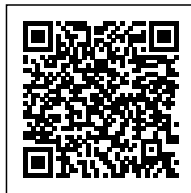


BRUSSELS - MORE THAN A LEGAL CENTRE - SJ BERWIN

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Clients should understand that a credible Brussels connection can offer much more than merely a route for solving legal issues, says Ramón García-Gallardo, managing partner of the Brussels office of SJ Berwin and Head of its Spanish Competition Practice.

A Brussels presence is psychologically important for both law firms and clients as it not only gives proximity to European Commission (EC) officers and decisionmakers, but it also offers the ability to develop a much fuller practice and understanding of the European Union (EU) legislative process, believes Ramón García-Gallardo, managing partner of the Brussels office of SJ Berwin.

'Brussels is clearly the legal and regulatory centre for EU and competition issues, and a permanent office here also helps with your credibility, the ability to network and to develop deeper levels of specialisation.'

The result he says is that an office here is thus able to offer a wider service to clients. In contrast to

when he first arrived in Brussels, in 1989, his work has expanded significantly beyond its initial Iberian focus, and the office now includes lawyers qualified in different jurisdictions such as Spain, Portugal, UK France, Belgium and Brazil.

'An emphasis on languages is important to be able to get closer to your clients, but for people with a long-term perspective it helps also to be able to look beyond the legal issues, to know how the EC and other institutions such as the European Parliament operate and to understand the very many different levels of decision-making.'

Garcia-Gallardo also believes that clients now want more than singular competition advice.

'We see a demand for specific expertise. Clients now want to know how EU or competition law interacts, for example, with procurement rules or trade law, or how different national regulators interact with the EC on contentious issues such as cartels and leniency.'

The trade arena is another area in which he sees increasing demand, while the economic crisis is also prompting client concerns around issues such as anti-dumping, and what may be the impact of some of the market distortions that are resulting from government interventions.

Lobbying

A further area of emphasis, says Garcia- Gallardo, derives from clients increasing interest in establishing a better understanding of how EU legislation is constructed, and how they might be able to voice their opinions and concerns to rule-makers.

Spanish multinationals such as Telefónica and Banco Santander, he notes, have both recently re-launched Brussels-based public affairs offices.

'Spanish companies have traditionally not been so involved or concerned with understanding the process, and so had little or no input in helping to shape or guide the regulatory process. A number of companies clearly now feel however that it is important to establish a link, to demonstrate that they are interested in understanding how things work and to get their views heard.'

There is also more emphasis within the EU institutions on making the decision-making process less opaque, he says.



Miguel Zaldivar

'In Spain, lobbying activity has not usually fallen within the remit of lawyers, but ultimately what is important is to understand the decision-making process – where the issues are generated and debated. A good lawyer will already understand the interaction of the EC, the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, who sits on what committees and how they interact.'

The most important issue for businesses looking to make an impact is however to take a long-term approach, says Garcia-Gallardo.

'You have to earn the respect of the relevant bodies and to operate in the required way, to present the relevant credibility in order to offer a view on a specific proposal.

Different businesses will have different regulatory focuses but it is important to be available when an issue arises, to meet the relevant EC Officer or MEP.'

With over 20 years direct experience in the local legal market, and as head of SJ Berwin's Spanish Competition Practice, he continues to emphasise the significance of a Brussels presence for his firm. 'The EU and competition world is now based here. For international clients that want knowledge, specialisation and networks there is clearly much more that can be achieved than by being in

Madrid or Lisbon.'