

Joan Martí – Director of Business Strategy at ACCIÓ

Joan Martí: “Corporate culture is a critical factor in *M&A* and partnership processes.”

Joan Martí is Director of Business Strategy at ACCIÓ, the Agency for Business Competitiveness of the Government of Catalonia, where he has accumulated 30 years of experience. A strategy professional for over 20 years, he has focused much of his career on cluster development, currently working with 28 clusters that bring together more than 3,000 companies in sectors such as healthcare, *food retail*, fashion, advanced materials, and agricultural production equipment. He is the author of the book *Clusters: Winning Strategies and Teamwork* and has led international benchmarking and *cluster manager* missions in Europe, America and Asia. He has been an international speaker, a *peer reviewer* in Scotland and Argentina and has presented Catalan cluster policy at Harvard.

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Have you been working at ACCIÓ for many years, and previously at CIDEM, always closely involved with strategy and clusters? What lessons from that career have most changed your understanding of business competitiveness in Catalonia?

In the 1990s, Catalonia was experiencing an international awakening, not only through a process of growing internationalization but also in terms of raising quality standards—a shift driven by entry into the European Community and the arrival of multinationals that, in many cases, refined their local supply chains. Today, factors such as quality and regulatory compliance with Brussels are considered basic requirements. The current model of competitiveness must pivot around high-value-added activities such as R&D and internationalization, prioritizing talent management.

Catalonia continues to have a diversified economy, and the clusters are clear evidence of this. After three decades of working with companies across multiple sectors, we have concluded that, in general, there are no “good” or “bad” sectors, but rather winning and obsolete strategies in every sector. The key lies in understanding how to break away from conventional wisdom in the sector. Additionally, individual strategy must be accompanied by the right environment, as the combination of both factors leads to competitiveness.

I believe the concept of competitiveness has been expanded to include social and environmental dimensions. EBITDA at the expense of workers, suppliers, or the planet is no longer acceptable. We must speak of socioeconomic competitiveness, and an excellent way to implement this in companies' individual strategies is through the creation of shared value.

The current pace of change requires competitiveness that hinges on highly adaptable companies—ones that understand their competitive advantages may no longer be permanent but rather temporary—and that are led by people who are committed to acting as agents of change. The same applies to the public sector.

ACCIÓ insists that clusters help reinforce strategy, boost competitiveness, and connect manufacturers, customers, and suppliers. In practice, what is the most tangible impact an SME typically notices first when it joins a cluster?

Probably, the first impact for an SME is a sense of community, in the form of connections with other companies that share the sector's value chain and face similar strategic challenges. Without downplaying these connections, my opinion is that the greatest impact an SME can gain from a cluster initiative is a better focus on its strategy. The cluster methodology revolves around a dual dimension of analysis and change process. On the one hand, it enables an understanding of the industry's growth dynamics (winning strategies, global trends, international benchmarking, etc.) and drives a change agenda with activities and projects that help companies reposition themselves toward higher-value businesses.

At ACCIÓ's business growth conferences, is there discussion of both organic and inorganic growth, and even of success factors in mergers and acquisitions? Would you say that today Catalan companies in the healthcare sector are better prepared for growth through organic or inorganic means?

After a couple of years dedicated intensely to promoting business growth, I have the impression that the healthcare sector is the most sophisticated when it comes to growth strategy. During this time, we have supported several companies in the sector and have learned from their cases through individual work and the workshops we conduct for CEOs. I believe inorganic growth requires more advanced specialized knowledge (company valuation, *due diligence*, organizational alignment between companies, team cohesion, compatibility of information systems...). I would say that healthcare companies are the ones we see as most prepared for inorganic growth, but organic growth is less complex. What we observe in many cases is a hybrid trajectory with both organic and inorganic growth occurring over time.

Are ACCIÓ's sessions on growth aimed specifically at CEOs, owners, and managers? What are the most common strategic mistakes you identify when a company wants to grow?

The main problem is that many companies don't want to grow. Once this barrier is overcome, I believe it's key to professionalize the process as much as possible. Strategy is, by definition, a journey of trade-offs, and this requires an analysis that may not be the norm, especially when it comes to SMEs. Growth decisions, which are by definition critical, should not be based primarily

on emotional factors such as instinct, experience, or trust. Mistakes usually stem from a lack of preparation or ignorance of the specific aspects of growth: payment methods, intellectual property, appropriate KPIs, structuring the agreement, alternative sources of financing, tax implications, etc. This is more serious when we're talking about inorganic growth, as it is more complex from a methodological standpoint. In this sense, cultural alignment between companies involved in a merger, acquisition, or strategic alliance is the key factor and likely where the most impactful mistakes occur.

ACCIÓ combines expert advice, financial aid, and regional outreach through its branches. What role do these events held throughout Catalonia play in democratizing access to business strategy beyond Barcelona?

In Catalonia, we are fortunate to have companies with high growth potential throughout the region. While there is obviously a greater concentration in Barcelona and its metropolitan area, there are hidden champions in every county. The guiding principle of ACCIÓ's Business Growth Program is to help companies scale up, and part of the challenge involves fostering a cultural shift toward greater pro-growth ambition. It is essential to address this challenge within the framework of a higher purpose: promoting a balanced economic model across the region. In 2025, more than 300 CEOs participated in the Growth Workshops, and we are already seeing that their impact across the region will be significant.

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