

Faster, more efficient and cheaper – 10 years at OHIM

James Nurton, London

Antonio Campinos succeeds Wubbo de Boer as head of OHIM today and according to users he has a lot to live up to

De Boer's regime, which lasted 10 years, was marked by big growth in CTM filings, improvements in IT services, reductions in processing times and cuts in fees.

It also saw the first CTM renewals, the launch of the Community design and the introduction of online filing. The outgoing president once told *Managing IP* that he believed prosecuting a trade mark should be as simple as booking a low-cost flight online.

De Boer cultivated strong relationships with IP users, and five users' groups are now represented as advisers on the OHIM Board.

But his regime also saw tensions with some EU member states, particularly when OHIM reduced fees, and sometimes with the Office's staff.

Heather Steinmeyer, president of INTA, told *Managing IP* that the past 10 years have seen tremendous strides in the promotion and use of CTMs: "Much of this can be attributed to Wubbo de Boer's leadership. The trade mark community thanks him for his hard work and dedication."

Dawn Franklin, who represents AIM, agreed, saying his achievements were "running a tight and practical office; listening and responding to users' needs; implementing steps to measure and improve service levels; and sound financial management, resulting in some fee reductions to the benefit of businesses of all sizes".

Maggie Ramage, president of the UK's Institute of Trade Mark Attorneys, said the efficiency improvements meant that "while getting a CTM used to take two years, it now takes just a few months".



She added that de Boer had promoted the Community system worldwide, including in countries such as China.

Many users also recognised de Boer's personal qualities, and in particular his down-to-earth approach. Among the first changes he made on arriving at OHIM were reducing the size of his own office and doing away with a chauffeur-driven car.

Tove Graulund, who represents MARQUES on OHIM's Board, said de Boer has done exceedingly well. "He has been very open to the users, and recognised that they are the real clients."

His considerable language skills - he could comfortably flit between three or four languages in one conversation - and his willingness to attend conferences and answer users' questions also won him support.

Ramage added: "He was always very approachable and encouraging. I think he will be missed."

The effect of many of de Boer's changes was to cut delays and reduce costs, but some observers questioned whether these benefits came at the expense of quality - with too many trade marks being granted.

One critic once told *Managing IP* that OHIM had become "a trade mark factory" that simply processed as many applications as possible, without worrying about the impact on the market.

In its defence, the Office would point to the limits of the law and cases, which it has to implement, and say that the high application volumes demonstrate how appealing Community rights are.

De Boer also faced critics in the national offices of EU member states, some of whom felt OHIM's attractiveness came at their expense and looked enviously at its surplus, which runs into hundreds of millions of euros.

The OHIM-national offices relationship is complicated by the fact that the member states sit on the Office's Board and vote on major decisions, including financing.

Some of those present at private meetings have described how relations could be tough, draining and even lead to personal attacks.

De Boer also faced periodic criticism from staff at OHIM, generally in response to increased work targets, reorganisation and cuts in hiring. For a time, posters promoting industrial action were a familiar sight for visitors to Alicante.

However, he also commanded great loyalty from his senior staff, many of whom can share in the achievements of his time in office.

Kerstin Gründig-Schnelle, who chairs INTA's Trademark Offices Practices - OHIM Subcommittee, summarised these as follows: "The Office achieved faster application and opposition proceedings, increased online access, developed e-business systems, and of course, helped bring about a substantial reduction of fees."

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