

# SMOOTH OPERATOR

Armed with a strong appetite to succeed, Bernadette Baynie of Batelco Group focuses on delivering 'fit for purpose' solutions at the telecoms giant.

**What is the focus of your position and the general functions as the group general counsel of Batelco Group?**

As the chief legal officer of the Batelco Group, I am responsible for the end to end provision of legal and regulatory services across the Group and to ensure that such services are delivered in a manner that enables our organisation to maintain leadership in its chosen markets.

This is achieved by my team and I delivering legal and regulatory services with the highest quality and timeliness and in a manner which is strategically aligned with the key performance objectives of the Group.

The key focus of my role over recent years has been to minimise legal and regulatory risk across our multi-jurisdictional operations and to strike an important balance between protecting our organisations' valuable assets, whilst at the same time seeking to maximise the overall value and financial return of such assets for its shareholders.

**What led you to your role at Batelco? Please share your past profile and how those experiences contribute to your current role.**

Prior to this role, I had been working for some years as a head corporate counsel of National Australian Bank Limited in its NSW operations. I occupied a senior leadership team position in the organisation during that time, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I had a great deal of autonomy and decision-making authority in the role and was given exposure to a wide range of banking and finance legal and regulatory work emanating from its corporate, retail and wholesale divisions. I really enjoyed the nature, diversity and complexity of the work and the people management side of the role.

By early 2007, I was ready for a new move as senior corporate counsel to a completely different industry, one that would evolve around me and challenge me in new ways. I did not expect that I would end up with such a role on the other side of the world but I am very glad that I did, as I have not looked back since taking up my role with Batelco in Bahrain. The company

is a terrific one to work for and I am grateful for the valuable opportunities it has brought me over the past eight years.

I was able to apply the legal skills and experiences that I acquired working for a banking group to a telecommunication group as both organisations had end to end operations across various jurisdictions – i.e: both designed their products and services, built and launched them onto their networks, distributed them across their retail, enterprise and wholesale channels and then relationship managed their clientele.

**What is the nature and scale of the company's operations in the region?**

The Batelco Group (Batelco) is headquartered in the Kingdom of Bahrain and listed on the Bahrain Bourse. Batelco has been growing overseas over the past eight years by investing in other market-leading fixed and wireless operators. It has evolved from being a regional Middle Eastern operation to become a major communications company with direct and indirect investments across 14 geographies.

**Tell us more about your legal team and the projects you are working on currently. Any innovative methods/systems that you and your team follow to ensure high productivity and performance levels?**

**What are some of the traits that you encourage within the team?**

Establishing a strong legal department starts with recruiting and developing the right lawyers for your team, those who have a genuine passion for excellence and a willingness to succeed both personally and as part of a team. I have been fortunate to have been given the opportunity over recent years at Batelco of building a cohesive and talented legal team across a number of geographies.

I believe that the "glue" which holds a high performance team together is formed from: unconditional support, empowerment and enablement. Team members need to know that they are valuable assets of the department and are equally worthy of trust, support and advancement,

irrespective of their seniority. No lawyer should be placed in a position to fail by their manager or team member i.e: “by supporting and enabling each other they effectively enable themselves, their overall team and manager”. Each lawyer understands the quarterly performance goals and work plans of their internal clients and works hard to deliver “fit for purpose” solutions and services that enable such goals to be fulfilled.

My team members have developed an appetite to succeed in response to the empowerment that they have received. It has also led them to forge strong, supportive and trusted relationships with each other, their senior leadership team members and across their business clientele. New governance structures and processes have been introduced that reflect the value of our work to the organisation. These include placing lawyers on steering committees for major projects and new ventures and requiring the involvement of my team from the commencement of such high profile matters.



**When do you enlist the support of external counsel? What qualities or skills do you look for in choosing a firm?**

We engage external counsel for specific matters which require specialist skills, expertise and experience. Their main value to us is the key knowledge that they have acquired of our business and their understanding of its key drivers, culture and strategic approach to matters. This knowledge is reflected in the nature, timing and content of their services to us. A key tool that I use to build my relationship with such firms is to provide them with constructive feedback at the conclusion of matters and share meaningful discussions with them on what has worked well and what areas could be improved.

I look for the following elements in new law firms that I seek to engage – those which:

- Have the capability to provide commercially strategic, fit for purpose and timely solutions that will enable the success of our organisation;
- Have a good understanding of the accountabilities and drivers of my role, including my budgeting responsibilities and the nature of the legal advice and solutions that my Group CEO, Group CFO and Board anticipate receiving from me;
- Ensure that our matters are resourced with competent staff from the firm, which my team and I will feel confident to present to our internal clients and Board (if so required); and
- Share an open and frank line of communication with us at all times.

**In your opinion, how has the general counsel's role evolved over the years especially in the Middle East?**

The GC position has evolved into one which plays a primary and integral role in executive leadership teams of corporations across the region. GC's help shape important decision making and strategic thinking now at the highest levels within an organisation. They are required to be "on call" at all times to their company (usually across several jurisdictions, given the nature of the region) and deliver "best in the class" solutions and services to its business teams. They need to protect the best interests of the company consistently with an objective perspective and maintain at all times a relationship of trust and confidence with their internal clients and the board. This means having the fortitude and capability of saying "no" at relevant times, in the best interests of the company, to situations and opportunities that involve genuine risk to the organisation.

**What's the best advice you have been given?**

- Not to make assumptions or take anything personally;
- To always give my best in every situation in order to attract the best out of life;
- To strive to make my interaction with people around me a "positive and great experience".

**What do you enjoy most about as a general counsel in this sector?**

- The great relationships that I have established over the years;
- The encouraging and consistent level of appreciation that I have received for my work from my clients and company;
- The diversity and quality of the work that I have received in the role and the daily challenges that it brings!

**What is your best practice tip to your peers working in this part of the world?**

The advice that I would give my colleagues working in this region is:

- To always respect and be sensitive to the cultural values and behaviours of the people that you work with.
- To remember that an important part of our working role as expatriates in the region is to act as "knowledge ambassadors" and to foster and promote local talent in our chosen industries. So always make the time to share and impart to your team members the best industry practices, insights and valuable experiences that you have acquired from other jurisdictions in which you have worked. In doing so, you strengthen the relationships around you and foster great talent in your teams, which will enable them (and you) to succeed.

**What is your strategy for the legal team in the coming years?**

Telecommunications operators are currently being challenged to make important strategic and operational decisions in response to the overwhelming impact of digitisation in our industry. We have a strategic imperative in my department, to support the business teams even more so in such a climate. We can achieve this by lifting our individual and team performances to new levels and by taking a more innovative and entrepreneurial approach to our work. This will assist our organisation to monetise the infrastructure and other investments that it has made in response to such transformational changes. 🚀

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