

## Meritas develops Australasia's first single law office lawyer exchange program

Travelling and working in a different jurisdiction and office can be an exciting career opportunity for a junior lawyer. The chance to develop professionally and personally, not to mention experiencing a bit of adventure in a new city.

It's something that many national and international firms talk up when recruiting – but rarely deliver – and something single office firms haven't been able to do at all.

Global legal network Meritas has now developed Australasia's first early career lawyer exchange program to offer lawyers from its member firms a taste of working in another city. The initiative helps build the network between the firms and also fosters an exchange of best practice between firms on everything from matter management to training.

Meritas is a global alliance of independent law firms and includes six law firms across Australia and New Zealand; SWAAB, Bennett & Philip Lawyers, DMAW Lawyers, Madgwicks, Williams & Hughes and Martelli McKegg.

The program was first piloted prior to Covid in 2019 in an exchange between SWAAB in Sydney and Martelli McKegg in Auckland. It consists of a two-week direct exchange of early career lawyers between offices who are introduced to work in the exchanged office, but do not undertake direct billable work for that firm. They can also continue to do their regular billable work from the different city if necessary.

Last month the first official *Fortnight Exchange* took place between lawyers from DMAW Lawyers in Adelaide and Bennett & Philip in Brisbane.

Jessica Punch is a three year post qualified lawyer from DMAW Lawyers who took part in the program last month, swapping with Ezekiel Ting from Bennett & Philip.

Both say they chose to work in smaller full service commercial firms rather than national or international firms because they wanted a better work-life-balance and are pleased that hasn't meant they missed out on experiences such as this.

Jessica said the exchange offered a rare opportunity for a relatively junior lawyer to develop business development skills such as networking and also opened her to some new practice areas.

"I've just reached the point where I'm starting to attend client functions and this gave me a chance to develop my networking skills without any partners present," she said.

"Towards the end I also particularly appreciated the opportunity to work on a bankruptcy matter which was new to me and extremely interesting."

Ezekiel said that during the exchange he was matched with a lawyer of similar experience and practice area at DMAW Lawyers and he has already taken some of the learning around CPD training back to Bennett & Philip.

"Adelaide is a great city and I really enjoyed the wine and food, even sampling the wine from some of the vineyards on the weekend."

In addition to experiencing a new firm, the exchange does not prevent lawyers from doing billing work for their own firm.

DMAW Lawyers' Principal Tom Dachs said the exchange had been designed to be minimally disruptive for clients and legal teams, but it was the reward for performing lawyers that was its primary purpose.

"It helps our network firms learn from one another and it also builds closer ties between the firms," he said. "It has been such a success in motivating our lawyers that we will likely have an exchange every year."

Bennett & Philp Director Andrew Lambros said the exchange of ideas was a huge benefit and its design meant it wasn't a burden on a smaller firm.

"We don't want participants simply working remotely, but that they can means there isn't a responsibility on the receiving firm to ensure they are busy," he said.

The program has been so popular that the Meritas network is now-expanding it internationally.

"This works well for both sides and leaves the network with stronger personal ties that will lead to more referral work between offices in the future," Lambros said. "It's a win from an HR, BD and practice perspective."

### **About Meritas**

Founded in 1990, Meritas is the premier global alliance of independent law firms. As an invitation-only alliance, Meritas firms must adhere to our uncompromising service standards to retain membership status. With 187 top-ranking law firms spanning 94 countries, Meritas delivers exceptional legal knowledge, personal attention and proven value to clients worldwide.

Meritas' Australia & New Zealand member firms are:

Bennett & Philp Lawyers, Brisbane <https://www.bennettphilp.com.au/>

DMAW Lawyers, Adelaide <https://dmawlawyers.com.au/>

Madgwicks, Melbourne <https://www.madgwicks.com.au/>

Swaab, Sydney <https://www.swaab.com.au/>

Williams & Hughes, Perth <https://www.whlaw.com.au/>

Martelli & McKegg, Auckland, <https://www.martellimckegg.co.nz/>