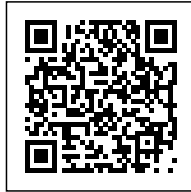


NEW LEADERSHIP AT THE HELM

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For most of the larger law firms in Portugal, announcing a woman as its new managing partner would be groundbreaking and a novelty. Not for Abreu Advogados. Inês Sequeira Mendes becomes the second female managing partner at Abreu this century, after Carmo Sousa Machado

(2004- 2007). Nevertheless, it is still a fantastic achievement for Sequeira Mendes, who has spent the best part of her legal career at the firm, joining in 2006 and becoming a partner in 2012. After seven successful years leading Abreu, Duarte de Athayde becomes chairman and passes the managing partner baton to his successor. Iberian Lawyer interviewed Sequeira Mendes, who candidly and elegantly described her plans for the firm's future, where she envisages challenges and opportunities as well as what she hopes her legacy will look like when her term ends.



Congratulations on becoming the firm's new managing partner! How long is your term for and what do you hope to achieve?

Many thanks. My mandate is for two years. Throughout this term, I intend to continue the sustained growth and recognition path that Abreu Advogados has been following, both nationally and internationally. I am convinced that we will continue on our journey as one of the top independent law firms in Portugal. Although we are already a key player, we know that we still have the opportunity to continue to be disruptive and challenge the status quo. That is the challenge and one of the key goals of this mandate.

What initially attracted you to the Legal profession?

Although I didn't have any lawyers in the family, ever since I was a child, I have looked at the legal profession with both curiosity and admiration. On the one hand, because it is a profession that puts a human relationship of trust, between client and lawyer, at the centre of everything. Whatever the practice area we choose, the main purpose of a legal professional is to help others solve their problems and/or implement or develop new ventures, thus having a relevant impact on people and society. On the other hand, there is also a continuous intellectual challenge that compels the lawyer to be in a permanent learning and adaptation process, whether by legal updates or new ways of delivering the service, which makes this area stimulating for any professional. Throughout my law degree, it became more and more obvious that I had made the right decision and that this would be my vocation. Sometimes people become disenchanted with the practical life that follows their studies. That is not my case.

How much has Abreu changed since you joined the firm in 2006?

When I joined the firm in 2006, Abreu Advogados was already an important player in the Portuguese legal scene, despite being a young firm by Portuguese standards at the time, mainly because the firm's founders had previously worked abroad in international firms and had international standards from day one. With over ten years of relevant work with its clients and legal advisory, the firm had been able to attract clients and create a strong international referral network that allowed us to work

on major national and international projects. However, the last years have been marked by the implementation of a growth strategy, which has led Abreu Advogados to be, at this point, one of the main independent law firms in Portugal, with more than 200 lawyers out of over 320 professionals. This was due to the integration of key lateral hirings of teams and leaders in specific areas such as M&A, Tax, Real Estate, but also due to our internationalisation, with the extension of Abreu Advogados' support to countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Macau, China and Timor-Leste. In addition, there was a reorganisation of the firm's practice areas and multidisciplinary teams organised by sectors of activity, that has allowed us to grow faster, adapt faster and also meet clients' needs and even anticipate them faster and better. The changes, however, go beyond the legal practice and include, for example, a strong commitment in the ESG area, having sustainability in our DNA and being the first law firm in Portugal to publish a sustainability report, and also in the people and culture, with projects such as the "Happiness Hub", the Abreu cultural project that aims to promote the arts among a wider audience and foster a deeper understanding of contemporary art among our people.

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

There are five practice areas and sectors that I would like to highlight as essential for the coming years: Restructuring & Insolvency, M&A, Tax, Technology & Cybersecurity and Employment Law. I have highlighted Restructuring & Insolvency and M&A due to a predictable reformulation on the national business landscape, as a result of the pandemic, which are necessarily leading to Mergers and Acquisitions and Restructuring processes that must be accompanied from a legal point of view. Regarding the Tax area, it is traditionally one of the most dynamic from a regulatory standpoint and therefore requires careful and updated monitoring in order to help and advise our clients; with the digitalisation growth and the need to protect companies' data and networks, cybersecurity has been playing a very important role, with an increasing regulatory activity that should be monitored; and, finally, the Employment Law area due to the changes expected in the Labour market, including the regulation around remote work and nomad workers. From another perspective, more focused on services, I would like to highlight that the nonfinancial indicators present in the ESG will be decisive for any company's future.

It would be fair to say that the Portuguese legal market has seen a number of high profile lateral moves at partner level during the last few years, and Abreu has been no exception in attracting senior talent. Is this strategy set to continue, or will the firm focus more on developing young talent?

I am proud to state that nowadays we have the team we want, highly qualified, very senior and with a strong track record both in the Transactional area, Regulatory and in Dispute Resolution areas, not only in Commercial Litigation and Corporate Crime but also in Arbitration. Every year, we initiate a round of promotions, merit-based, and this year we have just promoted four new partners and two senior associates, besides bringing onboard 14 new trainees. Organic growth and talent development are always at the top of our priorities. Nevertheless, we do not close the door to talented lawyers who share our culture and identify with our positioning. Abreu Advogados has an independent positioning and its own path, which makes it very attractive for those who, like us, value their independence and focus on creating value for clients. We have integrated highly senior and talented lawyers who were looking for a firm where they could maintain their focus on the quality of legal services and added value for their clients but also be more agile and flexible on the decision making process. And we did so because they added value to our project and fitted our strategic plan to reinforce key areas where we felt we needed more capacity.

What would you say to young law graduates when they are considering which firm to apply to, and why should they consider Abreu?

At Abreu Advogados, we look at the world from a different perspective. Since our foundation, more than a legal services firm, we have been a humanist project that aims to create a relevant impact on society and people. This is our mission, and we place our professionals at the centre of any decision, giving them the best working conditions and career progression. We are a firm that values talent and hard work and that has meritocracy as a basic premise. To prove the success of our strategy, we were recently elected by law students, for the second time, as the most attractive law firm to work for in Portugal.

How do you think Abreu Advogados can and does differentiate itself from your main competitors?

I believe that our culture of transparency is one of our main differentiators. Transparency in the way we interact with clients, in every aspect, such as costs, the team members involved in the matters, cybersecurity policies, etc., mainly because we are certified in ISO 9001, so we have to be 100% compliant. But also in the way we relate between partners and with our people. We are 100% transparent in our career plan, metrics and bonus calculation, for example. Also, what is different is the fact that at Abreu, we have an open-door policy because ideas have no hierarchy and debate crosses all areas and generations. But above all, what differentiates us is our people. When we say that we put the future into practice, we know this future is built every day by real people. In our case, the future

already has its own history, based on a commitment to our clients and society, established with rigour, transparency, and demand, which we seek to renew every day. Furthermore, we go beyond the legal practice concept by creating relevant insights for society with our Knowledge Institute, by anticipating the most relevant issues for corporate sustainability or by investing in support of culture and artists through our cultural project.

You are especially well known individually for your expertise in Competition, Regulatory and EU and Corporate and M&A work. What percentage of your time will you spend continuing to develop these areas as supposed to managing the firm?

The fact that I was elected managing partner does not mean I will stop working as a lawyer in the areas of Competition, Regulatory and European Union, in which I am a co-coordinator at Abreu Advogados

and the Health & Life Sciences sector. I cannot allocate a concrete percentage of time in each of the functions, but what I can assure you is that I will follow the clients and projects in which I am involved

with the same dedication and rigour I have always placed in everything I do. Besides, I have three other partners by my side on the executive committee, and we have a very strong and professional management team with a COO and a CSO and ten professional departments, all very well organised with extremely gifted and dedicated heads and dynamic teams of technical staff that make my job much

easier and the decision-making process more thoughtful.

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

First of all, one of the main challenges is related to the moment we are currently living, in which there is an accelerated change of paradigms with a profound impact on social and economic scenarios that requires a quick but well-thought adaptation. Then, the increasing complexity of the legal and socio-economic contexts that lead law firms to anticipate effective technical solutions to meet the clients' needs and, finally, the digitalisation of the economy, which is a challenge across all areas that will affect not only the way the working world is organised but also our own life in society. The economy is increasingly interconnected and subject to digitalisation and robotisation, with which artificial intelligence is increasingly associated. A law firm such as Abreu Advogados is aware

of this trend and has a leading presence on these matters. For example, we annually organise the Lisbon Law & Tech Forum every November, this year in its third edition, which brings together worldwide leaders on these subjects to discuss these topics and their impact on the legal profession.

What excites you the most about your new role?

Being a managing partner of one of the most prestigious law firms in Portugal is already an exciting challenge in itself. However, the possibility of being involved in the daily management and strategy definition of the firm in such a unique and challenging global context but also with the topic of multidisciplinary firms fast approaching makes it very challenging and exciting. I believe this is a crucial moment, and only the fittest will survive. And we sure want to be among them.

As you may know, at Iberian Lawyer, we are big supporters of diversity in all its forms in the legal sector. How important is it that more law firms in Portugal continue to put their trust in promoting women into leadership roles?

Last year, Portugal had only 16% of women on company's boards of directors. Data shows there is still a long way to go in terms of gender equality and that it is increasingly important to align society and decision-makers around this goal. It is everyone's responsibility, not only the law firms but also the business and government sectors. We must all do our part. I am the second woman Managing Partner at Abreu Advogados, after Carmo Sousa Machado, and I can say that we are a firm of people whose success depends intrinsically on each and every one of us, regardless of gender, race, creed or any other factor. This is a basic premise that we never neglect at Abreu Advogados.

When you arrive at the end of your time as a managing partner, how would you like Abreu to look?

I would like Abreu to look even greater and as a firm that is increasingly resilient and prepared for the world's changes. A great place to work, a great place to visit for all of those who look for deep knowledge and like culture, or even only to see the sunset on the river, and a great place for clients who look for tailored, agile and challenging solutions. If we remain strong, resilient, independent, dynamic and pioneers, then my job will have been well done. To make this happen, I am counting on our entire Abreu team to continue to respond quickly and effectively to all the challenges that are placed on us in order to continue Abreu Advogados' journey.

To read the interview in full please download issue [N.105](#)

Interview by Michael Heron.