

Member Spotlight: Steven De Schrijver

The technology law expert with a taste for the finer things in life



Steven has more than 25 years of experience in advising Belgian and foreign companies on corporate transactions and has been involved in numerous national and cross-border transactions in the TMT and life sciences sectors. He advises some of the largest Belgian and foreign technology companies, as well as innovative entrepreneurs on complex commercial agreements and projects dealing with new technologies.

'The only way to do great work is to love what you do.'

This Steve Jobs quote is the mantra embossed onto every business card that Steven De Schrijver hands out. It is a philosophy that has shaped his career, and one that he always shares with young lawyers, whenever they ask about the secrets of his success.

Steven has been a successful M&A lawyer for more than 25 years, leveraging a love of technology into a specialism that has seen him elected four times as the Global IT Lawyer of the Year by Who's Who Legal. His firm, Astrea, with offices in Antwerp and Brussels, may only be medium-sized, but services multinational clients.

Steven began his career in the 1990s, spending more than 15 years with a Belgian boutique law firm, and three more with a small outfit he established himself and grew from 4 to 17 lawyers, before eventually joining Astrea in 2012. Although he is in essence an M&A lawyer, many of his transactions have a technology element which allowed him to build up a unique expertise in the technology sector.

One of the first projects he worked on was the establishment of Belgium's nascent mobile telephone network in Belgium, with subsequent

technology, media and telecommunications (TMT) projects including the Yellow Pages war in Belgium and the acquisition of the Flemish broadband cable operator. Dedicated technology lawyers were rare at the time, and Steven moved into the role seamlessly, taking on more work of a similar nature.

Steven says: "I found myself advising, increasingly, on technology contracts, commercial IT and privacy law. This set me on a dual track of doing corporate/M&A transactions (often in the TMT sector) and drafting and negotiating complex technology contracts. I also advise on new, cutting-edge technologies, which have, more recently, included artificial intelligence, drones and semi-autonomous cars. I have provided Belgian law advice to Microsoft and Skype for many years."

One of the big technology themes animating Steven's work at present is the XAAS protocol, which stands for Everything as A Service. Built on the cloud computing revolution, XAAS allows any technology function to be transformed into a service for consumption. This allows firms to buy IT functionality on-demand, rather than build it themselves, or buy a product off the shelf. The mainstream adoption of these new concepts has spawned start-ups with valuable platforms, while expanding the scope of larger businesses across

borders. This is fertile territory for a specialist technology M&A lawyer.

A love for technology, has clearly aided Steven's career, but it has also created friction with those colleagues without the same vision or passion that he possesses. Steven says that conservatism within the legal profession has been one of his biggest challenges.

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“One of the challenges I faced in my first firm, was that my partners were very conservative and did not appreciate the changes that I tried to suggest to further professionalise the operations and business development practices of the firm. If you give yourself with all your heart for your firm and you are disappointed by your fellow partners, it can have a burn-out effect. At certain times in my career, my best partners were in other firms around the world rather than in my own firm.”

Many of these past frustrations are behind Steven, now that he runs his own practice together with his other partners at Astrea. However life as an entrepreneur has its own challenges. He says that one of the hardest things about running a medium-sized law firm is the recruitment of good young associates. This involves trying to convince them that his practice can offer so much more than large law firms; in the form of training, personal guidance and client contact. It also requires an understanding that monthly pay is not the only thing that matters.

Steven says: I tell my associates that they should consider themselves entrepreneurs and service providers, rather than law clerks or employees. They should treat the firm's clients, and also the firm's partners, as their customers, to whom they need to provide premium service and sell themselves. Young associates who do good work will receive more and more interesting work. Everything is earned, nothing is given. However, in the end it is all about values. Clients want to work with honest people who have earned their trust and with whom they like to talk and spend time with.”

He adds: “Another thing that is difficult, is keeping the interests of all partners aligned and professionalising the operations of your law firm with a lean staff. It requires a lot of discipline to constantly and systematically continue your business development activities when you are extremely busy.”

Steven prides himself on his client service, prioritising responsiveness, a pro-active approach and value-added services. He believes there will always be a place in the market for independent law firms providing high quality legal advice and top-notch service with a personal twist at reasonable prices. This is despite the challenges posed by AI-driven legal tech and competition from large global and multi-disciplinary firms.

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“We must remain focused on adding value, offering strategic advice and building strong networks. My

personal goal is to be the top technology M&A lawyer in Belgium, the go-to M&A lawyer who understands IT.”

Given Steven's dedication to technology, it is no surprise that he sometimes struggles to manage his work/life balance. He is a self-confessed smartphone addict, using it to keep up-to-date on sports, news and social media when not working. He regularly works long 12 hour days during the week and relies on his wife to remind him of his other priorities.

“I find it difficult as a lawyer to constantly meet the conflicting requirements from family, clients, partners and associates. I do try to enjoy the quality time I can spend with family and friends, but some of those friends are also professional contacts. Very often I rely on my wife to protect me from myself.”

Steven and his wife, Caroline, have an 11-year-old son, Quinten. They spend most weekends together, walking, going to the movies or shopping. Steven is also a gastronome and wine buff, enjoying dinner out with his family and friends, particularly in new restaurants. He is as happy in a side street bistro, as he is in a Michelin-starred restaurant, as long as the food is good.

It is clear, despite an addiction to his work, that Steven is able to make the most of the quality personal time he has. His passion for lawyering and technology extends to food, wine and family. Not a bad combination.

The logo for Astrea, featuring the word "astrea" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The letter "a" is green, while the remaining letters "strea" are black.

Steven De Schrijver - Astrea

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Astrea is an independent law firm with 13 partners and 40 lawyers in total, each with their own area of specialisation. Together they provide assistance in any area of Belgium law that might be required by private companies, entrepreneurs or public authorities.

The firm's broad-based composition allows Astrea to offer a comprehensive approach based on the individual client's needs.