

Surging law firm extends CEO's contract until 2033

.....
Janek Drevikovsky

Adrian Tembel commutes from Adelaide to Sydney every week, chairs the South Australian Productivity Commission and runs a law firm that boasts \$400 million in revenue and more than 150 partners.

No wonder he approaches work like “an Olympic athlete”. The Thomsons chief executive partner says he follows a strict routine of “no alcohol, good food, fitness, and being a really serious, boring person basically”.

But in the athletics of law firm life, Tembel's discipline isn't the 100-metre sprint. His career at the top is marathon-length, beginning in 2009 when what was then Thomson Geer appointed him chief executive partner.

Already, more than 17 years on, Tembel is one of the longest-serving law firm bosses in modern Australia. And now, the firm has decided it likes Tembel so much that it's extended his contract until 2033.

By then, he will have been on top for

25 years – a similar length of tenure to forces of nature such as Juan Martinez, the man who turned HWLE into a profit machine, and not that far behind Danny Gilbert, who was Gilbert + Tobin's managing partner for 34 years.

For Thomsons, the decision was straightforward: “Stability – certainty – with Adrian at the helm have allowed us to achieve the success we have,” explains fellow South Australian and chairwoman Loretta Reynolds.

Under Tembel's watch, the firm has grown from two offices generating less than \$50 million revenue into a nationally competitive player, with six offices and about nine times the revenue.

“We really want to keep that trajectory and the stability going for another seven years,” says Reynolds.

Tembel agrees that it takes long-lived leadership to remake a law firm.

“If you're a mature law firm, if you're wanting to maintain status quo, then rolling managing partner roles that are popularity contests every few years, that's probably okay,” he says.



Thomsons has extended Adrian Tembel's contract until 2033. PHOTO: DAN PELED

“But if you want to transform, you need stability. And you've got to link it with ambition.”

Tembel has worked to attract talent – for example in media law, or in government work, where Thomsons is a leader. He has also led the firm's recent restructure, where lower-margin, process-driven work was spun out into a separate entity called Faculti.

It's helped that Tembel and Reynolds, who has served an even longer

term since 2007, are a “strong team”, as the chairwoman puts it. Ambition for the next seven years is clearly high, but does it extend all the way to breaking into the “top tier”?

“I'm not going to put a badge on it,” says Tembel. “But we want to operate at the highest level in Australian law in all parts of the firm. Currently, it's maybe half of the firm.”

When 2033 comes around, will he go again? He says it's “too far ahead to tell”.