

A BUSINESS-MINDED LAWYER IS HARD TO FIND

Posted on 18/06/2019



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When searching for external advisers, clients are commonly seeking law firms that are able to adopt a business-focused approach, but such lawyers are often in short supply, says Casais Group's Manuel Luís Gonçalves



Finding lawyers that have a 'business-minded' approach is a preoccupation of many in-house lawyers. Manuel Luís Gonçalves, head of legal at Portugal-headquartered construction business Casais Group is no exception. "It's sometimes difficult to find lawyers that look at legal issues from a business, or economic, perspective – external lawyers sometimes don't have the knowledge of the business," he says. As a result, "bridging the gap" between the specialisation of external lawyers and the business acumen on Casais Group's three-lawyer in-house legal department is one of Gonçalves' key challenges and a

major priority. Casais Group operates in 16 countries and consequently, as Gonçalves describes it, "we are operating in many markets and this means there is a lot of legal risk to manage as we have to adapt to all the countries".

BRAND NEW CONCEPT

With regard to the structure of the in-house legal team at Casais Group, the members of the team are assigned different responsibilities. Gonçalves' remit is administrative, international and executive committee issues, while other colleagues are responsible for litigation and employment matters, as well as commercial tenders. Gonçalves' has spent 16 years at Casais Group, when he joined back in 2003, he says "the concept of a legal department didn't exist". Like many businesses, Casais Group suffered during the period of the economic crisis of 2008-12, Gonçalves' says. Prior to the crisis the in-house legal department had one part-time lawyer and one trainee, but post-crisis the firm established a new legal team with two senior lawyers, which has since increased to three. Gonçalves says that Casais Group – which has an annual turnover of approximately €500 million – works with five or six law firms. They are believed to include Gómez-Acebo & Pombo, Uría Menéndez, PLMJ, Vieira de Almeida and Campos Ferreira, Sá Carneiro & Associados. Casais often uses external firms when it is entering partnership agreements with other businesses, or if it is involved in highvalue litigation and wants to "mitigate the risk", according to Gonçalves. What is Casais' strategy when selecting external law firms? "We prefer bigger firms for issues like labour and litigation, for the rest, we use local firms," Gonçalves says. He adds: "When I choose a law firm, normally I don't choose based on a brand, instead I identify the qualities of the individual lawyer."

What qualities does Casais Group look for in its external lawyers? Gonçalves highlights industry knowledge, specialisation, in depth knowledge of the company, and good risk management as top priorities. He adds: "Sometimes I will choose a firm based on reputation – for example, if they have a high level of specialisation in the capital markets."

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