

# HITTING THE TOP TWICE - BAKER & MCKENZIE

*Posted on 24/10/2013*



Category: [Uncategorized](#)



**Following the hiring of José María Alonso to head Baker & McKenzie's Madrid office's dispute resolution team in March 2012, this year sees the former Managing Partner (MP) of Garrigues elected to lead the Madrid office.**

He is the first lawyer to have held the MP role in two of Spain's leading law firms – something that took many by surprise, Alonso included. "I never expected to be where I am today, especially at my age," he jokes.

Global law firm Baker & McKenzie has more than 4,000 lawyers in 74 offices worldwide, and was one of the first international firms to have a presence in Spain, landing in Madrid in 1965.

The firm's offices in Madrid and Barcelona now house over 200 lawyers combined, and earlier this year, Madrid was the scene of this 'first' in Spanish history.

## **The beginning**

Alonso didn't intend to practice law – he wanted to be a diplomat. "But I had a great professor, Luis Díez Picazo, who asked me to join his law firm while I was at University, and I couldn't say no!" He

began in litigation and loved it right from the start – and so ended his plans of becoming a diplomat. He then joined the Garrigues' litigation department in 1981, became Head of the practice in 1982 at aged 28, and was MP from 2000 until 2009, when he stepped down due to the mandatory retirement age of 56.

"In the world of auditors, it is common practice to retire at 56, and while many UK law firms have this same rule it is not necessarily something I agree with."

He tried to continue in Garrigues as Of-Counsel but couldn't find his "place" at the firm, and as the offers started coming in from competitors, he finally decided to join Baker & McKenzie.

Not such an easy decision to make, he says. "It was extremely difficult, and for a while I didn't have the courage to leave. But while I had the respect of my colleagues, I needed a voice," he explains. Something he has now found again at Baker & McKenzie.

Some question his decision to move from a domestic to an international firm as a wish not to join one of the domestic competitors. But Alonso says that to convince himself to leave somewhere he had helped to build meant looking for a different challenge.

"All my life, I've had a very international mind, and that's what prompted my move," he explains. "To me, Baker & McKenzie has the most important network in the world, I had some good friends there, and I was offered the opportunity to expand the existing litigation practice."

### **Taking the lead... again**

What Alonso loves about litigation is the idea of competing against someone – the other party's lawyer – who may be better than you. It's the combination of civil, commercial, and procedural law, with a dose of strategy, that makes it the most complete way of practicing as a lawyer, he believes. "Of course, it is probably the toughest way of practicing law, because at the end of the day the decision rests with the judge – and you may not like what they have to say."

Alonso has always had an inclination to become a judge himself. Sitting as an arbitrator, as he often does, is a way of acting as a judge, he says, and his idea was to become a judge at 60. "But as you can see, it didn't quite turn out like that as I am now 60 and running a law firm again!"

This change in circumstances is something that Alonso didn't expect, especially within a year of joining Baker & McKenzie. When Luis Briones, former MP, announced his intention not to stand for re-election, Alonso was asked if would like to be a candidate. "I said no as I had been MP for almost 10 years at Garrigues, but a month later, I was unanimously chosen by my partners at Baker & McKenzie and, after resisting for a while, I was finally convinced."

But this time with the condition that he keeps his role as Head of Litigation and Arbitration. The international element consumes a great deal of time, he says, and while he is on several Steering Committees, he is adamant that he will not abandon his practice.

Despite Baker & McKenzie's 46 offices belonging to the same organisation, they all work independently which, as MP, allows Alonso a great deal of freedom to make decisions. "And that was one thing that attracted me when I decided to join the Firm – I didn't like the idea of being a London/New York-centric company with another MP telling me what to do."

### **Firm objectives**

One of Alonso's main goals as MP was to complement and expand the existing Corporate and M&A department and secure more of a presence in the financial world, an aim that has been achieved by hiring a 20-strong team from Ramón y Cajal. This included two of its Founding Partners, Alonso Ureba and Francisco Bauzá Moré, as well as Partners Fernando Díaz, Guillermo Guerra, Fernando

Marroquín, Rafael Bazán and Carlos Gutiérrez. And some in the market have suggested that this constituted a blow to Ramón y Cajal as the hires include a substantial part of its corporate and finance teams.

"Now we want to increase our capabilities in competition and insolvency as these are hugely active sectors," he says, "and grow our White Collar Crime practice, which began with the 2012 hire of prominent public prosecutor Jesús Santos, who now heads the practice." Alonso's overall aim, however, is to ensure that Baker & McKenzie is recognised in the top tier of the Spanish law firms.

"There are no special differences between a good Spanish law firm and a good international law firm with a presence in Spain. In the past, Baker & McKenzie, Clifford Chance or Freshfields, for example, were not seen as truly 'Spanish' law firms, because the market only saw them as US and UK firms, respectively."

But the market is much more sophisticated these days, he says, and can recognise a mere satellite office from an established 'Spanish' presence.

"Don't forget that Baker was the first international firm that opened in Spain in the 1960s, and what we are now focused on is being recognised as a truly Spanish law firm, capable of providing the highest quality services, not only to large Spanish public companies, but also to the medium-sized client market, which is very active – we want and need to be on their shortlist."

The clear difference between the domestic and international firms, however, is the international network, Alonso says, something that is currently leaving firms without the ability to service clients worldwide in a vulnerable position.

For Alonso, this is the biggest advantage of being part of an international firm. "Wherever in the world your client has a problem then you send it to your counterpart there, and control it from here." The Spanish market is a tough market today and you need a presence abroad, says Alonso, especially in Latin America, where there has been unprecedented levels of economic growth and foreign direct investment. After more than 58 years in the region, it continues to be a key market for Baker & McKenzie, and they have 15 offices over seven jurisdictions, with local lawyers.

"Having locally-qualified lawyers supporting local matters is important," explains Alonso, "as it truly allows you to provide clients with the tools they need to capitalise on the opportunities available throughout Latin America".

### **Balancing two roles**

"I believe that the MP of a law firm has to be able to practice – you need to be in the legal world, and to be recognised and accepted by your peers. And sooner or later, you will step down as MP, so you cannot afford the risk of losing your profession because you have spent 10 years purely 'managing'." His time at Garrigues taught him that while he loves practicing law, he also likes running firms, undertaking projects, building teams and creating value. "I discovered that I have a kind of entrepreneurial mind – something I never knew before."

He credits his past MP experience as one of the reasons for his appointment at Baker & McKenzie. "Of course, I am very proud to be elected as MP – again! And I have the feeling of having been here my whole life, which is very important," he says. "I have found my 'place' again." When Alonso left Garrigues, he never expected to find himself as MP of another firm in Spain, and sees his appointment as a kind of recognition of his generation of lawyers.

"We still have a great deal to offer the legal market, both in terms of experience and profitability, and it should not be a question of age but whether you are good or not." He points to the US system, where law firms have no retirement limitations. "You can stay to whatever age – provided you are profitable!"

“ I believe that the MP of a law firm has to be able to practice – you need to be in the legal world, and to be recognised and accepted by your peers. ”

José María Alonso  
Baker & McKenzie



What will happen after this term ends is anybody's guess, he says. "I have learned that you never know what life has in store for you, and you may just see me in the judge's chair at some point in the future."

But one thing he is very clear about: "I am not retiring anytime soon!"