

Marc Ribas: “I was drawn to C&S Partners because I value practical consulting over theoretical”

Having worked at the likes of Schlumberger, Axalto and Thales, seasoned HR executive Marc Ribas has just joined C&S Partners as partner. He talks to us about what he has learned over his storied and remarkably global career.



Leaders League: What made you join C&S Partners ?

Marc Ribas: From reading the company charter and meeting its people, what I like and value about C&S Partners is its will and ability to produce tangible results: it takes an empirical approach, more pragmatic than many consultancies, which just try to impose one-size-fits-all models on all situations. As a former client of consultancies, I valued practical consulting over theoretical consulting. C&S Partners delivers quick results, too.

Which skills in particular will you be bringing from your previous role at Thales ?

I have worked for 31 years over four continents. There are two areas in which I believe I excel, in terms of experience: firstly, everything relating to M&A and integration. Throughout my career I have managed the acquisition of 20 companies across five continents. This includes companies of all sizes: mostly in IT, but also industrial companies. The breadth and width of my experience in corporate and post-merger integration – what works, what doesn't – is very relevant to any client looking to buy or sell.

Secondly, everything related to internal organisation and globalisation of the workforce. I've worked in China, Singapore and India; we created and expanded a research and development (R&D) centre in New Delhi. I have strong expertise in quickly staffing and reorganising at a global level, especially in R&D and support services. I know the limits of certain models too.

As well as having worked in France, the UK and Venezuela, you've spent two and a half years working in Beijing, and over four years working in Singapore. You've also worked in India and Indonesia. What were the most important things you learned from working in Asia?

In Beijing, I was the only French person at the company – it was a 98% Chinese office. In India, I was the only French person opening the R&D centre. These experiences have made me culturally nimble, and have made me a little Chinese and a little Indian in the way I think and act. I have great versatility, which will really help companies seeking to expand overseas.

Moreover, I have a traditional HR background in France. French labour law is quite complex, but I managed to oversee successful restructurings in 2017 and 2018 that were far less painful than expected.

The first thing I learned from my work abroad is that all global companies must have a China strategy and an India strategy. Both countries, especially in the software industry, are countries you must count on: for the next 20 years they will be producing many more computer science engineers than the rest of the world. Both countries have also achieved far better results than western countries in terms of gender diversity. In China, in the universities I was recruiting from, there was near-parity of genders in computer sciences and engineering.

Another lesson I learned was 10 years ago, when we had an R&D centre in the south of France. We decided to expatriate 25 engineers from China to this centre in France. Most of these people were young, but none spoke French. When they arrived, there was a total change in culture. For one thing, everyone began speaking in English, but more generally, the atmosphere and the attitudes to everyday work and team spirit were transformed. This is an important lesson: bolstering your team with employees from other continents, especially Asia, can really make a difference to business success.

Finally, I had heard many stories of working in China being difficult and complex. But this is not my experience. In China, people believe more in what they see than in what they hear. This is very refreshing: if you deliver as a manager, produce tangible results, and help people progress and develop, you will earn their loyalty for many years.

Now you've joined C&S Partners, what is your mission ?

C&S is a very young company, expanding fast. This could produce a feeling of anxiety, as many things have to be built, but this doesn't scare me, it excites me. C&S already has an offering in leadership and forming leadership teams; I believe we can both enlarge and deepen the HR offering. There is still work to be done when it comes to integration and M&A, something I can help expand.

I am also working on diversity, exploring ways of making diversity tangible and helping companies transform a buzzword into good business for them. When it comes to talent management, too, I look forward to deepening our approach.

C&S has an absence of dogma and pre-existing formats. We want to dig down into the organisations we help; work with all key stakeholders, not just C-suite managers; and produce detailed, in-depth analyses, so that our answers and recommendations are better accepted by the client at all levels of the company. C&S Partners's in-depth, pragmatic, investigative consulting is something I appreciate, since I have the same approach.