

# BRIDGING THE CULTURAL GAP

By Antje Veld

*With growing internationalisation, competition among businesses intensifies every day. At Dorhout Advocaten, specialized service is the key to their competitive edge. How does this law firm specialize? At Dorhout, location and personal interest translate into unique insight into energy and Poland.*

How can firms stay ahead in a growing and increasingly competitive international market? The lawyers at Dorhout Advocaten have devised a twofold strategy based on cooperation and specialisation. 'Borders are definitely disappearing more and more,' says Karin Figel, one of Dorhout's twenty lawyers. 'We are based in Groningen, but this is not looked at as provincial any longer. With communication systems such as Skype and smartphones and modern transportation...we can do our work anytime, anywhere.'

With markets expanding as rapidly as borders are vanishing, competition is on the rise. Dorhout Advocaten views this as an opportunity, according to Dorhout lawyer Lennart van der Ree. 'We decided to focus on cooperation with the many international companies and branch organisations that Groningen attracts, especially in the energy sector,' he explains. 'And we work closely with knowledge institutions, like the university and college that the city is well known for.' For example, Dorhout and the academic institutions are collaborating at the recently-established Energy Academy Europe. Van der Ree and his colleagues will soon contribute to the curriculum.

## A PIONEERING ATTITUDE

Cooperation with interesting partners is easy enough, but making oneself an appealing partner to others is tougher, and mostly results from specialisation, according to Dorhout. Because of its location, the law firm didn't have to look very far for its own specialty--Groningen is known for its gas fields, which made energy an obvious focus. Moreover, the region is also a designated sustainable and new energy area.

Van der Ree works mostly on energy law and international contract law, and, having spent four years working and living in Australia, he knows what it's like to adjust to another culture. 'We were the first firm here in the North to focus on energy,' he says of Dorhout. 'In some way I see us as pioneers. I think we have the same attitude as expats moving here, because we're both constantly pioneering and starting something new.' For Van der Ree, constant development and

international appeal make energy law interesting. Because so many international companies are moving to the 'Energy Valley,' the area sees much complicated legal activity. 'Energy and contract law is never just Dutch law,' explains Van der Ree. 'Most of it is European law and international law, therefore we have knowledge of many different legal systems.'

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Polish law is one of these different legal systems, and because Figel originally hails from Poland, Dorhout offers expertise in this area. 'I studied law in Poland as well as in the Netherlands,' she says. 'When I moved here, I immediately saw that the way people in Poland thought about the Netherlands--and the other way around--did not match reality. There are so many misunder-

standings about behaviour and communication. Mostly small things, but they are very important in legal disputes.' The Dutch way of writing contracts, with a special appeal to reasonableness and fairness, is one such example. In contrast, Polish contracts are written to reflect nothing more than the exact reality of a situation. 'Also, translations from Dutch to English to Polish can cause problems. Because I speak all three languages and I have knowledge of cultural behaviour, I can bridge the gap for expats and international companies that work in both countries,' says Figel. 'Since the Netherlands is the biggest investor in Poland at the moment, we find it important to provide this service. For me personally, it feels good to contribute to both countries.'

