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UAE MANAGING PARTNER REPORT

LAW FIRMS TURN TO TECHNOLOGY TO
FACE THE POST COVID-19 LANDSCAPE

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TOM WILSON, MANAGING PARTNER, SQUIRE PATTON BOGGS

Tom Wilson is a member of SPB's Global Board, serves as Managing Partner of the firm's Abu Dhabi office, and heads its construction and arbitration practices in the Middle East. Among the leading construction disputes lawyers in the region, Tom represents public and private owners, international contractors, and original equipment manufacturers in resolving disputes over the construction and operation of infrastructure assets. He has considerable experience resolving disputes through arbitration and alternative dispute resolution and serves as advocate in arbitration proceedings of all types. Who's Who Legal rates Tom as a 'Global Elite Thought Leader' and 'one of the standout names in the construction market'.

WHAT MEASURES HAS YOUR FIRM TAKEN TO ADAPT TO COVID-19?

As with most firms, our Dubai and Abu Dhabi personnel started working from home in early March. After much consideration, and with a host of adjustments to office life to assure the health and safety of our personnel, in June we began returning to the office.

“THE RESULT FOR LAW FIRMS WILL LIKELY BE AN UPTICK IN RESTRUCTURING, OPPORTUNISTIC M&A AND DISPUTES.”

Over the last few months the resourcefulness and resilience of our team has inspired me. We adapted quickly thanks to excellent global IT support and a can do attitude. We were able to maintain client service with minimal impact, and I am proud of that. We have also worked to support each other personally with numerous video and telephone check-ins throughout the team, both regular and spontaneous. We have also strengthened links throughout our global network to support our colleagues and our clients more broadly around the world, as this crisis affects all of us simultaneously.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FOR YOUR CLIENTS OVER THE NEXT SIX MONTHS?

The answer to that question varies by sector and geography, but I'd say the biggest and broadest challenge is simple - survival. Successful businesses are usually very good at 'seeing around corners' and positioning themselves to survive and thrive whatever the future may hold. The current levels of uncertainty and unpredictability—no matter the market, geography or industry—strain the abilities of even the most prescient and/or best-hedged organisations. This uncertainty and unpredictability leads to existential crises for many businesses and some clients. Through luck or cunning, some will make the right choices in the next six months, and will survive and be rewarded with a stronger position in a less competitive environment. The others may fail altogether.

HOW DO YOU ENVISAGE THE 'NEW NORMAL' FOR THE UAE LEGAL SECTOR?

Law practices in the UAE face many of the same challenges our clients face. This is a mature and highly competitive market for law firms. I expect the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic fallout from it will cause many international firms to evaluate anew whether the UAE market is right for them. The firms whose practices here are core to their broader strategy will remain in place and grow their practices. Others will likely leave the market over time.

For the firms that remain, I expect the bulk of the work in the near to medium term will be in addressing the local and regional business realignments and retrenchment that flow from the economic impacts of COVID-19, particularly the global drop in fuel



consumption and its impact on oil revenues. Every day we see the immediate impacts of COVID-19—the collapse in travel, hospitality and F&B for example, but there are deeper and farther reaching impacts just beginning to reveal themselves, such as the impact of government budget cuts on infrastructure development and other procurement projects. These impacts will ricochet through the broader business community and complicate the COVID-19 recovery. The result for law firms will likely be an uptick in restructuring, opportunistic M&A, and disputes.

WHAT REGULATORY INITIATIVE WOULD YOU MOST WELCOME TO SUPPORT THE RECOVERY AND GROWTH OF UAE BUSINESSES AND/OR THE LEGAL SECTOR GENERALLY?

I would not advocate specific assistance to the legal sector; welfare for lawyers usually comes with negative optics, and the health of the legal sector usually reflects that of the broader economy anyway. During my 12-year tenure in the UAE, the nation's leaders have admirably managed the development and diversification of the economy, with the UAE well positioned to serve its people and lead the region through the strength of a mature, resilient and diverse economy. In particular, the success in addressing the challenges of the 2008 financial crisis and putting the country quickly on track to renewed prosperity was impressive.

The challenges the nation, the region and the world face now are greater by an order of magnitude. There will be devastating economic consequences globally, and the UAE will not be spared. The UAE economy, like any modern economy, depends substantially on the consumption of its consumers. Most UAE consumers are expatriates and many of the highest spending consumers are professional expatriates. Many of these consumers have lost their jobs or seen their salaries reduced over the last few months. Many may soon choose, or be forced, to leave the country causing a contraction of the consumer base that will take a long time to rebuild. I implore UAE leadership to recognise the importance of the professional expatriate class to the national economy. It will take time for the nation's employers to adjust to the new reality and for

employment opportunities to return to the market. Everything the country can do to keep this key element of the consumer class intact and in country while the economy adjusts to these shocks will preserve economic health in the medium to long term.

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WHAT GIVES YOUR FIRM THE EDGE IN A COMPETITIVE MARKET?

With an integrated network of 45 offices in 20 countries across four continents, Squire Patton Boggs is among the world's most global law firms. Further, unlike several of our global competitors, we are a fully integrated law firm. Those of us in the UAE work closely with other SPB lawyers all over the world, every single day. We excel when clients need coordinated, consistent advice on matters that involve issues across multiple continents, countries and jurisdictions.

We also have a 40-year history in the Gulf region, and more than 40 lawyers practicing in four regional offices. My partners in the region are all international lawyers with an average of more than 10 years' experience in the Gulf. We combine our global reach and deep regional experience to provide insight and advice few firms can match. Whether we are advising a UAE-based investor on a concession in Eastern Europe, or a US chemical company on a joint venture in the Gulf, our edge comes from our near unique combination of global capabilities, local knowledge and the esprit de corps of an integrated global institution. ■



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