

ECIJA ENTERS PORTUGUESE MARKET WITH ANTAS DA CUNHA MERGER - ANTAS DA CUNHA ECIJA

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Firms with 'shared vision' link-up as Spanish clients grow operations in Portugal, while imminent introduction of General Data Protection Regulation promises significant opportunities



Specialist technology, media and telecommunications law firm Ecija has launched in the Portuguese market via a merger with Lisbon-headquartered firm Antas da Cunha.

Spain-based Ecija has taken the step with a view to establishing itself as an Iberian firm due to the demands of its clients, which are increasingly expanding their businesses in Portugal. Ecija founder and CEO Hugo Ecija says: "The Portuguese market has always been a natural aspiration. Now that we are consolidated in the top ten Spanish law firms, it was also time to start our growth as an

Iberian firm, motivated also by the needs of our clients, who are increasingly operating in Portugal.”

African markets

Ecija adds that the firm's new Portuguese operation would help it to generate business in African markets.

“Our new headquarters in this market also provide access to other Portuguese-speaking countries and the emerging economies of the African continent,” he explains. Ecija adds that the merger was a relatively straightforward process. “It has been a relatively simple move due to the shared values and vision of both firms – Antas da Cunha is an innovative and client-oriented firm with great experience and recognition.”

Explaining the reasons behind the link-up with Antas da Cunha, Ecija says the Portuguese firm has experienced “phenomenal organic growth” since it was founded by managing partner Fernando Antas da Cunha in 2015. In the last two years, the firm has now reached a total of 40 lawyers, all of whom are now joining Ecija, which will operate in the Portuguese market under the name Antas da Cunha Ecija.

Growing quickly

The merger means Ecija now has 35 partners and more than 180 professionals in offices in Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Miami, Santiago de Chile and Lisbon. In other jurisdictions, the firm will operate as the sole Spanish member of the Meritas legal network, which has 7000 lawyers in more than 70 countries around the world.

Fernando Antas da Cunha, managing partner of Antas da Cunha Ecija, says one of the key drivers behind the decision to merge was the imminent introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). “The firm [Antas da Cunha] has grown very quickly during our first two years and we weren't in the market to merge with an international firm,” he explains. “I had always assumed we would remain independent – however, the opportunity to start discussions with Ecija happened organically and we are delighted to bring their expertise in the area of TMT to the Portuguese market.”

Leading Iberian firm?

Antas da Cunha says that, given GDPR is coming into force next year, there is huge potential for law firms in Portugal. “With GDPR less than one year away and the increasing importance of data privacy in today's world, we strongly believe there is a big opportunity for us to capitalise in Portugal,” he remarks. “We are now facing the big challenge of creating a leading Iberian firm – having the trajectory, know-how and market recognition of Ecija in the TMT area will undoubtedly make us a very relevant player in the Portuguese market.”

Ecija has established itself as a leading firm in Spain in the areas of information technology, data protection and intellectual property, the firm's founder argues. “We have consolidated as the best firm in these practice areas in Spain and for that reason we believed it necessary to have a firm in the Portuguese market that brings together expertise, market recognition and such an important team of qualified professionals with full dedication to some of the most innovative areas of law,” Ecija says. “For example, in 2018 we are facing, from the point of view of data protection, a great challenge in the form of the adaptation of large companies to the new GDPR – for the success of each project, it is essential to apply a consolidated methodology and rely on professionals dedicated exclusively to the matter, which is unthinkable for small law firms.”

Cross-selling is fundamental

Fernando Antas da Cunha says the GDPR has the potential to open up new markets for law firms in other areas. “Without doubt the entry into force of the GDPR is a great opportunity for the development in Portugal of less traditional areas of law such as technology or data protection, and



for us it is a great advantage to count on the expertise of Ecija in such innovative projects that require absolute mastery of the subject," he explains. "In this merger, and with the short term goal of becoming a top player in the Portuguese market, cross-selling between the different offices and practice areas is fundamental."

Antas da Cunha adds that Portuguese clients are increasingly demanding legal advice related to their operations in Spain, and vice versa. "During the first months of discussions with Ecija, numerous opportunities opened up that confirmed this need on the part of clients and reaffirmed the idea of combining the expertise and recognition of Ecija to the multidisciplinary service we are offering in Lisbon."

Not easy to find merger partner

Meanwhile, Ecija says that it can be difficult for law firms to find the ideal merger partner. "Before announcing our entry into the Portuguese market, we communicated the news with some of our most important clients with a presence in both countries, and months ago we began to scope projects in Portugal, which were shared with some other potential clients who have already become new clients of the firm," he says. "It is not easy to find law firms with so many similarities in their professional management, corporate culture and customer-focus. We wanted to offer the same multidisciplinary service that our clients find in Spain and in Portugal. Offering innovative solutions and a 'total business approach' are the keys to the value added in our service, and we have also found them in Antas da Cunha."

Antas da Cunha Ecija has eight partners and nearly 40 lawyers in Lisbon, but this is "only the beginning", according to Antas da Cunha. He adds: "We bet on the growth of the firm in the short term and as a step prior to entering new markets and sectors where Ecija is a leading player, including: new technologies, smart cities, blockchain, cryptocurrencies, digital transformation, startups and entrepreneurship, the sharing economy, cybersecurity and new payment methods."

Full-time secondments

Ecija says that his firm's non-hierarchical approach to law firm management differentiates it from some of its rivals. "We ensure visibility for our lawyers, not taking into account the hierarchies as in other traditional firms," he explains. "We are looking for true passionate professionals, with international academic or professional backgrounds and enthusiasm for technology." Keeping up to date with developments in the sector is vital, according to Ecija. "In the TMT sector, it is imperative to be constantly updated, and this occurs naturally if the aforementioned requirements are met – we strongly emphasise that our professionals must get to know in depth the sectors in which they will mostly work." He adds: "For example, in the area of technology, our lawyers do not only manage all the legislation involving the intellectual property of software, but many of them are used to developing software – we combine the projects in such a way that those who participate in them know the client perfectly, and this often includes a full-time secondment with the client."