

‘It was great for two years, then unmitigated hell’

Having weathered the Enron fallout, led Clifford Chance and bounced from Hong Kong to Russia, Tony Williams has decided to take the advice he has given so many and recognise his sell-by date, he tells Catherine Baksi



Tony Williams will not be taking on new projects — although he will consider advisory and non-executive director roles

[Catherine Baksi](#)

Thursday January 11 2024, 12.02am, The Times

Share

Tony Williams managed one of the biggest City law firms and led the pioneering legal arm of the accountancy Arthur Andersen in a career spanning more than 40 years.

It has been a rough ride at times. When the Enron scandal led to Arthur Andersen’s demise, Williams, as managing partner of Andersen Legal and its English law firm Garretts, telephoned firms across the City to secure jobs for nearly all of its 350 lawyers and support staff, who had been left out of the rescue deal brokered with its former rival Deloitte & Touche.

“By and large the City came together quite well and we found most people homes,” Williams says, noting that his former firm, Clifford Chance, also stepped into the breach. But after winding up the UK business, Williams had no new job to go to.

He “took the summer off to recover” and then launched Jomati, a consultancy that takes its name from the first two letters of his wife and children’s names — Johannah, Mair and Tim. “It worked for Tesco, so why not for us,” quips Williams, who discovered that Jomati is also the name of a village in Burundi.

Now, after more than two decades spent giving firms the benefit of his experience, Williams is retiring at the end of March. Well, sort of — he will not be taking on new projects, but will complete current work and move to undertake advisory and non-executive director roles.

“Having advised many law firm leaders to recognise when their sell-by date is approaching, I thought I should take my own advice and step back from consulting while I still had clients wishing to instruct me,” says Williams, 67.

Unusually for the senior partner of a “magic circle” law firm, Williams, who was born in Addlestone in Surrey, was state educated, attending a local secondary modern and sixth form college. The youngest of four children, he went into the law by accident. After completing his A-levels, his mother, who had been a secretary, died and his father, a research chemist, was also unwell.

He took a gap year and worked at Turner Garrett & Co, a small law firm in Byfleet, which offered him a training contract.

Supported financially by the firm, which bought his books and secured a Law Society bursary after the death of his father, Williams studied law at Southampton University. He qualified in 1981, during a decade when the legal profession was going through a period of expansion and increased social mobility.

Williams is concerned that young people who come from backgrounds like his will find it harder to enter the profession today, despite reforms to open up wider training routes. He has launched the Jomati Foundation, a registered charity into which the firm pays 5 per cent of its fee income, to fund law school bursaries and legal education and access to justice projects.

“I’d like to see law firms doing that,” says Williams, who acknowledges that many have become increasingly committed to doing pro bono work. But he is not in favour of a levy on City law firms to help fund legal aid, as Michael Gove proposed several years ago as lord chancellor.

After qualifying, Williams was keen to get some City experience and joined Coward Chance, which in 1987 merged with Clifford Turner. He worked for a year in the real estate department before moving to corporate work.

In 1984, shortly after the UK signed the declaration for its handover, Williams went to Hong Kong to set up the firm’s corporate team and was made a partner there in 1988. Looking at the current state of the former colony, he says: “You realise how fragile freedoms that you have taken for granted are. The same police who were upholding freedoms in Hong Kong are now raiding offices and arresting people.”

He moved back to London in the early 1990s, and with the fall of the Iron Curtain got involved in central and eastern European work. After complaining that the firm was “not taking Moscow seriously enough”, he was sent to run the firm’s office there. “It was the time of the [Boris] Yeltsin chaos years, when we hoped it was the end of the Cold War and a new period of history. But by the end it was clear that the mobs were taking over.”

Williams returned to London in 1997 to take over as managing partner, and during his tenure, he sought to make its operation more “business-like”. As a result of a falling out with the senior partner over the firm’s merger in 2000 with the New

York firm Rogers & Wells, Williams left to head up the legal practice at Arthur Andersen, which was then the best known and most successful of the five audit and accountancy firms in the world.

“It was great for two years, then unmitigated hell,” he recalls. Williams was growing the pioneering multidisciplinary practice combining lawyers and accountants.

“We were building something that was quite exciting. It was going the right way. We were the ninth largest global law firm by revenue in 2001 — and gone in 2002”. The speed of Arthur Andersen’s collapse, after its role as chief auditor to the bankrupt US energy trading group Enron, was horrible, says Williams.

Williams, who qualified when work was done on manual typewriters and remembers “the excitement when a telex machine was installed,” says that technology has transformed the way that lawyers work. But he insists: “Fundamentally, what clients are buying from lawyers — their quality of advice, understanding and empathy and their ability to find solutions and a way forward — are still what people pay for, even if it’s dressed up in different ways”.

Having had little time to relax during his career, Williams, who lives in the South Downs and has four grandchildren, is looking forward to spending time with his family. A keen cricket fan, he is also looking forward to attending more matches and hopefully seeing some England victories.