

Interview of Eric Lewis and Cristián Francos

The Americans Come Back but Not to Compete



Baach, Robinson & Lewis arrived in the country, not to practice Argentine law but rather to advise firms with conflicts in the United States.

In New York and in Washington they charge in dollars. In London, in pounds. Without need for calculators or precise monetary conversions, the arrival of Baach Robinson & Lewis in Argentina provoked questions among the lawyers of the city: What are they here for? What did they see? Are they the beginning of a massive arrival of United States lawyers to the country?

Instead of keeping these questions to themselves, Asuntos Legales interviewed these professionals who will be in charge of the local boutique office, a delegation that in the last month was headed by Eric Lewis, named partner of the firm who for 15 years has been working with lawyers and clients in Argentina.

"There is a great opportunity in this region. American investments come to Buenos Aires, attracted by this potential," justified Eric Lewis. Nevertheless, in his business plan, attention is given principally to the United States rather than "la Reina del Plata."

"Anyone who does business in dollars needs today a guide regarding the law and North American regulations. The idea is to work with all of our friends here to help them do business with the United States," he noted.

In effect, after the attacks on September 11, a large number of rules and regulations tied directly or indirectly to (international) business were enacted in the United States. Regulations regarding money laundering, financing terrorism, fund transfers and a series of other situations more or less complex forged a regulatory corpus that is difficult to grasp for those not involved in the North American judicial system.

"We didn't come to the Argentine market to litigate or to practice Argentine law. We won't be competing with local firms. The idea is to find solutions for companies' legal problems which are handled by local lawyers but also have conflicts within the United States," clarified Cristián Francos,

the Argentine face of the brand new office.

Lewis added that many of the clients that the office has in Europe are interested in returning to our country. This is about companies that left at the beginning of the century with the 2001/2 crisis and that are now looking for the best way to re-enter the regional market.

"We see a great future for building a bridge between Argentina and the United States in regard to finance and corporate law, and we also see Argentina as a base for the whole region," he stated.

Consulted by clients who would be interested in knowing about the new Argentina, Lewis pointed to firms regarding finance, banks, insurance and other industries.

"Latin America was not attended to sufficiently after the crisis, which now implicates a great opportunity," he added.

On this note, he stressed that his arrival to this country is not

to compete but to work together with national firms, both in terms of the operation of foreign companies in Argentina as well as the problems in the United States facing local companies.

Structure

For now, the firm has established an office with rotating professionals who will be coming to Argentina every two or three weeks. “Depending on how the project evolves, we will be establishing a permanent presence by the end of the year or the beginning of next year,” said Francos.

“Do you know if other American firms are following in your footsteps?” asked Asuntos Legales. “I hope not,” laughed Lewis, “but I think they should if they are thinking strategically and long-term. Although if your plan is to make lots of money, perhaps no. But if your strategy is like ours, to generate a bridge between these countries, then our plan is more appropriate.”

Francos added that in Argentina there are many multinational companies and many

Argentine companies that are capable of competing throughout the world. “We are aware

that in terms of profit, this is no United States or London, but the cost is also less and there is much work to be done,” he added.

In this way, the professionals recognized that the hourly rates that are managed in the United States leave a large part of their Latin American clients aghast. “I don’t think we need to earn money like a rock star. We don’t have the ambition to become a firm with thousands of lawyers and a huge structure. Our measure for success is different,” concluded Lewis.

Action in Guantanamo

“The law’s empire should reach all and there are limits which States must respect in any part of the world.”

With this phrase, Lewis synthesized the reasoning behind his action initiated against the ex-Secretary of Defense in his country, Donald Rumsfeld, and a group of United States generals, while representing a group of detainees in Guantanamo who were “tortured throughout two and a half years and humiliated because of their religious beliefs,” a case that is before the United States Su-

waiting for a sentence that will likely come in June.

His name and his firm are also acting in a case representing Afghan detainees in a North American base in Afghanistan, a country where, according to this lawyer, there are approximately 40,000 detainees in similar conditions to the 250 detainees in Guantanamo.