

Latham led the pack for U.S. M&A value in 2020, surpassing Wachtell

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Latham & Watkins was 2020's top U.S. dealmaker, based on the value of announced transactions the firm advised on that had any U.S. involvement, passing perennial champ Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen & Katz, new Refinitiv data shows. In 2019, Latham hadn't even cracked the top 10 in that category.

Latham was also one of few firms to increase its total deal value in 2020, a year marred by the coronavirus pandemic, compared to 2019. It advised on nearly \$360 billion in deals announced in 2020 that had any U.S. involvement, compared to less than \$285 billion in 2019, according to reports market data provider Refinitiv shared with Reuters on Tuesday.

Latham's leap in rankings comes after about four years of investment in its M&A practice, that group's co-chairman Michael Dillard said Tuesday. Its strategy included adding lawyers and other professionals in markets like New York, London and San Francisco's Bay Area, with a focus on technology, pharmaceuticals and life sciences, industries that flourished despite the pandemic.

"Frankly, 2020 was the culmination of that. And so we're pretty proud of it," Dillard said.

This year Latham has advised: Nvidia Corp on its deal to buy chip designer Arm Ltd from SoftBank Group Corp for as much as \$40 billion; Advanced Micro Devices Inc on its \$35 billion all-stock bid for Xilinx Inc; and Slack Technologies Inc on its deal to be acquired by Salesforce.com Inc for \$27.7 billion.

Wachtell was 2020's second-highest-ranked firm based on the value of transactions it worked on that were announced in 2020 and had any U.S. involvement. It advised on about \$340 billion of such deals in 2020 compared to over well over \$600 billion in 2019, Refinitiv reports show.

According to Refinitiv's ranking of firms advising a U.S. merger target in announced transactions, Wachtell kept its No. 1 spot, with \$280.5 billion in deals. Latham nearly matched that figure, however, earning second rank – up from 12th in 2019 – with \$276 billion in deals.

A Wachtell representative did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Despite leading in U.S. deal value, Wachtell and Latham trailed behind Kirkland & Ellis and Goodwin Procter on deal volume in 2020, based on transactions with any U.S. involvement. Kirkland, the highest grossing U.S. law firm, advised on about 650 U.S. deals while life sciences favorite Goodwin advised on about 600, data shows.

A representative for Kirkland did not immediately provide comment. In a statement, Goodwin chair Rob Insolia attributed the firm's 2020 deal volume to the "convergence of capital and innovation across the technology, life sciences, private equity, financial services, and real estate industries."

"Any U.S. involvement" league tables include deals where the target, acquirer, or either ultimate parent are domiciled in the United States, according to Refinitiv. They also include the nation of the seller and seller ultimate parent on privately negotiated stake purchases.

Davis Polk & Wardwell nabbed the global top M&A spot based on announced transaction value in 2020, Refinitiv data shows. Goodwin was the top-ranked firm based on global announced deal volume.

M&A deals overall were down 21% at \$2.2 trillion in the first nine months of 2020, with U.S. transactions coming in at \$800 billion, a 43% slump from the same period last year, according to Refinitiv.

They bounced back in the summer, and deal frenzy in September led to a record third quarter with more than \$1 trillion worth of transactions around the world, Refinitiv data shows.

Over all of 2020, worldwide M&A activity totaled \$3.6 trillion, a year-over-year decrease of 5%, according to Refinitiv.

UPDATE: This story has been updated to add comment from Goodwin Procter and to add full-year data on worldwide M&A activity.



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