

Nurturing the green shoots of innovation

Top intellectual property lawyer Noel Akers sees Cornwall as a fertile seedbed of new ideas and technologies.

Overview

Noel Akers is one of Europe's leading practitioners of intellectual property (IP) law, admitted to represent clients in patent, trademark and design issues in both the UK and the EU. For a number of years he was a partner at one of the world's most respected international IP firms, acting for major companies in several different countries. Noel set up his own legal business in 2004, and in April 2005 he relocated from Hertfordshire to premises at Cubert, near Newquay.

Some might see this as a surprising move for a professional at the top of his game, but from Noel's point of view it made eminent sense. "I've had a house down here for a few years, and I'd found I was quite able to bring work down with me. With a fast, reliable Internet connection it didn't really make any difference to my clients."

Another factor was the decentralisation of the UK patent and trademark system, and the growing importance of EU law. Combined with the fact that trademark and patent offices have been moving rapidly towards electronic filing, this means that geographical proximity to legal institutions simply isn't necessary any more. "Also, we're in a competitive market and clients are highly conscious of costs," Noel points out. "The days when people were happy to write a blank cheque

for handling a patent portfolio are long gone. By situating the business in an area where overheads are lower, we're able to provide a much more cost-effective service without sacrificing quality."

Just as importantly, Noel had noticed that Cornwall itself was changing in ways that made it an increasingly attractive base for an intellectual property firm. "There's certainly no shortage of innovation and good ideas down here," he says, "particularly with developments like the Combined Universities in Cornwall and the Knowledge Spa, and the business incubation work they're doing. What we're seeing now is how supportive infrastructure can make a big difference in getting new ideas off the ground. And innovative ideas need to be properly protected – which is our kind of expertise comes in."

Noel admits that the attractions of Cornwall's lifestyle played a part in the decision to relocate. His office is located in a rural setting close to some of north Cornwall's best beaches, and he's looking forward to trying his hand at surfing. Will there be a conflict between working and hitting the beach on a fine summer's day? "I don't think so," he laughs. "I have a feeling we'll be able to work out suitably flexible working conditions!"

Workforce

Noel recently recruited a highly qualified assistant, Christian Ziar, through the Unlocking Cornish Potential graduate placement scheme, which he sees as "extremely useful". He plans to expand the workforce as the firm's workload increases.

Clients

Noel Akers & Co. act for companies and individuals in the UK and a number of other countries, including several in North America. "When we need to meet with an overseas client, they tend to come to London," Noel says. "Having good rail and air access into the capital means that's not a problem." He's also pleased with the way that the firm's local client base is developing, and sees this as partly the result of Cornwall's friendly, open business culture: "People seem to be pleased to find that our specialist expertise is now available locally, whereas before they would have had to look quite far afield."

Technology

Much of the technical and legal research that the firm needs to carry out can now be done online, so fast, dependable broadband access is indispensable. Noel speaks highly of Cornwall's dedicated business broadband support agency, actnow: "They've given us some very useful advice on setting up our broadband connection and networking the office, and

we're also getting some help with hardware costs through their Accelerator scheme."

Support

Noel is full of praise for the Cornwall Pure Business inward investment service, which he says has enabled his firm to integrate swiftly with its new environment. "It's crucial for us that people know that we're here, and that they can source IP services locally," he says. "Cornwall Pure Business have introduced us to the relevant people and organisations, and being able to draw on their wealth of local contacts and knowledge has made a huge difference."

In fact, Noel himself is now making a valuable contribution to the extensive support network that exists for start-ups and relocated businesses in Cornwall. As well as donating some of his time to Enterprise Edge – a business know-how service that assists Cornwall-based companies – he's also been working with Cornwall Pure Business. "I presented a master-class to entrants to a competition for health-related ideas that they ran recently," he says. "And since then I've advised some of the entrants on the intellectual property aspects of taking their ideas forward."