

Taking legal matters to new frontiers

Cox Yeats has become the address of choice, writes

Shirley le Guern

UMHLANGA'S Ridgeside Office Park has become the address of choice for most of the larger law firms in town. Many are big national names. However, one of these firms fiercely guards its independence as a home grown success story that can better rise to the challenges faced by Durban companies.

Michael Jackson, the managing partner at Cox Yeats, which offers a wide range of commercial legal services, believes the somewhat out of the legal box approach of its founder, Graham Cox, remains at the firm's core.

Cox arrived from the Western Cape in 1964 and put down roots in Mercury Lane in the centre of Durban.

Cox went on to chair both the KZN Law Society and the Law Society of South Africa. He also counted many of the province's biggest corporates as clients. Many remain to this day.

A few generations on and the firm remains relatively small. It is around half the size of its biggest KwaZulu-Natal competitor and prides itself on being "a niche firm" that is very specialised.

Jackson said there are advantages to being the smaller kid on the uMhlanga block. Because Cox Yeats has less baggage, it is more focussed, more nimble and can offer a more personalised approach.

"We did a lot of thinking about what on earth we should be doing about this. The conclusion that came out of all that introspection and strategising was that we were not prepared to lose our independence and become part of a national law firm.

"That would mean having to practise in the way they determined as a satellite. We also realised that, while we valued our independence, we also had to ensure that our expertise was as good, if not better."

Again, the firm took a slightly different route. Instead of



Cox Yeats managing partner Michael Jackson, with associates Chris Chetty and Jenna Padoa at the company's Ridgeside offices.

competing for seasoned professionals, it focussed on raising the expertise of practitioners and attracting new talent through creating an environment in which young professionals could be accelerated as quickly as possible.

Cox Yeats currently has a professional team of 35 of which nearly 50 percent are under the age of 30.

Over the past five years, Cox Yeats' income has doubled with the lion's share of growth coming from the younger set.

"Relative to other firms, we've grown significantly. We've shown that it is possible for a KZN based law firm to compete effectively against the big national law firms and that it's possible to have another way of practising which (is different from) the big multinational type of law firm with a top down approach," he adds.

Contrary to the widely held belief that Durban firms offer up and coming young professionals less opportunities, Cox Yeats has found that it is now attracting practitioners from both large national firms and from Johannesburg.

One is Jenna Padoa, a commercial law specialist who

moved to Cox Yeats nearly three years ago. She will become a partner in March.

"Here, you learn something new every day and you are constantly involved in new matters. It is never stagnant, always different, always a challenge.

It is also a very nurturing environment. Integrity is very important here. That and the culture of excellence and team work are the things that I love most about this firm.

"In a very short legal career, I've grown quickly because of mentorship and because I have been involved in matters that you may not be involved in at other firms. Here, you get involved in big matters and take on more complicated tasks. It's not a case of being stuck in a photocopying room. It is actually about dealing with the nitty gritty issues, the technical aspects," she explains.

Chris Chetty, a University of KwaZulu-Natal graduate who side-stepped pressure to follow a career in science or accounting, to follow a legal one, is doing his articles at Cox Yeats.

He chose between two big firms to do his articles. "Cox Yeats seemed smaller, more niche and had well respected professionals

in their fields who were known experts. I started in January last year. It was a baptism of fire with some high pressure assignments but it has been good and empowering to know that you are doing high quality work that you wouldn't get at other companies at this level."

For Jackson, a "new generation" of young professionals who are supported by solid expertise brings a refreshing energy to the firm.

They provide new ideas and a new perspective that enriches both service to, and relationships with, clients.

Reaching back to the earliest days of Graham Cox, client retention remains all important. In addition to specific KZN expertise in the likes of the sugar, maritime and mining industries in Richards Bay, the firm also believes in quite literally getting to their clients' levels.

"To give the best service to our clients, we believe that it is essential to understand their objectives and to deal with their legal affairs in the context of their overall requirements.

Our aim is therefore not simply to give the best technical advice, but also to partner with our clients and contribute to the

development of their local and international strategies and policies.

In giving advice, we aim to provide practical and imaginative solutions to clients' problems and to present what can often be complex topics in a clear and non-technical way," he says.

That often means taking a proactive approach and monitoring upcoming legislative changes and then advising clients on what is in the pipeline, how these will impact them and how they need to respond. This is often done without a specific request from a client.

Key areas where this has become particularly important include land ownership and redistribution, mining and water rights and management of other key resources, including energy.

"What has been interesting for us is linking with clients and identifying the problems they are likely to encounter then trying to move these towards a solution which provides an opportunity for them. There are all sorts of things one does including submitting representations to Parliament and then developing strategies around these issues. That's become much more important for lawyers than it was," he says.