

'AVAILABILITY' OF EXTERNAL LAWYERS IS ESSENTIAL - GRUPO VISABEIRA

Posted on 12/12/2013



Category: [Uncategorized](#)

Tag: [cat-clientview](#)



A multinational's needs are such that the 'availability' of their external law firms is vital to any in-house counsel, says Isabel Fernandes

With a Group restructuring underway, as Head of Legal at Grupo Visabeira, Isabel Fernandes' primary need is for her external lawyers to be 'available' as well as international. The Portuguese multinational is present in 12 countries worldwide and covers a diverse range of sector including tourism, real estate, telecommunications, TV and ceramics – which includes Portugal's Vista Alegre Atlantis porcelain.

As such, aside from her in-house team, the support of her externals is paramount to ensuring all the Group's international needs are covered.

African adventure

Having studied at the Coimbra University, Fernandes trained for the Portuguese Bar Association while working in the Planning Department of the Portuguese Ministry of Justice (MoJ), in particular covering personal data protection. She was then invited to go to Macau as part of the Office for Legal Translation in charge of supporting the Governor, where she stayed for two years. After which she moved to Mozambique teaching economics and commercial law at the country's first private university, working with the first Portuguese law firms established locally, before joining PwC in 1998 as a Senior Consultant. Fernandes then became Associate Director and built up the company's internal tax and legal department, participating in many of the country's tax reforms. 2006 then saw Fernandes return to Portugal to head Grupo Visabeira's Legal Department, where she has stayed to-date.

Doubling resources

When Fernandes arrived the Group's internal Legal Department had five lawyers, and she has since taken that to 10 at the head offices in Viseu and two at their Lisbon offices.

All the legal matters of the Group's companies and subsidiaries are either dealt with or coordinated by Fernandes' in-house team. "We cover everything including the Group's management structure, internal legal issues for each of the companies and subsidiaries, corporate issues, litigation, real estate, labour, social security, international markets and the public sector."

The Group has a big presence in France and Mozambique as well as in Angola, Belgium, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Germany, Morocco and Sweden. This worldwide presence means that she also relies on law firms to assist and, in particular, on three external lawyers for particularly complex matters or specific technical services – sole practitioners Carlos Valverde and Leopoldo Camarinha, and external consultant Maria João Parreira – who all have long standing relationships with the Group.

Since 2009, when the Group took over Vista Alegre Atlantis, Fernandes has been working very closely with Morais Leitão, Galvão Teles, Soares da Silva & Associados, that were involved in the public offer, as well as Simões Correia & Associados, which continue to help her with labour matters in particular. "We also have ongoing assistance from Abreu & Associados, and CMS Rui Pena & Arnaut, while for tax we go principally to E&Y but also work with PwC and KPMG."

She highlights expertise, excellence of work, quality of service and availability as the most important characteristics in her externals. "Being very good and very available is hugely important, as well as being part of a global network because of the international components of the Group."

For most jurisdictions, Fernandes relies on local firms, but in some countries, such as Angola, France and Mozambique, because of the size of their presence there, they have internal lawyers as well as close relationships with local law firms. "Especially for litigation because if you want to go to court in Mozambique, for example you have to be registered with the Mozambique Bar Association and you cannot just send Portuguese lawyers," she explains. "So we collaborate with various firms there such as PwC and other local firms for litigation."

Restructuring

Grupo Visabeira is currently implementing a group-wide restructuring to decrease costs and optimise the Group's structure and activities. "Sometimes when you have 10 corporate entities, for example, all undertaking complementary activities then you end up paying the same regulatory administrative costs 10 times over, so we are trying to ensure we are cost efficient in this area." They are also looking at minimising legal and tax risks and ensuring the overall structure is as efficient as possible.

Fernandes' challenges for the coming year are largely led by the country's economic situation, which is going to lead to a lot of work on consolidation. "We are also trying to identify new partnerships, especially for Vista Alegre Atlantis, and the Group has recently opened in the US and are looking towards new businesses in markets such as India, the UK and the Dominican Republic." The Group's main priority, however, is optimising the current business structure while pursuing new business opportunities in new sectors, Fernandes says. "The crisis is full of opportunities, and we are fully committed to taking advantage."

Isabel Fernandes is Head of Legal at Grupo Visabeira