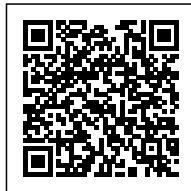


BOUTIQUE LAW FIRMS IN PORTUGAL – ARE THEY A TREND?

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When Iberian Lawyer interviews general counsel and law firm clients across the globe, there is often a common theme that gets repeated. That clients are starting to care more about sector experience and specialisation rather than a law firm's size or dimension. This is clearly an opportunity that Vanessa Rodrigues Lima, the founder of VRL Legal, has focused on. Despite the challenges of starting a new project during a pandemic and uncertain economic times, one has to commend Rodrigues Lima for embarking on her new journey less than three months ago. A Brazilian native, she moved from Rio to Lisbon at the age of six and has spent her entire professional career in Portugal. We discussed with Vanessa why Private Clients require a different approach and the type of relationship and lawyer they value.



We understand you are originally from Brazil. How did you end up in Portugal?

Yes, I was born in Rio de Janeiro. I am the granddaughter of a Portuguese of origin who emigrated to Rio de Janeiro. Due to the vicissitudes of life, at the age of six, my maternal family returned to Portugal. I left my father and the rest of the family in Brazil. Despite this, I still have a strong

connection with Brazil, not least because I keep this part of the family. Until the beginning of the pandemic, visits to Rio de Janeiro were annual. I want this situation to pass so that I can return, as I miss it a lot already. Not to mention the countless Brazilian clients with whom I maintain a special and close relationship. Since I also maintain a Brazilian accent, clients feel comfortable communicating with me. This is very special!

What initially attracted you to a career in the Legal profession?

Ever since I was young, the answer to the typical question - "What do you want to be when you grow up?", was on the tip of my tongue: Lawyer. Naively, I didn't yet understand the meaning of the profession. I thought what awaited me was the world of TV series. Today I know that, despite not being a bed of roses, the life of a lawyer, especially in my area of expertise – Immigration and Foreign Investment, can be very challenging and rewarding despite the great responsibility it entails. But I must say that I love the feeling of trust and satisfaction from customers. That's what motivates me.

Who were the biggest influences in your early career and what did they teach you?

The answer to this question could come across as being ungrateful because I feel that everyone who worked with me contributed to what I am today. Especially having worked at three high-quality law firms. I am very grateful for the knowledge and confidence I gained along my path.

But I must say that in all three offices I've been through, in addition to having made great friendships in all of them, at least one person was a positive and active influencer in my career in each of them.

I cannot fail to mention my first "boss", Sara Sousa Rebolo, who, despite being very close in age, taught me what attitude to have in the face of the professional challenge that lay ahead. She taught me what hard work was and showed me that with hard work and commitment, it was possible to grow. Without a doubt that my "workaholic" aspect comes from Sara! (laughs) It was, without a doubt, a great school!

More recently, during my time at Abreu Advogados, I had the privilege of working with the best lawyers in Real Estate Law – Renata Silva Alves, an area that arouses my interest. With it, I realised the value of teamwork and the empathy that we must have and cultivate with the client. But there were many others who left an impression on me: from the administrative staff, the secretariat to the trainee lawyers and partners. Some of them negatively, of course. But they didn't stop contributing to my knowledge.

You have spent most of your career at Abreu Advogados. What made you decide to start your own project?

Despite being young, I have many ideas and projects that I want to develop in the area of Law and beyond. I felt that the time had come to start my solo adventure, to conquer my space, my dreams, to do things my way. And I must say it's been an amazing adventure! I think many of us have this desire, but very few are willing to take the risk to give up a "stable" job to start a project of their own. And yes, it is a lot of work, a lot of responsibility, with a lot of headaches involved, but at the end of the day, when we look at the product of our work and feel proud of what we have produced and achieved, we confirm that it was worth it. I live my profession very intensively. My specialised area is very involved with the personal lives of clients, and I feel the clients' problems as mine. It is this personal touch that I want to impose on VRL Legal.

Can you summarise what differentiates VRL Legal from the competition?

Rigour, trust and proximity to the customer. These are the three words that define my work. The client feels confident in the service provided because he knows it is done with rigour and professionalism. Furthermore, what is essential in the Private Clients area is the contact with the

client, a timely response. That makes all the difference. I am in permanent contact with my clients, and I know they value this very much. It is essential that we cultivate empathy with customers, with the opposite parties, with all those who cross our path. It is in the most unusual situations that the most work arises. We must treat all situations as potential generators of more work, showing everyone what values we stand for and the rigour of our work.

Would you describe your firm as an HNWI and Private Clients boutique? Is there a big difference between servicing these clients and corporate clients?

Yes, definitely. Despite the great interest in the Golden Visa programme, I currently have diverse clients. They include Tech Visa certifications, residence for highly qualified workers, foreign investors with Real Estate projects, residence visa for entrepreneurial immigrants, nationality processes, Start-Up visas, among others. The type of advice I provide is highly specialised and personalised to the client's needs.

What is your strategy for the next three years?

The strategy will be one of consolidation and growth. I must say that about two months after the launch of VRL Legal, prospects and indicators are extraordinarily positive. The next step will be to increase the team without ever forgetting the values I defend: Rigor, proximity and trust.

Do you think there is a tendency in the Legal market for more boutiques to emerge?

Yes. No doubt. In the world of Private Clients, the most important thing is contact and proximity to the client. But the secret to success is the confidence in the advice provided, based on seriousness and professionalism. Unfortunately, Immigration Law has only recently started to be recognised in the Portuguese Legal world. But we still have a long way to go compared to certain jurisdictions. Medium and large law firms should bet more on this specialisation because immigration is not only made with a Golden Visa. There are countless issues that arise daily and involve Immigration Law, not only for private clients but also for business clients.

What has been the most valuable thing you have learned since starting VRL Legal?

That we must believe in ourselves, in our worth and that we can achieve much more than what we think. We have to consider the risk carefully, but never give up!

By Michael Heron.

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