

Michelman & Robinson takes its California mindset to London

The Los Angeles-founded firm that once resisted expansion now spans continents, opening its first international office in London -- a move shaped by global client demand, arbitration trends and a culture built around nurturing talent and creativity.



Michelman & Robinson LLP launched its first international office last month in London -- a move longtime litigator Sanford L. Michelman admits he never imagined in 1999, when he and co-founder Mark B. Robinson opened their Los Angeles firm.

"Mark wanted to take space with nine offices, and I said, 'No, let's take it with six. I don't want to grow that large,'" Michelman recalled with a laugh.

Today, home to roughly 100 attorneys, Michelman & Robinson handles litigation, transactional and regulatory matters from offices in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Irvine, along with New York, Chicago, Dallas and Houston.

Michelman said the idea of expanding abroad had been on the table long before the pandemic.

"We had so much work in Europe over the years that we decided in 2019 we were going to make that leap," he said. "But then COVID hit."

The London office, now 18 attorneys strong, received formal UK regulatory approval on Oct. 17, according to London co-founding partner Hooman Yazhari. The new office will initially focus on white-collar, corporate crime and investigations, and corporate finance and transactional work.

"We have ambitions to get into other areas where we see opportunities for growth," Yazhari added, "as we look at macro trends and what areas in the economy will require more legal services."

Michelman said the firm's long-standing approach has been to let the regional industries surrounding its offices shape the type of law practiced there.

"The reason we do that is we never want one office to be the IP office or another to be the corporate office," Michelman said. "We want the office to be fully capable of servicing the market."

In London, that means a focus on insurance companies, private equity, banks, aviation, sports and consumer luxury brands, as well as advertising and digital media.

Michelman noted an increasing trend among multinational corporations to update contracts outside the U.S. judicial system -- a shift he expects will fuel more international arbitration work. Both he and Yazhari said the London office is well positioned to capture that demand.

"As we've seen - everything from tariffs to geopolitical tensions to inflation to interest rate rises - those trends make business more difficult," Yazhari said. "And when business gets more difficult, contracts don't go as smoothly as everyone had hoped when they signed them. And that leads to disputes. ... And whether you are in Asia, in the Middle East or in Europe or North America, you often have London as a seat for international arbitration."

A dual U.S. and British citizen, Yazhari was recruited specifically to launch the London office. He has known Michelman for 15 years and was once a client while serving as general counsel for an aircraft leasing company.

"The firm's motto has always been: 'Three steps ahead.' That really sums up how they think," Yazhari said. "And it's been very focused on nurturing talent and nurturing the growth of the individual lawyers here. ... And if you're a firm that attracts talent, you're going to be a firm that attracts clients."

Michelman echoed that sentiment, noting the firm recently completed a rebranding and website redesign.

"I can understand where you might say, 'We've had the same logo for 100 years,'" he said. "But that's not really our culture. Our culture is always leaning forward and being forward thinking."

That philosophy, Michelman added, extends to how the firm supports its people.

"Because you're paid for creative thinking, right? And you can't have good creative thinking if people aren't engaged and satisfied," he said. "We put a ton of energy and effort into training programs and advancement programs. ... It is a moral obligation, I think, of anybody running an organization to make sure everybody has that capability to advance, provide for their families, mature and look back on their career and say it was a good decision - not just a paycheck. That I think is our No. 1 driver."

Thanks to strong client demand, Michelman said he expects growth "with some pretty good velocity" not only in London but also in New York and Los Angeles.

"In other markets, we are looking at Washington, D.C.," Michelman said. "We're looking at the Middle East - Dubai in that area - and Singapore because we're getting a lot more demand from those areas. But we'll take our time. We're not in any big rush. ... It all depends on demand, not because there is some magical number we're trying to achieve."

SHANE NELSON

shane_nelson@dailyjournal.com

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