

HOW TO BE REACTIVE AND PROACTIVE BUSINESS PARTNERS

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Headquartered in Switzerland, MET is an integrated European energy company, with activities in natural gas, power and oil, focused on multi-commodity wholesale, trading and sales, as well as energy infrastructure and industrial assets. Operating in 14 countries via subsidiaries and with 22 International trading hubs and 25 national gas markets, it's easy to understand the active pace of the company. A dynamism tangible also in the legal department, where the idea is to be true business partner and the challenge being able to coordinate all the different jurisdictions. Franck Vernier, general counsel at MET International, tells more to *Legalcommunity.ch...*

First of all, how does your legal department operate?

The legal department of MET international covers all legal, compliance and regulatory matters

attached to the trading activities of the company. The legal department is composed of three people with incentives to grow in view of the growth of our activities. There is a junior legal counsel and a senior compliance regulatory officer with me as part of the department. The scope of work is to support all legal, compliance and regulatory questions arising within MET's business at every step of a transaction.

What are the main challenges you're facing?

The main challenge is to follow an incredibly dynamic business which sometimes is not on the same timeline as the legal department would request us to be on. The challenge is to provide accurate legal advice in a very swift environment where every point (in every aspects) matters. Reactivity and proactivity are king in our business as we say, we are "partners in crime" and we are supporting as partner every question, every issue that front office, middle office and back office may have regarding the legal aspect attached to our activities. From a high-level perspective, I do believe our job is to know the business as if we were front office to be able to advise them in the best way possible. i.e. bringing into the business scope the legal components to ensure successful overall view on any trades they wish to enter into.

In other words, being a true business partner...

Indeed. We should be seen as dealmakers and, basically, we need to be business-minded. We have to demonstrate that we are in the company as a firewall: as a gate keepers of the rule but, at the same time, understanding the commercial intentions. We're here to advise and to support these intentions, making sure everything is done by the rules and that the legal risks are well known. Our key role is to find solutions and, therefore, give options that will work for all stakeholders involved.

How has your work changed with the arrival of pandemic?

To be honest, I don't think things changed much with the pandemic. I think we lived a situation where GCs needed to be very active and proactive in their responses, advice, understanding of the needs of the company, of their stakeholders and ultimately to their clients. Obviously, we have to put expertise and senses all together very quickly to be able to face the different situations and so translate legal principle into facts and reality. This has been a positive experience in the sense that it demonstrated how quickly we have been able to turn around and set up new legal structure in presence of this new environment and how we actually did organize, shape, experience, with the ultimate purpose to ensure legal department to be on the spot at the right place at the right moment. With Covid-19 all legal departments had to face all issues at once and so an organisational mindset as well as a legal analysis of the impact and risk on our activities were a must to ensure proper continuity: GCs needed to be reactive and to adapt to the situation for the interest of the company we represent.

And as for the internal cooperation?

It's the same situation as before. But new closer relations have been established for instance with HR, to set up policies the way it should be able to support employees. Externally, we cooperated more with the front office to assist what are potentially the legal risks attached to these new circumstances.

Talking about renewable growth in CEE region, what are the legal perspectives?

Renewable growth is a key strategy for the group and therefore for us. The intention is to support the business in such a way, that it can be achieved in due time and manner. The legal department is

a major partner in that respect to frame the strategy appetite we wish to establish. The legislation is developing fast and regulatory requirements are strict which shall be well understood to enable success. We have to adapt quickly to the market diversity and support the business accordingly.

2020 has been a year of big achievements. MET did several operations in Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary...

Yes. That's the beauty and the challenge of working in a company active all-around Europe. We have to be up to speed in terms of any legal and regs, conditions, legal requirements, guidance etc... which have authority and apply in each jurisdiction where we are active. In 2020, it is notable that we entered into strategic partnership with Keppel Corporation which is of great support for our activities. From a transactional perspective, we booked subsequent capacity booking at the KrK Croatian LNG terminal in support of our strategy and perspectives.

Also, MET recently entered the German market with gas storage and sales activities...

Yes, it has been also an achievement for 2020. Legal department has been supportive in enabling it to take place and support the strategy that we wish to apply on this market

And looking to the future?

The intention is to follow our growth and to grow with it! We are working on modernizing our systems and tools which support us in our daily work. We also wish to work on more standardization and harmonization of documentation to be used internally but also externally with our clients who support liquidity of our activities. Technology is definitely something we're looking into, to help us out and so to focus on the main legal aspects. In the entire chain of a transaction there are already technological tools. But obviously, you still need to have a human intelligence to be able to discuss, negotiate, appreciate the legal risk attached to any transaction. In the next two years, I feel technology will be more and more present and will probably change the way of working but not our core vision of what a legal advice or support shall be!

The interview was originally published in LC's Italian magazine MAG ([click here](#) to download)