

STAYING FOCUSSED

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Tabaqueira senior counsel Alexandra Reis says the external law firms she instructs need to be proactive, efficient and concise in their responses



Alexandra Reis (pictured), senior counsel at Portuguese cigarette company Tabacqueira, has high expectations when she instructs external law firms. In addition to demanding that firms are proactive and efficient, she also wants them to provide succinct responses to legal queries rather than interminable memos, which fail to make any recommendations. Iberian Lawyer spoke to Reis to find out how the Tabacqueira legal department is

having to transform itself to become more technologically focussed, how it chooses its legal advisers and the frustrations she experiences when dealing with external law firms.

How big is your legal team?

I supervise two lawyers in Portugal and I also have the support of an administrative assistant

How is your legal team structured?

As the senior counsel, I am responsible for the coordination of the department and the development of my team members. Our objective is to be a multidisciplinary and motivated team, that deeply understands the commercial priorities and operating environment of the company and that both proactively and creatively supports all areas, from commercial to operations. Business areas are allocated to a single contact point in the department. This means that we position ourselves as business partners who are critical to the achievement of company's objectives. Rather than being passive and waiting for the organisation to come to us for a consultation, we are in the meeting room and at the table when a project is being developed or when a business initiative is taking its first steps.

When did you join your Tabaqueira and how has the legal team changed in that time?

I joined Tabaqueira – the Portuguese affiliate of Philip Morris International (PMI) – in 2003, and at the time the team was the same size, that is, three in-house counsels. The size of the law department did not change over the years, but our job did, immensely, as our company evolved and it is currently going through a dramatic transformation. We want to be far more than a leading cigarette company with the world's most popular brands – PMI is developing smoke free alternatives, such as IQOS, an electronic device that heats tobacco rather than burning it. This has meant the need for a transformation in the organisation, in the role of Tabaqueira's law department, and in the matters our team is expected to know about and advise on. Now we need to be fluent in electronics and technology, for example. And things move at a very fast pace. As such, we always look for learning opportunities and are always adopting new techniques to enhance our legal work and strategic thinking.

What legal work do you do internally?

We deal with all areas of law, though some only occasionally, such as real state, for example. We put our focus and effort on tobacco-specific regulations – such as product regulation and advertising – commercial and contract law and employment as we are an organisation with around 850 employees. We also deal with antitrust and competition law issues and support the ethics and compliance department.

Which do you outsource?

We outsource litigation and certain matters that are very important to the company or require specialisation and expertise that we don't have in-house. Also, we delegate legal work that frees up our time so we can focus on important and urgent matters. We also outsource matters that can be done faster or to a higher quality by outside counsel.

Do you have preferred law firms that you choose to work with? If so, which firms are they?

Yes, Tabaqueira works with several law firms, including PLMJ and DLA Piper (for employment matters) but these are not the only ones.

How do you select law firms?

The selection and retention of law firms is done in accordance with guidelines that PMI has put forward and that we also apply in Tabaqueira. Competitive bidding is encouraged in order to select

the right outside counsel for certain matters or for matters with budgets of \$25,000 and above. Scoring and selection is based on expertise, experience, staffing, and fee structure.

What do you look for when selecting your external counsel?

Expertise and experience but also proactivity, quality, efficiency, and timely delivery. Also, I appreciate open, trusting and constructive relationships with outside counsels.

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