

THE NEW SQUIRE SANDERS

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George von Mehren and Paul Oxnard

At the start of the year, US firm Squire Sanders & Dempsey completed its merger with Hammonds. GAR spoke to George von Mehren, the head of international dispute resolution at the merged firm, and Paul Oxnard, who led the Hammonds dispute resolution group, about what clients can expect.

Can you remember your initial thoughts when the suggestion of a merger was put to you?

Paul Oxnard: When the merger was first proposed, I was struck by the extent to which the international arbitration practices complement each other. Hammonds, which set up an independent arbitration group about ten years ago, was strongest in Europe and Asia - in particular in places like Paris, Madrid and Hong Kong where Squire Sanders lacked a significant presence. The only place where both firms were active was South America, where the combined practice is now pretty impressive.

George von Mehren: I knew the Hammonds practice by reputation, but when I looked in more detail at the arbitration team, I was struck by how strong the people are and how good the client base is. The arbitration community may not have realised the potential of the Hammonds practice; it was very attractive to us. As a result of the merger, we now have a much larger and broader group - our clients will see the benefits.

Did you two already know each other?

GvM: I don't think the firms had ever crossed paths. I knew of Paul, but I can't think of a situation where we locked horns.

PO: I think that is indicative of the fact that we had been operating in different jurisdictions - reflecting the different strengths of the practices.

Were either of you directly involved in the negotiations?

GvM: We were both heavily involved in the due diligence, although I don't think either of us sat at the table and negotiated the finer points of the merger.

Have you had any problems with conflicts of interest?

GvM: There haven't been any significant problems for the arbitration group, or for the firm.

Are you in the middle of any major cases that you can talk about?

PO: I'm acting for a manufacturer in the entertainment industry in three related arbitrations, which are all taking place in London under UNCITRAL rules. Some of the arbitrators are sitting on more than one panel, which has led to various unusual challenges to their appointments. It's hard to estimate the total value of the dispute, but it could be in the region of US\$75 million.

GvM: We're seeing a huge demand right now for our natural gas repricing expertise - as prices fall in Southern Europe there is a noticeable rise in disputes with long-term suppliers. On the investment side - among other things - we have a very interesting line of work for European and US companies with interests in Venezuela.

Will there be any changes in the personnel working on the big arbitration cases?

GvM: We won't switch people around just for the sake of it, but if we see opportunities to give more value to the client we'll do it. We have, for example, a partner who is extremely good at dealing with damages in arbitrations. I typically bring him in to cases at the quantum stage. We may think about involving him in cases Hammonds have brought in.

PO: George is too modest to say this, but he is renowned in the arbitration community as a brilliant advocate in arbitrations. At Hammonds the advocacy-side was less prominent, and in the UK we tended to rely on barristers. There are certainly real opportunities for involving George and some of the other leading advocates to deliver the full package for clients on Hammonds cases.

What have been the biggest challenges associated with the merger?

PO: Obviously, different teams have started working together who haven't worked with each other before. That inevitably brings its own challenges as people get to know each other, but the early signs augur well.

GvM: At Squire Sanders, our approach has always been to staff our cases based on the specific needs of a client. Rather than assigning work to an office in one particular region, we put together the best team possible using all our available resources. It means our arbitration practitioners are used to collaborating on cases with new people.