



**There are values in life that come and go, and there are those that stay with you for a lifetime. For Igor Shevchenko the law firm is an ever-being priority. Having committed himself to this ploy at a very young age he has bartered it neither for a family comfort nor for a so popular at this time political career.**

There are roughly three hundred law firms in Ukraine today. Naturally, this large number encourages competition, so being among the leaders is not a simple matter. According to a rating conducted in 2002 by the "Yurydychna Praktyka" ("Legal Practice") industry newspaper, Shevchenko Didkovskiy & Partners place first in earnings, second in productivity and third overall among Ukraine's leading law firms. How could this be if the firm's founders were buried in their books at university a mere six years ago, and the leading partner was

serious dream — to become an international lawyer. But his desire to be admitted to the Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University's international law department was as great as the chance that a youth from a simple Soviet family could actually be admitted was tiny. This idea was even supported by hiring tutors, but the youth's all-consuming track and field activities for a time took priority. Igor decided to enter the Institute of Physical Culture, where he continued to train, eventually (in 1989) making the USSR Junior Track and Field Team.

The rest of Igor Shevchenko's life

International Relations. But all this did not happen in one fell swoop: to reach his fabled goal Igor faced two interviews that turned out to be monumental in his life — an English language interview as well as a face to face with the institute's leaders. As things turned out, both meetings turned out unusually, and unusually well. For all but our hero, these conversations invariably commenced with telling one's own story, but not for Igor. He had turned things on their head. The Institute's administration had learned of his fairly successful athletic career to wit and his equally successful career of transfers from university to university. Their first inquiry boiled down to the following: "And where do you plan on transferring to next?" The reply was immediate and direct: "Well, the only place I could transfer to from here would have to be Harvard." Needless to say the director smiled and stated "Well, he's our kind of student!"

The burning desire to become an international lawyer made a most solid impression and put an end to any additional questions that may have been in the interview pipeline.

**"Success is putting to the best possible use all the opportunities we have in our possession"**

Shevchenko entered the legal community immediately after leaving the Institute of Physical Culture, having studied there for two years. Fate lead him to Oleksandr Oleksandrovych Chaliy, today the State Secretary on European Integration at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, and at that time the top dog at the Legis law firm. He was the individual who passed along to Igor his first professional legal skills, including the ability to think logically, to analyze situations, conduct negotiations, deal with foreign clients and prepare bills. One time, and this was before Igor had begun studying at the Law department, Chaliy had asked Shevchenko: "Do

# Law Firm As an Art

prophesied a great athletic career some ten years ago? Why did he change direction by so many degrees? And how on earth did he manage to rise so quickly in the legal community — was this fortune or the fruits of persistent labors? Taking into account that everyone was started from scratch, one has to wonder just where the secret lies. We did our best to find out more about what fate has given Shevchenko Didkovskiy & Partners, a firm about which so far we know only that they have very little time for journalists and all the time in the world for their clients.

**"You must set great goals before yourself... so as not to miss the target"**

A long time ago, fifteen years in fact, a sixteen year old boy dreamt a

began to remind one of a winding paths in a tropical forest. First came disenchantment with major sports. It turns out that in order to succeed in the big leagues, one needed to support one's training with chemical supplements, which more than overtaxed one's system and did nothing good for one's health. Igor's unwillingness to accept this state of affairs brought him back to the idea of pursuing jurisprudence. And since he could not simply don the robe of a law school graduate right off the figurative athletic runway, Igor decided to approach his goal gradually. First he switched to the Shevchenko University History department, and after a year of academic success there, he transferred to the Law Department. Finally, with some lucky happenstance, he moved to the newly created (at the time) Institute of

you really want to become a lawyer or is this just your kow tow to the fad of the day?" Igor kept his thoughts to himself that day and decided to prove what he wanted through actions rather than words. He put in two years of hard work, and the effort paid off as he gained new knowledge at the Institute of International Relations. This in turn stoked his burning desire to put all this knowledge to good practical use. Olga Ihorivna Lukashuk, instructor of international law, took note of this sense of purpose, and assisted Igor in finding work at Frishberg & Partners, one of very few firms working in Ukraine according to a close semblance to Western standards. In working there Igor did not stop at obtaining professional experience — he went further in absorbing progressive methods and various tricks of the trade attendant to legal practice, including Alex Frishberg's virtuoso ability to attract clients, and organize and manage the thousand details that go into running a law office on a daily basis. But even this was soon not enough for him, as he wanted to move forward and learn

ever more. And life gave him that chance, that opportunity, through practice with the tough but fair Vasyl Ivanovych Kysil, a wonderful professional and a sterling individual. The esteemed professor and senior partner at Vasyl Kysil & Partners assisted all his students in obtaining practical legal work experience. However his assistance was rather unconventional, insofar as it consisted of his handing out thick folders and sheaves of client documents to students, explaining the assignment at hand and setting a deadline. And all this without a workplace much less a workstation, without any methodological support or personal assistance. A deadline was a deadline. One worked days and night, one searched and hunted to complete this serious and significant practical assignments of Vasyl Ivanovych on time.

### "That was the start of their show"

Working with Kysil, Shevchenko got to know another seeker of knowledge and experience — his groupmate Oleksiy Didkovskiy. And in 1995,

after a year's incessantly hard work, Vasyl Ivanovych inspired the boys to set up their own firm. It all started with the search for an office near Kysil's, to facilitate cooperation with him and due to the need to occasionally run by for a bit of advice. Every day after classes the duo, dressed in stylish black and white jackets, would knock on all office doors in the neighborhood of the Republican Stadium. Talking with the directors of various organizations, they would tell the endearing tale of two young lawyers' dream of starting their own firm, which for some reason no one wanted to lend assistance to... They even dropped by the Society for the Deaf, where they negotiated with the director through an interpreter, yet even there they were turned down. Looking back and laughing, the two came to call their maneuvers "The Two on the Corner Show", as a popular TV show hosted by Igor Uholnikov was known at that time. That was the beginning of their show, which continues to this day. A bit of time passed and their first office found them on its own. A company



Clients get maximum attention!

owned by Igor and Oleksiy's friends, went bottom up and a smart and well equipped little office in the Leningrad Hotel, on Shevchenko Boulevard, was waiting for them. It is there that in October 1995 they began their independent legal practice. The first months were exceedingly difficult, what with major expenses and a paucity of clients. Nonetheless, thanks to the moral and financial support of their parents and Vasyl Ivanovych Kysil, who would send clients their way from time to time, the two managed to stay afloat, believing in success and working hard to achieve it.

Naturally, another crisis was before them: in 1996, just as their income had begun surpassing expenses, their rent was suddenly doubled, all this to the point where it became impossible to pay it. And the ages old question "To be or not to be?" presented its ugly grimace before them. Do they continue working or do they wind things up? For as if to spite them, both had at that time very handsome offers for individual professional development elsewhere. And here, as always, came Igor's father to the rescue with an opportunity to rent an office right across the street on Pushkinska at a reasonable price. Yet even this new location was not all it cracked up to be at first. The issue of continued operations hung in the air for quite some time thereafter and until that May evening when the partners sat down for a serious talk on where they were headed and what to do. In the end they decided not to call it quits and to pull it all out, redoubling their efforts. And they were not mistaken as Fortune smiled down upon them.

A few days later Igor learned he had won a Muskie Graduate Fellowship to attend to University of Minnesota School of Law courtesy of the United States Government and American taxpayers. On the one hand this was phenomenal news, because new opportunities could be harvested this way, not to speak of the personal professional benefits to Igor. On the

**Shevchenko sees the key to success in the legal business as lying in client service, which can only be achieved through conscientious and coordinate efforts of the entire office team, as well as through individual professionalism, creative approaches, flexibility in decision-making and on-going professional development.**

other hand this would leave Oleksiy almost alone to face all possible problems one and one in a young and still rather weak firm. Nonetheless this was a golden opportunity not to be missed. They finally decided Didkovskiy would try to steer the firm clear of shoals and rocks in Ukraine while Shevchenko busied himself with his studies and business networking in the US. With time Shevchenko ended up sleeping in America on couches in the university library at nights, and sitting up until morning buried in books, while Didkovskiy spent many a night at the office in Kyiv. And come vacation time, as other students traveled to Florida and Disney World, Igor wrote letter upon letter to top notch law firms in search of an appropriate internship. He had written and dispatched over 100 such letters and received only three invitations, which gave him if not a 100 percent, then at least a very good opportunity to do what he had set out to do.

### **Making the most of an opportunity**

Coudert Brothers, Steptoe & Johnson and Covington & Burling — three megafirms — gave Igor the chance of a lifetime. He was faced with the question of choosing the right firm to take 100 percent advantage of the opportunity presented. He could not do it by himself, and thus

asked U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, America's first female member of that vaunted institution. For Justice O'Connor this was a no brainer. She immediately replied "If I were you, the first thing I would do after walking out of the Supreme Court Building, would be to call Coudert Brothers and take their offer, before they have had a chance to reconsider. Igor followed her advice and did not regret it.

After successfully completing the University of Minnesota Law School in May 1997, Igor arrived in New York at the invitation of Coudert Brothers and began preparing for the New York State Bar Exam. The preparations for this exam, as well as the exam itself, were the most difficult things he had undertaken in his entire student life. After all some 25 percent of all American law school graduates, native English speakers, do not pass this test, even after three or four attempts. Right before the examination Igor's colleagues at Coudert Brothers sought to make him relax. "Don't get nervous, nothing terrible will happen, even if you don't pass this one, you will still be an attorney of renown. Few foreigners pass this test." But Shevchenko would not have been true to himself if he had not proved that Ukrainians are an intelligent nation. And as it turned out, after his successfully passing the New York State Bar Exam, the attitude at Coudert Brothers towards Ukrainians as professionals changed fundamentally.

### **Sacrifice in the name of the firm**

Both partners walked the white path of success in 1997. Oleksiy had also won a Muskie Fellowship that would have allowed him to study at the University of Michigan, one of the finest law schools in the U.S. Yet again came up the dilemma of what to do. Yet another durability test for the firm. If Oleksiy heads to America, the firm disintegrates, and if he stays, he misses the opportunity to gain a



**Oleksiy Didkovskiy:**  
optimism —  
the key principle in work

Western education free of charge. Or Shevchenko would have had to have cut short his internship at Coudert Brothers and return home, which would have put a tremendous dent in the firm's plans to develop a business relationship with a very serious firm indeed. Their firm's fate was in Oleksiy's hands, and he made a very difficult decision that turned out, later on, to have been fully justified: he said "Thanks but no thanks" to the graduate study and tells Igor of this only post factum. "I decided to stay at home, despite the fact that everyone called me an oaf for throwing fifty thousand dollars to the wind." Oleksiy remained in Ukraine to do everyday business, while Igor obtained critical experience and contacts in New York, and thereupon returned to Kyiv and continued practice with his partner. Oleksiy sacrificed his personal comforts and took a great risk, since no one could say what the future held. At that time all they had were dreams and hopes bolstered by faith, although, dear reader, you will agree that even the first two went far under the circumstances.

New York had a nice surprise for Igor. Besides the tremendous experience he obtained there, Igor's internship resulted in the establishment of a formal relationship between Coudert Brothers and Shevchenko Didkovskiy

& Partners in Kyiv. Their first joint project was the purchase by the Norwegian telecommunications powerhouse Telenor of a large number of shares in the Ukrainian company Kyivstar. Shevchenko was still in New-York as Oleksiy began working on this major project with Coudert Brothers attorneys.

At years end Igor returned to Ukraine, which he calls "My favorite country, my Fatherland. Wherever I might be, no matter how wonderful the place, I always feel that country tugging me home." Now again Shevchenko and Didkovskiy were working together, with new opportunities that allowed them to redouble their efforts to become successful. Other companies began recognizing their record and new clients appeared without any advertising whatsoever. They became known and renowned for their straight shooting performance.

### The school of success

"Demanding but fair, as you work with him you feel that nothing is unachievable in this life," say Igor's staff. They come to the firm as if to a school of success, from which it is impossible to graduate.

Shevchenko sees the key to success in the legal business as lying in

client service, which can only be achieved through conscientious and coordinate efforts of the entire office team. Individual professionalism, creative approaches, flexibility in decision-making and ongoing professional development fit right in as well.

How does one achieve this? Igor Shevchenko follows Eastern management traditions, based largely on the psychological laws of human relations, what the Chinese call the "art of the heart." The team built by Shevchenko and Didkovskiy is held together by this kind of glue. In the meantime, the partners have borrowed the best that the Anglo-American tradition has to offer in the basics of organizing and managing a law firm, in particular a team based approach that focuses everyone on working towards a common goal.

Igor Shevchenko believes strongly that a law firm is a discrete system, which can function effectively and develop only on the condition that all its components are developing harmoniously, and that means that there must be a pool of committed clients, highly professional staff, balanced finances, creative marketing, a captivating team social life and the like. And building this kind of system is an art unto itself that a successful leader must master for himself. The leader, as an artist, has a variety of instruments and materials that he uses, as he might a brush and paints, to create a painting, which is the firm itself. And in nearly all cases the range of instruments is identical. Yet some end up painting masterpieces, some merely fine works of art, while others come up with nothing worth mentioning. It appears that Igor Shevchenko knows how to create a masterpiece, on which he continues to work with Oleksiy Didkovskiy and the entire team. The masterpiece is being created for their clients. These most important and worthiest of people for any law firm include, in the case of SDP, Telenor Mobile Communications, with which the firm has been working since 1997; the most principled client Elite Ukraine;

ING Bank Ukraine; Citibank Ukraine; Bank Austria; Ukrsibbank; Austrian Airlines; Aerosvit; Lukoil; NTV Plus; Roksolana; Leskal; Kraft Foods International; Philip Morris; the European Business Association; and many others.

Igor Shevchenko does not hide the fact that client trust is the firm's foremost accomplishment. Since the majority of their clients are foreign companies, it was no small task to earn their trust, which was accomplished through understanding the mentality of their top managers and representatives in Ukraine, coupled with strict adherence to standards and quality that they are used to in the West, and enhanced by the ability to explain the nuances of Ukrainian law and business practices in a comprehensible and client-friendly fashion. It is here that the study and internship abroad helped Igor greatly. Each client, regardless of the volume of work performed and the size of the retainer, is a VIP. Clients recognize, value and reward this approach through generous remuneration.

### Dreams come true

Today Igor Shevchenko carries a great number of responsibilities apart from the practice of law per se, and namely managing the firm and its substantial staff. Here we find administrative matters, finances, human resources matters, professional training and staff development, marketing strategy, and many other items that need to be addressed to

assure the firm's harmonious development. Every week there are legal English courses on site, while regular specialized legal training courses, expert seminars, and conference participation both at home and abroad, all round out the equation. These are all additional evidence that Shevchenko and Didkovskiy care about their team, giving their colleagues and employees unique professional growth opportunities.

Igor Shevchenko shared the secret behind recruiting younger staff for the firm: "In evaluating a candidate for the position of Junior Associate, we first look not at his or her practical experience, but rather at the ability to think logically and creatively, to analyze problems and craft solutions, all the while expressing his or her arguments comprehensibly and laconically, be they verbal or written. We also take note of initiative, a desire to learn and a readiness to work according to our methods and standards."

"Ten years ago I wrote up a plan of what I wanted to achieve, something akin to a script of my life for the coming years." Recently I came across a small piece of paper, on which I had laid out my nearest-term goals. You won't believe how surprised I was when I understood that

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plan had already been implemented. In fact I have never told anyone about this before (he smiles). But we are still far removed from the level at which I want to see our firm.

The precise nature of the level Igor Shevchenko had in mind for his firm will remain a mystery for us. It is most likely that we will never learn the essence of this great secret. But we can celebrate the fact that we at least have a chance to observe from the sidelines as a true masterpiece is being created before our very eyes.

