

## Business & Careers

# Ryan only third Canadian to take Meritas helm

Canadian settles into chair of 175-firm global legal alliance

GEOFF KIRBYSON

It's not often a lawyer can wrap himself in the flag, so Andre Ryan is taking full advantage of a rare opportunity to display the Maple Leaf.

Ryan, a commercial litigator and partner at Quebec-based BCF LLP, a firm with 155 lawyers, will assume the chairman's role with global business law firm alliance Meritas after its April 26 annual meeting.

Ryan is only the third Canadian to take on the chairman duties since Meritas was formed in 1990 and when more than 300 delegates from more than 50 countries converge on the Vancouver Convention Centre, it will represent just the third time the AGM has been held outside of the U.S.

"I'm thrilled about it, I'm humbled, I'm up for the challenge and I'm ready to get things moving," he says.

Ryan was first asked by his fellow partners to represent the firm at Meritas in 2002. As he served a term as a board member, he realized the full potential it offered in helping his firm's clients.

Perhaps the biggest threat to Meritas' alliance of 7,100 lawyers in 175 member firms in 76 countries is the increasing globalization of law firms. But Ryan believes its business plan, which enables clients of Meritas firms with international interests to connect with pre-qualified legal expertise around the world, is well positioned not only to grow, but to thrive.

Part of that growth is expected to come geographically as Ryan says certain parts of Africa that have been under the radar previ-

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**Andre Ryan**  
Meritas chairman

ously are now getting a closer look, as are some countries in Eastern Europe.

"Our presence in Central and South America is really great and we're represented in all 50 states. All the Canadian provinces are represented except New Brunswick, but we're about to make an invitation there," he said.

"We're not in the business of planting flags for the sake of planting flags. When we find a quality firm in the market where we feel there is a need for our clients, then we'll [issue] an invitation [to join Meritas]."

It's hoped further growth will come from attracting different types of lawyers to the fold, with corporate counsel at the top of the list.

"We tell them: 'When you're looking for legal representation in foreign markets, we can identify a responsive, grassroots, qualified lawyer who works with a firm that presents the kind of quality you require and expect.' And we do

that at no cost. Instead of looking in the phone book or in directories of law firms, we provide them with our own contacts," he said.

Because members firms do not compete against each other, Ryan says an environment of co-operation has been created where information is willingly and gladly exchanged.

For example, the tax lawyers from Meritas member firms advertise together and plan activities with one another.

"As a group, the Meritas tax Canada group is larger or equivalent to any existing tax group at a national firm. It also has presence in all 10 provinces," he says. "I think our business model allows firms who would otherwise consider regional mergers as a means to keep their clients the ability to remain local and independent."

On the flipside, Ryan says the biggest challenge at Meritas is getting the opportunity to sit down with general counsel and present the business model to them. Once they can meet face-to-face, he's confident they'll understand and appreciate the proposition.

"We are keeping an eye on the regionalization of law firms in certain parts of the world and on international mergers, but we think the bulk of our membership values its identity and independence and will elect to keep it."

A typical Meritas member is a mid-sized firm with deep roots in the community that serves clients with international needs. It's not an exclusive relationship, however, as firms can still refer business to non-member firms without incurring any penalty or scorn from other members. Quality is a priority, too, as not only do firms need to qualify



McLennan Ross  
(Calgary, Edmonton and Yellowknife)

Boughton Law Corporation  
(Vancouver)

Pitblado Law (Winnipeg)

Lawson Creamer (St. John)

Ottenheimer Baker (St. John's)

Wickwire Holm (Halifax)

Harrison Pensa (London)

BraceauSeller (Ottawa)

Minden Gross (Toronto)

Matheson & Murray  
(Charlottetown)

BCF (Montreal and Quebec City)

Robertson Stromberg  
(Saskatoon)

ners didn't support me, I would never be there. The firm feels it's a good investment for us to take a leadership position in this organization. There's a significant sacrifice in terms of billable hours but we have the structure to support me in the role. We wouldn't do it if we didn't think it was good for us. I like to think it's good for us but we're good for [Meritas]," he said.

Ryan says BCF is one of the most active member firms in terms of outbound referrals. Going the other way, he estimates his firm attracts "hundreds of thousands" of dollars worth of inbound referrals annually, too.

"It brings in a decent volume of business every year," he says.

There are other advantages, including a quick turnaround on courtesy advice. If Ryan has a client who is considering doing business in Peru, he can call a lawyer at a firm in Lima for an initial chat and within a few hours, provide the client with a local perspective on the legal challenges they'll be facing in the South American country.

"I find that's of significant value, especially when you're looking at business dealings in locations where you're less familiar with the business and legal environments," he says.

Ken Kallish, a partner at Minden Gross in Toronto and a former Meritas chair himself, believes Ryan will be "great" in the role. "Andre brings a unique set of strengths to the position. His foresight, engaging personality, industry knowledge and broad perspective will serve our organization well. The Canadian Meritas members are proud to see Andre become the third Canadian to lead Meritas," he says.

to get in to Meritas but they must recertify every three years.

"It's not a formality," he says.

Ryan estimates his chairman duties will take up between 20 and 25 per cent of his time, including regional and industry meetings. He wouldn't have applied for the job if he didn't have the unconditional backing of his BCF partners.

"It's a firm decision. If my part-