

Shaking Hands in Dubai

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You don't have to go to Dubai to appreciate the dynamism of the place. You can get a sense of that by talking to senior UK business lawyers, who are falling over themselves to get a piece of the action.

But it is only by going there that you begin to get a sense of what it is like. For me, that process began on Monday evening last week with the car ride from Dubai International Airport past Dubai City and on to Jumeirah Beach. You can't even begin to count the number of cranes reaching off into the distance as futuristic buildings – including the needle-like Burj Dubai - appear to be rising up before your eyes.

Last week *Legal Week's* events arm made its first foray beyond Europe when it held a one-day conference for senior in-house lawyers at the Madinat Jumeirah resort complex. The impetus for the Corporate Counsel Forum Middle East was the recent establishment of the Dubai Corporate Counsel Group, which underlined the growth of Dubai's in-house legal community. We received particular encouragement from Robert Swade, chief legal officer of Jumeirah Group, and David Brimacombe, head of legal and compliance and regulatory risk for the Middle East, Pakistan, Africa and Europe at the Standard Chartered Bank. Both Swade and Brimacombe had attended *Legal Week* corporate counsel events in Europe and felt their colleagues in the Middle East would benefit from a similar gathering. And they were prepared to roll up their sleeves. Brimacombe chaired the event while Swade was a keynote speaker.

While some of the themes – on, say, leadership – echoed those that arise at our European gatherings, it became evident during the conference that general counsel in the Middle East face a series of challenges that are unique to the region.

Top of this list for many delegates is the need to adapt western business practices, including those lengthy legal documents, to the environment in which they work.

As more than one delegate observed, the vast majority of businesses in Dubai are still privately-owned, while many transactions are conducted more or less on the basis of a handshake. And yet Middle East-based companies and funds are stepping up their foreign investment.

If they play their cards right, the need for someone on the inside to act as a bridge between these cultures and business practices will present senior in-house lawyers with the opportunity to get closer to the hearts of their businesses than is often the case in Europe.

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