. He said as firms from the middle of the country expand outward, and are able to maintain that culture, talented lawyers want to join in.

“It’s more engaging. It’s more friendly and collegial,” he said as the reason for attracting other teams of attorneys.

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