Blake Dawson finds its feet in Tokyo

Setting up a Tokyo office for Blake Dawson has given Natsuko Ogawa a chance to test her management skills while also ticking off some important career and cultural goals, write Cameron Cooper and Ashleigh Wilson.

It is a fair bet that the business plan for Blake Dawson’s Tokyo office did not factor in an earthquake and tsunami that has killed more than 15,000 people and which is expected to cost the Japanese economy about $300 billion.

The March disaster underlines the dangers that left-field events can pose for a business and the importance of having some core philosophies in play that will help a firm ride out any ups and downs. Such careful planning has been part of the equation for the resident partner at Blake Dawson’s Tokyo office, Natsuko Ogawa, who arrived in the Japanese capital in January 2010 and opened the doors to the firm’s office there a few months later. About 18 months on, and notwithstanding the repercussions of the earthquake on the nation, she is confident that Blake Dawson is well positioned to thrive in the highly competitive Japanese legal market.

First things first, though. Ogawa, a Perth born and bred Australian of Japanese heritage, is eager to let the world know that business is back on track after the tragic events of March. Japanese clients are taking a business-as-usual approach and they seem as determined as ever to pursue their projects in Australia. “Things are back to normal and M&A activity is back to the same levels as before the earthquake,” Ogawa says. “Japanese companies are still keen to invest, particularly globally. You really wouldn’t notice the difference if you came to Tokyo. You wouldn’t know that we had a disaster like that.”

Setting up the firm

While many international law firms have been conscious of the need to establish a presence in Asia, the market has a reputation for being tough to crack. Cultural and legal differences, red tape, transferring skills into a new domain – there are many hurdles to overcome. Japan is no different, as Ogawa found early in the piece. Setting up the office required attention to regulatory compliance rules, a process that can be convoluted in Japan. It took three months to obtain the necessary regulatory approvals and registrations through the Ministry of Justice and the Japan Bar Association before Blake Dawson could officially open its Tokyo branch in April last year. “It was really getting registration as a foreign lawyer that took a bit of time,” she explains. “The first few months was just about getting the office set up because you’re not allowed to practise law in Japan before you’re registered.”
With those start-up issues resolved, Blake Dawson has consistently built up its client list and workload in subsequent months. Including Ogawa, the Tokyo office has a team of six lawyers and wants to increase that quickly to about 10. Aside from ensuring the office is running smoothly, Ogawa’s present workload primarily involves M&A matters and Japanese investment into Australia, with a particular focus on energy and resources, financial services, the food and beverage sector and the growing infrastructure market. While this is similar to her work back in Australia, she notes that her new clients in Tokyo are often not familiar with working in Australia. As a result, more time is spent explaining things such as terms of engagement and billing practices. While patience is required, it is all part of establishing a good relationship with clients from day one.

Ogawa credits a couple of factors for Blake Dawson’s early success in Japan. First, the Australian headquarters of the firm had significant experience dealing with major Japanese clients prior to the opening of the dedicated Tokyo office. With those contacts already in place, it has been easier and quicker to establish a meaningful presence in Japan. Second, its regional resources and skills base courtesy of other offices in Jakarta, Shanghai, Singapore and Port Moresby mean it is au fait with doing business in Asia.

Ogawa says while many of Blake Dawson’s Japanese clients had been satisfied with the firm’s Australia-based services, she has no doubt it has been the right call to establish an on-the-ground presence in Japan. “Our clients had been happy with our service in Australia, but we really felt a Tokyo office would enhance our service,” she explains. “Some of our clients who had previous experience with international firms pretty quickly worked out how to use our additional services, but those (without that experience) have taken a bit longer.”

With those adjustments in train, Ogawa is confident that clients have been impressed with the service and skill levels of the new office. “There have been a number of transactions where there have been more face-to-face meetings in Tokyo and without the office here we just wouldn’t have been able to accommodate that.”

Understanding your clients
One of the keys to Blake Dawson’s success in Japan, according to Ogawa, has been establishing excellent internal resources. “If you’ve got good people beside you who know what they are doing then that just makes your life so much easier,” she says.

Adjusting quickly to cultural differences is also crucial. The language barrier is an obvious issue that must be addressed, and the Blake Dawson team is well placed in this respect. While she had an Australian upbringing, Ogawa’s parents were conscious of equipping her with Japanese skills. “Growing up we spoke Japanese in the home and English outside, so that worked well,” she says.

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Ogawa is one of a number of people in the Tokyo office who are fluent in Japanese and English. “We are very lucky that we have a lot of Japanese speakers in our team, including the Aussies, who are perhaps even better Japanese speakers than I am.” Having such bilingual capabilities within the firm has served to impress many of Blake Dawson’s Japanese clients, Ogawa says. “It obviously makes it very easy. You go to a meeting and they will say ‘oh wow, you guys aren’t only great lawyers, but you also speak fluent Japanese’.”

Any new market presents challenges, but some cultural nuances in Japan are very much welcomed by Ogawa and her team, including billing and payment practices. “We’re very fortunate with Japanese clients in that we don’t have to worry about the bill being paid. They are absolutely terrific with that!” she says.

**Wearing two hats**
Notwithstanding an element of red tape that all businesses in Japan must combat, Ogawa is enjoying the balance between her legal work and a managerial role. The job entails everything from obtaining the necessary regulatory approvals to managing a large, expanding client base from a relatively small local office. “It took me a while to get used to the managerial side as I hadn’t had much experience with it in Australia and then I was suddenly running the firm here, but I do enjoy it,” she says. “I’ve always liked the people side of things particularly, and it’s very satisfying seeing the team coming together well and interacting well with our colleagues in Australia.”

She is also benefiting from the experience of coordinating with other Blake Dawson offices in the Asian region, and notes there is a particular emphasis on promoting synergies between the firm’s Japanese and Indonesian businesses. “Japan to Australia business is very strong, and we would really like to see more on the Japan to Indonesia side of things,” Ogawa says. “We now have a very strong offering in Jakarta, so we are working with management in Jakarta to really promote that.”

Such international growth is important in an era when multinational firms such as Norton Rose and Allen & Overy are pushing aggressively into the Australian market and using it as a base for expansion into Asia. Ogawa is mindful of the trend. “We think that having an international strategy is going to be increasingly important because that’s where a lot of our competitors are winning in Asia ... That’s why it’s not only important to have a presence in this jurisdiction but also a credible presence that’s competitive.”

**Giving employees more choice**
Business growth aside, the establishment of the Tokyo office has a number of side benefits for Blake Dawson. The firm has recently established a junior lawyer rotation program, allowing young lawyers who are interested in Japan to work in the Tokyo office for a six-month period. That enables the firm to
cater to junior lawyers who have a passion for Japanese culture and who want some experience in that market.

The Tokyo office also helps generally on the recruitment and retention front, giving the firm additional capacity to offer international experience to lawyers who might otherwise have been tempted to join a multinational competitor. It is a happy turn of events for Ogawa, who previously worked as a junior lawyer at a Japanese firm.

“It’s really nice now, as a firm, to be able to offer those people an opportunity to stay with us and come to Japan as opposed to them going to an English or US firm.”