

TECHNOLOGY OFFERS BRIGHT PROSPECTS FOR EMPLOYMENT LAWYERS - GRANT THORNTON

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Employment lawyers who use technology well will have a great opportunity to distinguish themselves from their competitors by forging close relationships with clients

Given that new technology offers a wealth of opportunities for employment lawyers, they must ensure that it is correctly implemented in their firm, as well as ensuring best practices for its use are adopted, argues Aurora Sanz, partner in the Barcelona office of Grant Thornton. She adds that lawyers who make the best use of technology will be able to use it to build stronger relationships with clients. "[The use of] technology will be one of the principal differences between labour lawyers and will impact on how they are connected to their clients," Sanz says. "Understanding its potential and making the most of it will make lawyers a trusted partner of their clients."

Workforce reductions

Sanz says that among the key employment-related challenges clients are facing is the need to create more flexible workforces, which can involve reductions in salaries and changes in working

conditions. In addition, clients also face the issue of having to potentially cut jobs. She highlights "reduction of the work force" as one of the key trends and adds that companies are also exploring measures which "align individuals' performance to company's results".

Indeed, managing staff and ensuring their well-being is one of the major issues clients face, according to Sanz. "I would point out three challenges," she says. "Psychological claims for burn-out, stress, and harassment cases." The engagement and retention of employees are also issues that companies are seeking to address, Sanz says. It is with this in mind, that more companies are developing diversity and inclusion policies.

Facilitating telework

As the Spanish economy improves, so the nature of the work carried out by employment lawyers is changing, explains Sanz, who adds that firms are now shifting their attention to more innovative employment matters. "We are now more focused on legal advice of a different nature, which is very creative," she explains. "For example, new human resources policies have to be aligned with the needs of businesses and developed in a way that prevents claims in the future – meanwhile, there has to be flexibility in the working schedule, businesses need to facilitate telework, and companies need to have equality policies." In addition, Sanz says that clients are also demanding services related to the assessment of the working environment. Meanwhile, employment lawyers are also receiving more requests from clients with regard to the issue of retention bonuses.

Providing services to start-ups is a potential growth opportunity for law firms, according to Sanz. "Advising start-ups is another great opportunity, as 'millennials' are our future clients and being close to them from the beginning is a way to add value to their projects," she adds. Sanz believes that law firms should concentrate on global businesses as target clients "especially in a more globalized and mobile economy as we have now".

Factors such as these will result in a change in law firms' approach to handling employment-related matters as they become more deeply intertwined with the business interests of their clients, Sanz says. "We are now, more and more, a partner of the client," she explains. "That's the reason why we need to have an in-depth understanding of their businesses." Employment lawyers also now find themselves working in ever closer collaborations with colleagues in other practice areas. "We are working more with other fields – such as corporate and tax – and in doing so, developing together a more comprehensive legal proposition."

Plan for the future

The result of this is that clients should be using employment lawyers in a more proactive way rather than seeing them as resources that are only deployed when things go wrong. Sanz suggests, for example, that employment lawyers could be invited to attend negotiations involving workplace councils and workplace safety committees.

It is vital that employment lawyers anticipate what their clients' future requirements will be, according to Sanz. "This is the greatest challenge," she concludes. "We should think about what our clients' needs will be and what they will be demanding in the future – such anticipation, combined with a deep understanding of our clients' industry sectors will make us an essential part of every labour strategy developed by any company."