

MAFALDA BARRETO: “THIS IS A PEOPLE BUSINESS AND THEY'RE OUR MOST IMPORTANT ASSET.”

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Gomez-Acebo & Pombo has reached another important milestone in their history, celebrating

their 50 year anniversary in Spain and over ten years in Portugal. Mafalda Barreto has been with the firm since almost the beginning of its journey in Lisbon. It would be fair to say that GA_P's presence and reputation in the country are now virtually unrecognisable to those that remember the project that started back in 2010, with 23 lawyers at 131 Avenida da Liberdade. The firm has achieved consistent organic growth during this period and has moved office premises twice to accommodate the expanding team. Barreto has had the responsibility of steering the ship since 2018 and admits that while her first year was easier than expected, the challenges generated post-COVID she could never have imagined having to deal with in her career. Iberian Lawyer had the pleasure of interviewing GA_P's Portugal office managing partner for this article.



You joined Gómez Acebo as partner in 2013. How much has the office and your presence in Portugal changed during the last eight years?

In 2013, we were still establishing ourselves in the market, although we already had a team of more than 20 lawyers, with a great deal of experience in their respective practice areas. Gómez-Acebo & Pombo's commitment to Portugal was clear from the outset and continues to be so. We are an Iberian firm, and the Lisbon office is a fundamental part of our strategy. Over the last few years we have grown and consolidated our presence in the country, and we have become a benchmark law firm in the country. We are proud of what we have achieved, and we thank our professionals and our clients for that. GA_P has now been in Portugal for ten years and 50 years in Spain. We have ahead of us the challenge of redefining what is to come and what we want for the coming years and what we are going to leave our younger colleagues when their time comes to be at the front of the office. This is a challenge that we take on with enthusiasm, respect and a lot of desire.

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

Like many other colleagues I may have been attracted by television shows that give a glamorous idea of the profession, which is actually not in line with the reality. But apart from that I think I am a problem solver and I always liked studying and connecting with people. This combination seemed perfect when I had to decide my future, and I don't think I have ever hesitated. I wanted to study Law and I wanted to be a lawyer. So this is fundamentally how I got here and I think it still defines me as a lawyer and makes me enjoy every day of my profession.

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

I would say that the partners who I have worked with in my early years have definitely influenced me as a lawyer. What I have learned from them is what I still try to transmit to the young lawyers I work with: you always need to be at your best and make a constant effort to outperform; you need to be close to the client, understand what they need and solve the client's problems as well as to help to

achieve their goals. Your client's success is your success. I was also taught to have high standards of ethics and to care about the role of lawyers in society and the access to justice of those that do not have the economic means to do so.

You became managing partner in January 2018. Three years into the role, how would you summarise the journey so far?

If you had asked me this question in 2019, I would have answered that it would have been easier than I had originally expected. Now, after suffering a pandemic and being forced to completely change the way we work, I can say that it is something I never thought I would have to manage. Despite the unexpectedness of the situation, at GA_P we responded quickly to move to teleworking without affecting the relationship with clients and between professionals, and we have made an effort to ensure safety for our professionals. I believe that the pandemic placed value on personal relationships at both the lawyer-client and firm-professional levels, and I dare say that we have been up to the task. One of our most respected values at the firm level is proximity, and this has endured despite the distance.

What do you think are the biggest challenges law firm leaders are currently facing?

Well, right now there are many, although the most immediate ones are the following: On the one hand, the return to the office, something that has not been easy in general. It seems that teleworking is here to stay, but we have to look at what are the right models for our sector of activity. At the firm level, we are looking for a balance so as not to lose some of the things that teleworking has made evident, such as the need for work-life balance, but this is one of the challenges that we need to solve immediately. On the other hand, as I said, we are at a time of redefinition of the project at various levels and this, although exciting, involves taking into account many parameters and making important decisions for the future of the firm at a global level. It is a lot of responsibility.

How do you think Gómez Acebo can and does differentiate itself from your main competitors?

What sets us apart from other firms is our values, which we apply in our day-to-day work: proximity, acumen, excellence and innovation. Gómez-Acebo & Pombo is a firm with a very high personal quality, which invests in and cares about the people who form part of it and which strengthens those relationships. I believe that this is a distinctive feature that makes our professionals happy and confident in the project. On a business level, what I think sets us apart is that we are very transversal. We strive to provide the best service, to involve different teams, different areas, etc., always adapted to the needs of our clients. We also have a very broad academic team that helps us to find innovative solutions for the most complex issues, and that is only possible if you have professionals with a very high level of knowledge, experts in each subject. Finally, the sectoral division. We invest a lot in forming expert teams in each sector and this helps us to be efficient when providing our advice.

What would your advice be to young people, especially women, that are law graduates or associates looking to progress their careers?

Law in general is a very demanding profession. For both men and women. Reaching the highest positions entails personal sacrifices that are not easy to make, but I believe that we are all rowing in the right direction. Going into the subject of women's careers, we can say that the turning point is motherhood. This is where, until now, a very large number of women have been left behind in their professional careers. It does not mean that this does not happen now, but it is more common to see paternity leave and maternity leave is accepted as normal; society has also evolved to a point where it is finally understood that it is not fair that a woman has to choose between her career and her family life. Of course, I would be naïve to think that you can have it all at the highest levels, but work-life balance as a right and teleworking can help a lot in the future to ensure that such trade-offs are

not made. My advice would be to keep the highest standards every step of the way, always trying to outperform while being a good colleague to your fellow colleagues; keep close to the clients and keep close to the structure, have pride in what you do. As for women, my advice is to accept that this is a very challenging career that will require a lot of personal sacrifice and will make you be absent from some family moments. Don't blame yourself too much for your choices.

Which practice areas and sectors do you consider essential to the firm's future?

The firm has recently launched a Sustainability practice area closely linked to the European Funds programmes. Sustainability, broadly understood and including: Sustainable Finance, ESG and Corporate Governance, Energy and Climate, Environment and Circular Economy, Sustainable Mobility, Natural Resources and Sustainable Agri-Food, Environmental Taxation, Regulatory Compliance and equality and social inclusion plans, is one of the main business focuses because the future business framework depends on it. Related to the above, Digitalisation is also a relevant issue on which we are focused. Less than a year ago we launched GA_PDigital on LinkedIn where we incorporate regulatory updates on this aspect, as well as relevant cases in this area. Digitalisation will also mark the future of our clients and we are ready to accompany them. On a more immediate level, of course renewable energies are a main focus of work in which we are fully engaged. We are doing a lot of work in this area. Litigation, Insolvency and Restructuring will also mark the year 2021.

If you could turn back the clock to when you started as managing partner, what advice would you give to your youngerself?

It will all turn out well! I confess I was a bit overwhelmed with the role when I started and thought it would be much more challenging than in reality was (Covid-19 apart!). In an organisation like ours, the managing roles have outstanding support teams that make our lives much easier and the constant contact between the managing teams of the various offices also helps us make the right decisions when defining the strategy of the firm, and this translates to each place we are present. The day-to-day activity is mostly to be available to hear people and help them. This is a people business and they are our most important asset.

How would you like Gómez Acebo to look when your time as managing partner ends?

When I finish my role as managing partner, I hope that GA_P will continue on the growth trajectory we have been working on so far. We are currently investing in innovation at all levels, especially in digitalisation, and we want to implement new tools to optimise the internal management of the office. I hope that our office will continue to be a reference point in the Portuguese market, with a solid team of professionals and good clients with whom to maintain a long-term relationship of trust.

By Michael Heron

To read the full interview on issue number 107 click [here](#)