



Airbus GC John Harrison on the Advancing Position of General Counsel in a Global Corporate Setting

Law Department Management



John Harrison, general counsel for aeronautics group Airbus, has been a longtime advocate for the importance of the general counsel's position within the company. At Airbus, John has worked to help secure the company's global image as an innovator in aviation, and believes that the key to success also lies in the ability of the legal department to provide a strong, unifying voice.

"With Airbus, I consider the position of general counsel to be an integral part of the management," Harrison explains. "From the legal disputes we oversee to capital allocation, I am involved as an equal partner at the table. I believe the company is better protected as a result, because I am able to understand the complex concepts that require legal advice."

Harrison, who is based in Toulouse, France, initially joined Airbus from law firm Clifford Chance in 2000 at the beginning of an in-house revolution in Europe. In the early stages of his in-house career, corporate law departments began taking on more responsibility as a result of the heightened regulatory presence in the region.



"I enjoyed playing a part in this revolution. I feel quite fortunate to be considered a member of the executive committee, to report to the CEO with access to the board, and to have the tools necessary to be an effective risk manager," Harrison says. Although he would leave Airbus for project management company Technip in 2007, Harrison returned in 2015 to assume his current role. Expanding one's professional horizon is an opportunity he would recommend to any in-house counsel looking to expand their expertise.

"I was able to look at Airbus from the eyes of a different industry. For compliance lawyers in particular, it's imperative to understand every aspect of the law. So learning a new skill set, either in a different country or in a new company, is a rich experience," he underscores. Airbus currently employs around 130,000 individuals across 180 locations in Asia-Pacific, Europe, and the Americas — making it essential that Harrison and his team understand the regulatory complexities of myriad jurisdictions around the world.

"We have more than 400 lawyers in the company, yet everything is broken down into business units where smaller groups specialize in their field. The general counsel has to drive strategies and facilitate overarching legal requirements like a managing director, while others make sure that the wheels are turning," he says.

The company has three main business segments: commercial aircraft, helicopters, and defense and space. Each unit has a team of in-house counsel that is directly reporting to Harrison. On top, he has specialized teams for specific cross-divisional areas of expertise or key regions. As a global leader of an expansive legal and compliance department, Harrison believes that the ability to delegate is critical.

When jurisdictions have differing standards, Harrison errs on the side of caution by observing the jurisdiction with the most rigid standard and then applying that standard company-wide. This guarantees that the company will remain compliant across even the highest threshold, and ensures that every component that enters an Airbus product is held to a certain standard.

And in an industry where safety is paramount, Harrison argues that maintaining a uniform standard across the company's supply chain is essential to mitigating risk. Take your average Airbus airplane: Only 30 percent of the product is created specifically by Airbus, meaning that roughly 70 percent is procured from its outside suppliers. This disparity requires that the legal department uphold obligations for both compliance and market deadlines.

"We make it fly — that's our motto. If we put a seat in an aircraft, it has to go through rigorous safety procedures from the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Over and above that, if our products are not safe, people will not buy them," he states. When Airbus creates a new product, Harrison is uniquely aware of the contractual requirements from the beginning of the development process through to the project's conclusion. The company sets a quota for the amount of aircraft required to reach its financial goals, and Harrison must work to help ensure that the target is met safely and efficiently.

"At our core, we're a manufacturing company, and we are entering into the ramp-up stage for some of our key products," he says. Over and above the company's compliance requirements, Harrison notes that Airbus is giving key importance to its corporate social responsibility. Investors, he says, are increasingly looking to make sure that the company is aware of its global footprint, and taking active measures to become a model corporate citizen.

In recognition for his dedication to compliance and corporate sustainability, Harrison was recently awarded the International Law Office (ILO) Global General Counsel of the Year Award. To Harrison, the honor serves as a reminder that focusing on company victories can be as important as attending to lessons learned. "Sometimes, it's nice to lift your head and say we're doing something right. I generally focus on what we can be doing better, but it has been a valuable experience to honor our success," he admits.

[Matthew Sullivan](#)

