



Building a mothership platform, one location at a time

By John van der Luit-Drummond
Tuesday 05 May 2026



Stephan Swinkels is bullish when speaking about the importance of employment lawyers in law firms' growth strategies.

"Employment law has moved into a much more central role within corporations," he says. "It's incredible how fast things have changed. Today, our work is bet the company matters, which is integral to a company's core strategy – we are seen as key business partners."

As a key figure behind Littler's international expansion, [Swinkels'](#) career traces the evolution of employment law itself: from what some considered to be a subsidiary practice to corporate/M&A teams to a specialism that "deserves a spot at the boardroom table".

Leading Littler's global offices and a member of Littler's US board of directors since 2024, Swinkels employment law career has been, by his own admission, accidental. "I started in employment law, but it wasn't by choice," he says, recalling his first year and a half as a trainee at Baker McKenzie in Amsterdam.

Like many ambitious young lawyers in the early 2000s, he soon pivoted to corporate law – the perceived centre of gravity in elite firms. At Baker McKenzie, he immersed himself in the energy of the dot-com boom, spending years advising on complex transactions. But over time, the work lost its edge.

"Corporate law became very repetitive. It was the same private equity companies asking for the same type of contract," he says. This dissatisfaction led to an inflection point nine years into Swinkels' career when he recognised a gap in his skillset – not legal, but commercial.

"I felt very light when it came to the financial and commercial sides of negotiating a contract. I felt that the banks, the consultants, were so far ahead of us. We knew about the law, but we had very little to add from a commercial point of view. And I wanted to know more about it."

The completion of an MBA in Berlin reframed his thinking. The practice of law, he realised, was not just about legal doctrine; it was about understanding how businesses actually operate. That insight would later become central to his approach to clients and to reshaping his career.

In 2010, Swinkels was invited to help build a new international network focused exclusively on employment law. Swinkels did not hesitate, seeing potential in the idea. "When I started my career, employment law wasn't a top priority in most firms. It was important, but not a priority. Employment lawyers were also very limited on what they did – things like restructurings, hiring and firing, non-competes."

Today, that description feels almost antiquated. But Swinkels recognised the direction of travel more than a decade ago when he threw himself into the creation of what would become L&E Global – a leading alliance of employment law boutiques now comprised of more than 2,000 lawyers spread across 34 countries and six continents.

"I saw the business opportunity of international cooperation," he recalls. "We started out with six firms, and I developed the strategy, the communications, the infrastructure, the formats, the interpretation of contacts. It was an amazing time and a very rewarding period in my life."

While learning how to align independent firms across jurisdictions with shared standards, he soon recognised the limitations of the network model. "A network can add value to law firms, but it's never the same as a law firm. It's a group of independents that have something in common. Working cross-jurisdictional in a law firm is a whole different level."

Joining Littler in 2016, the opportunity was clear: take the lessons learned from L&E Global and apply them within a fully integrated global firm. "It was the logical step to go from a successful network to a real law firm," he says.

At the time, Littler's international footprint was modest, and mostly concentrated in Latin America. Today, it spans more than 100 offices and nearly 2,000 lawyers – a transformation Swinkels has helped lead primarily across Europe where it now has offices in 13 countries. "We had the platform. We just had to make it more international and start thinking global," he says.

But in the beginning, Swinkels' biggest challenge was persuading the firm's shareholders that international growth would enhance, rather than dilute, Littler's core strengths. Fortunately, it wasn't long before the value of cross-border collaboration became obvious.

"We started connecting the dots between the jurisdictions and it just worked. Because, in the end, like-minded people who love labour and employment law want to be the top of their profession. And if you put them together in a room, you will get something beautiful."

Littler's rapid global expansion has been successful thanks to its Swiss Verein structure, with knowledge management, marketing, business development, and training functions centralised but under co-branding arrangements. That strategy has changed of late with a more consistent and unified branding strategy under the "Littler" name.

Although Asia-Pacific and Central Europe remain obvious regions for further growth, Swinkels is wary of overreach and becoming a "telephone directory" of office locations. "You've seen companies that become a victim of their own success. They grow too fast and cannot deliver," he says.

Instead, he advocates a measured approach by concentrating on the jurisdictions that matter most to clients. "It's like I tell my kids: you can build a very high tower, but it will be very unstable. What's more important is that we build the foundation. Growth, for me, is much more about getting our processes aligned and meeting market demand, than adding more offices."

Equally important is maintaining quality of service – something other Swiss Verein firms have been

criticised for lacking. For Swinkels, that means selecting partner firms that are deeply embedded in their local markets. "I want us to know the judges. Know all the parties. Know the local market. That's why we market ourselves as 'local, everywhere'," he explains.

But beyond strategy and quality, Swinkels emphasises something less tangible: culture. "In the end, it is about personality and people. About cooperation and a joint vision," he says. "Employment lawyers are, generally speaking, very nice people because they deal with the human element. And connecting the dots is kind of simple when you find them. We're creating a family."

Looking ahead, Swinkels is clear about his ambition. "At the end of my career, I hope to look back and see we built a mothership platform for labour and employment law."

The future lawyer

The legal profession itself is undergoing profound change, driven, above all, by technology. But while AI threatens to automate large parts of legal work, Swinkels believes employment law is relatively resilient thanks to its human dimension which, he argues, cannot be replaced.

"You cannot negotiate a collective bargaining agreement through AI. You can't convince an employee to accept a severance payment or a mutually agreed exit. You need to sit across the table from them, understand them, and talk. AI can't do that."

And yet that does not mean Swinkels is opposed to lawyers using new AI tools. "You need to have adopted it and be working with it responsibly and effectively – everyone should be doing that by now," he says.

For Swinkels, the conversation is no longer about whether firms use AI, but how deeply it is embedded into their lawyers' day-to-day work. And, crucially, how it is shaping the next generation. "They shouldn't be afraid of AI or technology. They should embrace it – AI is not here to replace our lawyers, it's here to amplify their strengths and to help us use it to its greatest strategic advantage."

However, that may require a reframing of what junior lawyers see as their role. Rather than focusing on what tasks AI might replace, associates should be asking a different question: what they can add. "Don't just think about what AI is taking away from what you used to do – but more importantly, what you can add to it," he says. "How does that define who you are as a lawyer, and who you need to become?"

In practical terms, this means a growing emphasis on data and analysis – and knowing the right questions to ask. "Using AI is not difficult," Swinkels says. "What's challenging is knowing which questions to ask. If you ask the wrong questions, you will never fully realise its value."

This ability to refine inputs is fast becoming a core legal skill, given that AI is dramatically increasing the volume of information thrown at lawyers. "If we use AI to pull case law examples, you can easily end up with 500 cases," Swinkels notes. "The question is: how are you going to analyse that? How do you make sure you can actually use that information and most importantly, in the legal context, judgement is especially critical – everything AI produces must be carefully reviewed and verified."

But does this technological advancement mean a fundamental shift in legal training? The traditional apprenticeship model – learning by doing, under the supervision of senior lawyers – has long defined the profession. Swinkels does not see that disappearing with the advent of AI, but he does believe training methods are essential to ensure the proper and responsible use of AI.

"Lawyers are still trained on the job. When you leave law school, you basically know nothing. The law itself is already outdated the moment you leave, because it changes every day. What you do learn is how to think, how to analyse, and deal with information," he says.

"Teaching law students how to use AI tools is only in its infancy at university," he says. "So firms need to

think about how we train people with it and how it will impact the traditional law firm model.”

Law firms will also need to rethink the structure of legal careers against this backdrop, Swinkels suggests. “There may be different types of lawyers emerging. Some will focus more on content and building the case, others will be more analytical, working with data and technology. There’ll be something for everyone. But it will change. And we need to embrace that opportunity.”

The legal industry is undergoing a pivotal transformation. Beyond the rise of AI, forces such as geopolitical instability, private-equity investment, and large-scale Big Law mergers – creating unprecedented legal giants – are reshaping the profession in lasting ways. Yet Swinkels remains optimistic about the future of employment law: “We are more than only lawyers. The additional skills employment lawyers must possess make this field uniquely prepared for what lies ahead.”