



GGI Practice Group interview series

A man of vision

This month marks the start of our series of Insider interviews with Practice Group chairmen. We'd like you to meet Oliver Biernat, Chairman of the GGI International Taxation Practice Group.

GGI: *What are your duties as chairman of the International Taxation Practice Group?*

Oliver Biernat: Beside the more formal aspects – which certainly are important – of organizing and preparing the meetings, I try to concentrate on making the sessions more efficient and our work better-known within and beyond GGI. My personal concern is to strengthen the joint action and presentation of the Practice Group to face the competition of big companies in international markets.

GGI: *How many participants attended the last International Taxation Practice Group meeting? What were the main topics?*

Oliver Biernat: The last meeting was attended by 17 participants, but the total number of members working

together within that framework is over 40. As usual, new members – luckily we could welcome quite a few of them – had the opportunity to present their companies. As a special highlight, we could distribute hot off the press an absolute GGI novelty developed by the Practice Group members: the brochure International Tax Services, which describes in short terms our expertise in international tax issues and contact data in 15 countries. In the technical part of the meeting, we discussed tax news in our member countries and heard presentations on cross border tax issues in the Netherlands Antilles, the U.K. and Romania as well as new E.U. tax legislation. Furthermore, we initiated new projects like the international taxation matrix, an update of the Internet/Intranet platform of our Practice Group and formed a task force to handle future updates.

GGI: *Was it a successful meeting?*

Oliver Biernat: It definitely was. A mere glance at our



Oliver Biernat

agenda mentioned before will prove this: New members were introduced, interesting presentations from many participants were given, and discussions on ways to make progress took place. A lot of good ideas came out which now need following up.

GGI: *What did participants learn?*

Oliver Biernat: The particularity of the Practice Group is not only to learn about technical news like new tax legislation in other countries or tax havens, but to learn from other members' experience and

to market their expertise in international taxation via GGI. Certainly we don't have the time to delve too deeply into individual subjects, but we get a first impression on the new opportunities or problems arising when doing business in the other countries. Details can always be discussed at the get-together or in bilateral contacts with the local expert on demand. Also, our aim is for others to find out about the network as a vehicle for clients.

GGI: *What makes a great Practice Group meeting?*

Oliver Biernat: Inspiring ourselves and others by contributing new ideas for future projects and letting the outside world know that we are here and we are good at what we do – this is what makes a great meeting. Having a lot of participants who give presentations is the best way to achieve this aim and discussing tricky cross border tax matters with other members gives the final shape to a perfect meeting.

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GGI: *How can Practice Group meetings be improved in future?*

Oliver Biernat: Generally speaking, we have already improved a lot – by setting agendas ahead of time, creating task forces, writing detailed minutes, and regarding the content, we have already presented first results of our work with the brochure. Still, there's a lot to do. Invitations should be sent out much earlier so that more people will be able to coordinate their plans for traveling well ahead, and the issues recently launched need more dedication.

GGI: *Would you like to see increased participation or have meetings held more often?*

Oliver Biernat: Regular meetings help to follow up the projects and it would be fantastic to have participants from many countries. Yet I see the difficulties in traveling great distances for short meetings. In future I can imagine having video conferences that will allow more members, especially from outside Europe, to join the meetings without having to travel.

GGI: *What can members do to get more out of Practice Group meetings?*

Oliver Biernat: They can contribute to set up the agenda by presenting issues of their concern right ahead. Discussions could be even livelier if the participants read and prepared the agenda carefully long before arriving at the meeting and thought about what they could contribute to that meeting. Finally, it's up to the members

to volunteer to give presentations on taxation topics they are experts in.

GGI: *What's on the agenda for the International Taxation Practice Group?*

Oliver Biernat: Our task forces are currently creating a new flyer on "Doing Business in..." for each member country, developing guidelines for intranet display and the description of our Practice Group on the GGI website, and creating a list of links on interesting databases and homepages in connection with international tax law. Those topics will be recurrent themes at the next meetings. For the next meeting on October 9th in Eisenberg, Austria, prior to the Central and Eastern European Conference, we might emphasize Central and Eastern European tax law. For the meeting at the World Conference in Rio we're planning to focus on tax issues in Latin America and how Latin American and other GGI members could cooperate more intensely. Our latest project is establishing a joint, regular information service to inform our international customers on tax news all over the world. This will certainly be a highlight of our next meetings.

GGI: *What are you really concerned about today?*

Oliver Biernat: Referring to the accounting branch, the "Big Four" are intruding into the market for mid-sized tax companies. They are using their market power and cutting their hourly rates to capture clients in the mid-sized segment, forcing mid-sized firms out. On top of that,

it is very hard nowadays for mid-sized tax firms to find qualified staff because young graduates are being won over by the Big Four companies on university campuses.

GGI: *If you could have a face to face discussion with anyone in the world, who would you choose?*

Oliver Biernat: President Dmitry Medvedev of Russia. I wonder why he isn't using the power of words for negotiation instead of practicing archaic war strategies by sending tanks to Georgia, putting pressure on people and destroying various regions. Using the right strategy, he could achieve an up-to-date win-win-situation instead of playing a game nobody can win and provoking the next cold war.

GGI: *What makes Frankfurt special?*

Oliver Biernat: Frankfurt is the most international city for business in Germany and the German financial center. Not only its skyline is unique, all the infrastructure is here and our Taunus Mountains and Rhine Valley form attractive soft factors for business. Companies trying to get into the German market would be well-advised to start up in Frankfurt.

GGI: *What would you like to share with GGI members?*

Oliver Biernat: I'd like to invite GGI members to work together even more actively. That's the purpose of the network. We all need to put in some effort to make the most of it. Again: We should transmit the spirit that we are good at what we do, but to-

gether we are even better!

GGI is pleased to announce that Mr. Biernat has just passed exams to be one of the first official "tax consultant specialists in international law" in Germany.

Are you interested in joining the International Taxation Practice Group? Contact:

Benefitax GmbH
Steuerberatungsgesellschaft,
Wirtschaftsprüfungsgesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main
Oliver Biernat, Chairman of the International Taxation Practice Group
E: o.biernat@benefitax.de
T: +49 69 25 62 27 60
W: www.benefitax.de