Put very simply, the aim of any EU business association is to be heard, understood and (if possible) supported by the EU lawmakers. As more and more regulations and policies affecting business are defined and decided not at the national but at the EU level, the main tasks of these associations are to:

- promote and defend vis-à-vis the EU decision makers, the interests of the companies they represent
- make sure company priorities feature high on the EU agenda
- obtain early warning of EU initiatives affecting companies, inform members, help them define their collective views and ensure the EU lawmakers receive these in good time and take them as fully as possible into account.

This is easy to say, but very difficult to achieve. To make it all happen, each business association needs its own highly competent secretary general.

**The ideal secretary general**

Picking the right person for this job is fraught with difficulties. Brussels is littered with the remains of failed secretaries general, often because the recruiters made the wrong choice. The ideal candidate should have:

- board level experience in international business and in international associations. The combination of these two is important. To be credible as spokesperson for companies, the secretary general must have
first-hand company experience. But in companies, power flows from above, while in EU associations it comes from ‘below’, that is, from the national members. An EU association cannot be managed in the same way as a company and newly appointed secretaries general who have only company experience often fail to make the necessary mental adjustment

- a deep knowledge of the EU and its methods of working
- skills as a linguist, communicator, leader, diplomat and administrator, equanimity, robust health, boundless energy and stamina
- the will and the courage rapidly to become a well-known personality on the EU scene
- feelings of delight, not exasperation, when faced with European diversity and idiosyncrasies
- the confidence to speak to prime ministers and the humility to lick the stamps and post the letters
- motivation mainly from factors other than pay, such as European integration, the market economy, the politics of business, the challenge of achieving the impossible, and so on.

The first difficulty comes when searching for the ideal candidate. Few people combine top level business and association experience. The average remuneration package is not especially attractive for business people and taxation levels in Belgium are high. No training exists nor are there any manuals to help prepare future secretaries general for their tasks. Handling a multinational organisation where membership is voluntary and over which the secretary general has no hierarchical authority is a daunting challenge. Such organisations have a natural tendency to split into factions and it is the secretary general’s constant task to prevent this from happening.

The job can be a lonely one. National members of EU associations have only a limited knowledge of EU affairs and methods of work. Understandably, they usually give first priority to national affairs. The top officials of national associations cannot devote much time to EU matters nor do they feel comfortable acting on the EU scene, where they are not as well known as in their home countries. EU associations are seen by their national members as relatively expensive cost centres, the benefits of which are difficult to measure and not immediately apparent, especially to officials who have only a superficial knowledge and understanding of EU processes. The result is that the national members tend to spend a disproportionate amount of time studying the internal administration and organisation of their EU associations,