

Debevoise & Plimpton

[Marty Schultz-Ackerson]

Since its inception in 1931 in New York, Debevoise & Plimpton has enjoyed a long and fruitful history that has led to its reputation as one of the most prestigious law firms in the world. Top-notch corporate and litigation departments, a stellar *pro bono* practice, and a pleasant firm culture all help to distinguish Debevoise from its competition.

Debevoise founders also boast historical pertinence outside of the legal world. Harvard alumnus Eli Whitney Debevoise, a descendant of the cotton gin inventor, and Oxford-trained William Stevenson, an Olympic gold medallist in the 1924 Paris games, formed the initial partnership. They were eventually joined by Francis Plimpton, now best known as the father of humorist-writer George Plimpton, and another Harvard graduate, Robert Page.

The firm demonstrated its powerhouse potential early on by assuming a frontline role in the bankruptcy case of “Swedish Match King” Ivan Kreuger in 1934. Kreuger had achieved a worldwide dominance of the match industry and was one of wealthiest men in the world before the NYSE crash led to his demise. The firm still represents the North American division of Swedish Match, which emerged from Kreuger’s empire, as well as such long-time clients as American Airlines, DaimlerChrysler, and Goldman Sachs.

Debevoise’s history has been marked by a slow but steady expansion, as well as perseverance through tough times. During World War II, many of the firm’s lawyers were recruited to government or military posts. Defying the pressure to downsize, Debevoise arranged a merger that allowed it to stay abreast of the market. Always ready to capitalize on new opportunities, Debevoise enlisted the help of several of American Airlines’ past lawyers when it became the company’s lead counsel in 1948.

Debevoise has established a stronghold in the areas of corporate law and litigation both in the United States and abroad. Its M&A work is particularly noteworthy, with recent highlights including Chrysler’s \$38 billion merger with Daimler-Benz and Goldman Sachs’ \$72-billion sale of an AT&T subsidiary to Comcast. The firm’s excellence in litigation shines forth in Mary Jo White, the head of the department, who returned to the firm after an eight-year stint as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York. Under her leadership, Debevoise frequently steps up to the plate in high-stakes cases. Currently, the firm is representing Tyco’s former CEO Dennis Koslowski in his white-collar defense case and a chemical manufacturer of the Agent Orange defoliant, used by the US military during the Vietnam War, in a toxic tort class action brought by Vietnamese citizens.

Approximately half of Debevoise’s work has an international focus, either by subject matter or by client, and the firm possesses an expertise in cross-border transactions, capital markets, private equity funds, and large-scale restructurings. As an example of Debevoise’s international stature, more than half of the lawyers in the London offices hold UK qualifications.

Perhaps one of the most attractive features of Debevoise is its *pro bono* practice, to which the firm reportedly devotes a tremendous five percent of all billable hours. In the *Vault Guide to the Top 100 Law Firms*, the firm once again ranked second in the “Pro Bono” category. Recently, the firm represented the Mexican Government in connec-

tion with Mexican nationals on death row in the United States. It also provided an amicus brief on behalf of gay-rights groups in the campaign against Texas’ sodomy laws, which culminated in the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence vs. Texas*.

As expected for such a high-caliber firm, getting hired at Debevoise is not easy. In addition to stellar grades from top law schools, successful candidates will also demonstrate a well-rounded background and the ability to effectively handle a sophisticated caseload. Those who make it through the selection process will not only have the opportunity to participate in comprehensive training in their field of choice, even overseas, but also to work in a rare firm culture, often hailed as one of the most collegial in the country, which cherishes the relations between associates and partners.