THE LAWYER

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Gibson Dunn: to infinity, and beyond

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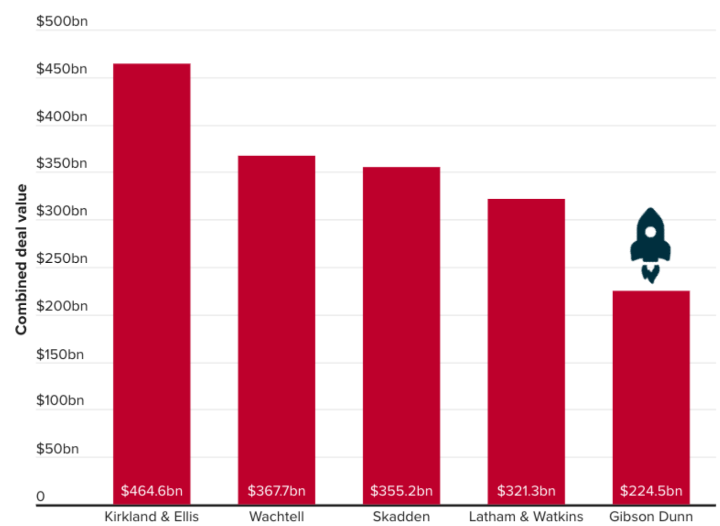
It's all go at Gibson Dunn. The firm has, of course, just pulled off an unprecedented, six-partner raid on Wachtell Lipton Rosen & Katz, including litigation co-chair Bill Savitt. But the Los Angeles-founded firm's recent evolution, from Latham & Watkins' slightly less showy or successful West Coast cousin to genuine global powerhouse, has featured a whole string of big-ticket partner hires.

Now, not every partner hire pays off, but for any firm it's great when the ROI is pretty much immediate. M&A supremo George Sampas – in star quality, the corporate equivalent of Savitt – is a great example of a lateral acquisition that bore big fruit. Sampas joined Gibson Dunn from Sullivan & Cromwell two years ago as co-chair of its M&A practice and head of cross-border M&A. He is SpaceX's lawyer. (It's hardly necessary to say much more, but we will.) This year, Sampas was one of the lawyers advising SpaceX on its mega $250bn acquisition of xAI. That's one of the biggest deals of this year, or indeed, any year. Plus, on top of the mega M&A, this year Gibson also handled the small matter of the world's largest-ever IPO, for the same client.

Gibson Dunn is now in the top five firms globally by M&A deal value



Top five firms by combined deal value; global principal advisors announced, first half 2026
Source: London Stock Exchange Group

So, something seems to be working. In the London Stock Exchange Group's 2026 half-year M&A rankings, Gibson Dunn rose from 28th place into the top five, with 122 deals totalling $224.5bn. You might say, ahem, it 'rocketed' up the charts. This is why star laterals matter: Gibson Dunn has successfully shifted itself from being viewed primarily as a litigation-led practice into one of the leading global M&A advisers, particularly on megadeals.

Firmwide chair Barbara Becker, herself a former global co-chair of M&A, made growth in Gibson Dunn's transactional practices a central strategic objective when she became chair in 2021. The firm's playbook to achieve this result is remarkably similar to several of its key competitors: invest in the core transactional practices; deepen New York; aggressively expand London (where lawyer headcount has risen by some 83 per cent since 2021); build stronger private capital relationships; and connect London, the Middle East and New York. Gibson Dunn's New York office is now ninth in *The Lawyer* New York 100, putting it within shouting distance of Skadden and Debevoise & Plimpton.

But this is all easier said than done. That Gibson Dunn is persuading these stars to join is quite the achievement. Stratospheric, even.