

# EUROPE'S FINEST?

Viewed in some quarters as the continent's best managing partner, João Vieira de Almeida says the key to his firm's success is having 'no stars' – now he faces one of his biggest tests...handing the firm over to his successor

JOÃO VIEIRA DE ALMEIDA



Talk to some legal market commentators and they will tell you that **João Vieira de Almeida** is the best law firm managing partner in Europe. It's quite a claim. But he is a man who has won many admirers, both for his professional capabilities and his personal qualities. He took over as managing partner of Vieira de Almeida (VdA) – the law firm founded by his father – in 1996. Back then the firm had 16 lawyers, today it is one of the three biggest law firms in Portugal with approximately 300 lawyers and a total of 450 professionals working in 13 jurisdictions. Market observers talk about a strong and inclusive leader, while he also has a reputation as a charismatic “cool guy” who has been spotted playing drums in the firm’s house band at events such as “Rock ‘n’ Law”, where bands made up of lawyers raise funds for charity. Given the accolades and the personal charm that has won him widespread respect and praise, it would be understandable if Vieira de Almeida had developed a monstrous ego. But while, in the eyes of some, he is one of the “stars” of the Iberian legal market, he is keen to stress that the secret of his firm’s success is the fact that it has no stars, and instead the firm’s ethos is focussed on the development of team players. When he took over the firm 23 years ago, “we created a strong team culture, we had no stars”, Vieira de Almeida explains. “This is reflected in everything, the partnership structure is very close to a pure lockstep,” he adds. “The firm is very democratic and cross-selling is very high.” Vieira de Almeida continues: “Every partner is an equity partner, communication is on a first name basis, we pass on this message at every level, we expect to work as a team.”



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## REBELLIOUS STREAK

Vieira de Almeida joined the firm in 1985. It had been founded by his father **Vasco Vieira de Almeida**, who in addition to being a lawyer, has enjoyed a distinguished career in the world of politics and finance. In the 1970s, Vasco Vieira de Almeida was a Portuguese government minister, while at different times in that decade he was also managing director of Banco Português do Atlântico and chairman of Banco Crédito Predial. Though João Vieira de Almeida did ultimately follow in his father's footsteps by developing a career in the legal profession, you sense that he does have a rebellious streak and he openly admits that, as a young man, he was adamant that he “didn't want to be a continuation of my father”.

However, after considering a career as a historian, Vieira de Almeida took the step of joining his father's firm. All families experience tensions at times and the Vieira de Almeidas were no exception, except their disagreements were played out within the confines of a law office. João repeatedly asked his father if he could become a partner in the firm, but the answer was always ‘no’. However, after ten years, his father relented and made João a partner. “When finally he did make me a partner, I was elated,” Vieira de Almeida says.

Having got his wish of becoming a partner, João Vieira de Almeida was clear about his objectives. Specifically, he didn't want the firm to finish once the name partners retired, a fate that befalls many firms. “My father was a well-known lawyer, but I always wanted to do something that would outgrow me and my father,” he says. The law firm model he sought to emulate was one which he had encountered on trips to Britain. “I spent a lot of time going to the UK and I wanted to copy that,” Vieira de Almeida explains.

In order to build an institution that survives the departure of its founders, Vieira de Almeida's philosophy has centred on thrusting as many of

## VIEIRA DE ALMEIDA: THE BIG MATTERS

### ◆ NOVEMBER 2018

Advises Portuguese private healthcare company **José de Mello Saúde (JMS)** on the registration of its commercial paper programme on MARF, the fixed income market operated by Bolsas y Mercados Españoles (BME). The programme has a maximum outstanding balance of €50 million.

### ◆ JUNE 2018

Advises telecommunications company **PT Portugal** – a subsidiary of Altice Europe – on the €660 million sale of a 75 per cent stake in its company Towers of Portugal to a consortium including Morgan Stanley Infrastructure Partners and Horizon Equity Partners.

### ◆ APRIL 2018

Vieira de Almeida (VdA) advised Deutsche Bank on the sale of its private and commercial banking business in Portugal to Spain's Abanca. Based in north-west Spain, Abanca has 640 branches and more than 4,600 employees.

the firm's lawyers as possible into management roles. To this end, in addition to Vasco Vieira de Almeida (the founding partner) and João Vieira de Almeida (the managing partner), the firm also has a head partner (**Mário Esteves de Oliveira**), and a group senior partner (**António Magalhães Cardoso**).

In addition, the firm has a board of directors, which consists of seven of the firm's partners plus a general director, **José Sousa de Macedo**, who is not a lawyer. The board of directors meets twice per month and is responsible for developing the firm's strategy. The firm also has an eight-strong executive committee, which includes some partners as well as the firm's business development director and corporate affairs director, for example. But it doesn't stop there – the firm also has a senior partners group (consisting of five partners), and an executive partners group (this consists of six partners, and is of particular interest as we will find out later). Finally there are a total of 18 practice heads. "Everyone who has a leadership role meets every month," says Vieira de Almeida, who adds that all partners in the firm have access to data related to "key performance indicators in real time". He says he is comfortable with the idea of having other forceful leaders around him at the firm. "I have never been afraid of choosing better people than me, people who are opinionated and who challenge me," Vieira de Almeida explains.

### USING COMMON SENSE

He argues that the firm's approach to remuneration has also been key to its success. "I was never particularly interested in earning more money than was adequate, I have never been the best paid lawyer in the firm," Vieira de Almeida says. When it comes to remuneration, the firm sets an upper threshold – which still means the firm "pays well", according to Vieira de Almeida – and any revenue that is brought in above that is reinvested in the firm. Vieira de Almeida says that, except for one year, the firm has always exceeded the threshold it set and the surplus was reinvested in the firm. "Fundamentally, running a law firm requires common sense, it's not a complicated business, you don't need to be a genius," says Vieira de Almeida. He adds that it was very important that the firm made sure that its growth did not "impact on the culture of the firm". He continues:

### PORTUGAL'S BEST LAW FIRM BRANDS

2018 Ranking	2017 Ranking	Firm
1	3 ▲	MLGTS
2	1 ▼	VdA
3	2 ▼	PLMJ
4	7 ▲	CMS
5	8 ▲	Abreu
5	6 ▲	Linklaters
7	4 ▼	Uría Menéndez
8	10 ▲	DLA Piper
8	5 ▼	Cuatrecasas
8	- -	Garrigues

Source: Iberian Lawyer

"Our culture is key in attracting people, the goal is to leave the firm for the next generation." Vieira de Almeida says that the firm receives 3,000 job applications each year.

So how has the legal profession changed in the 34 years since João Vieira de Almeida joined his father's law firm? "It's so different, the legal profession has opened up to the world, back then a lawyer was an island, you wouldn't let them [the clients] in, you would advise them from a position of superiority," he says. "But now we're part of the ecosystem, now clients rule, and we need to be transparent."

Some VdA partners believe the firm could move to another level and talk about how the firm could potentially become a pan-European force with offices in some of Europe's major capitals. They acknowledge that, with this goal in mind, the best strategy could be to merge with other European law firms. Time will tell whether such talk amounts to hubris or is, in fact, a realistic goal. "There's a lot we can do to increase our footprint in Europe and maybe there could be more representative offices," says Vieira de Almeida. The



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firm is understood to be reviewing its international strategy and it is likely that more representative offices will be opened. At present, in addition to its headquarters in Portugal, the firm also has operations in the following jurisdictions: Angola, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, Portugal, Sao Tome and Principe, and Timor-Leste. Vieira de Almeida says the technological revolution is changing the business model of law firms. But he adds: “This is a delicate process, the core of our business is being a trusted adviser to clients, but automating trust is complex.” Vieira de Almeida says

lawyers now have to learn new skills and learn to be technological and, in this sense, there is a “skills gap” in the legal profession. He says: “You need to change the kind of people you’re looking for, you need to be innovative and anticipate new products.” As studies have shown, the firm has one of the most powerful brands in the Portuguese legal market, so why has VdA’s branding been so successful? “A significant investment in the brand is emotional, we believe in the brand,” Vieira de Almeida says. He adds that because the investment is emotional, it “develops the reputation, we have people who can build and defend our brand”. At this point, once again we hear the mantra about there being “no stars” at the firm. “The name of the firm is ahead of anything else”, he adds.

**PREDICTABILITY BUILDS TRUST**

What is also important when building a successful brand is consistently providing high quality legal services, says Vieira de Almeida. “We need to be consistent, it may sound boring but predictability builds reputation and trust when interacting with clients and lawyers,” he adds. One of VdA’s fiercest rivals in the Portuguese market is MLGTS, which for a long time was seen as the number one firm in the country. Some managing partners at rival law firms will say privately that MLGTS still stands out as the market leader with the top institutional clients. But Vieira de Almeida disagrees with this hypothesis and says that institutional clients are now changing legal advisers. “We now work with clients that used to be institutional to MLGTS, while some of the biggest funds in the world now work with PLMJ – institutional clients are now spread across the top three firms,” he says. Vieira de Almeida says he thinks

more international firms will open in Portugal, though he adds that his firm is not open to any merger proposals. One of his main priorities at the moment is succession planning. He says he has a “date in mind” for when he will step down as managing partner, he doesn’t specify what that date is, but says it is “not far away”. He adds that the next managing partner of the firm will be one of the partners who is currently a member of the firm’s executive partner group. So, we do know that one of **Fernando Resina da Silva, Frederico Gonçalves Pereira, Manuel Protásio, Paula Gomes Freire, Paulo Pinheiro, and Tiago Marreiros Moreira** will become Vieira de Almeida’s successor. Vieira de Almeida says that he has “someone in mind”, but does not reveal the name. Of the aforementioned group, Paula Gomes Freire’s profile has risen in recent years and she has been increasingly seen as one of the key representatives of the firm. And she clearly has leadership qualities – in 2018, she was voted one of the 50 most inspiring women lawyers in *Iberian Lawyer’s InspiraLaw* initiative. Vieira de Almeida believes the flow of

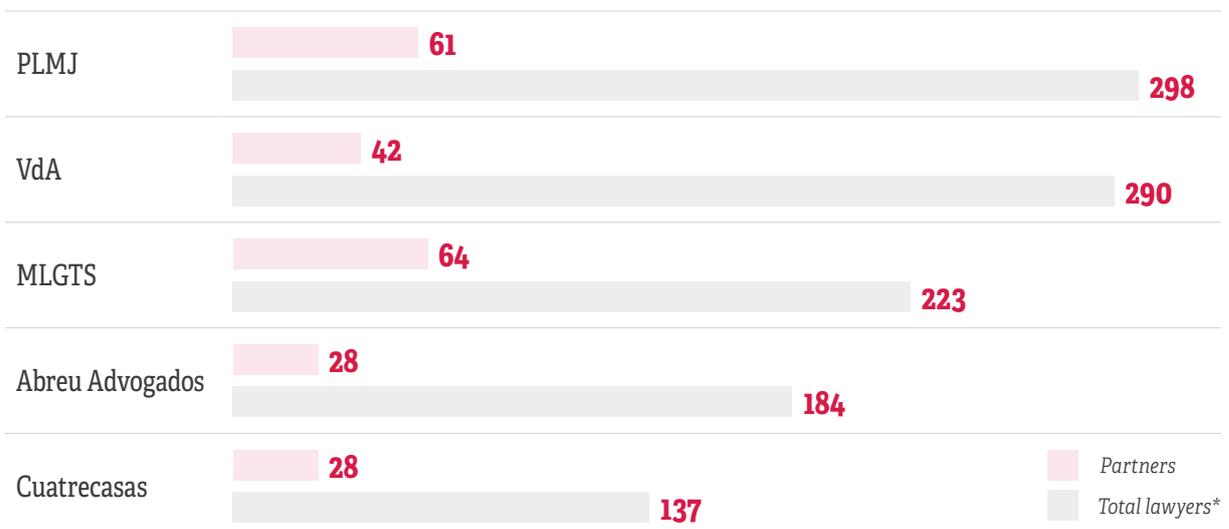
legal work will continue at the current level for the next few years. Finance-related work, especially that concerning the collapse of Banco Espirito Santo, continues to feed many lawyers in Lisbon and has helped a lot of Portuguese firms to grow in recent years. In 2017, VdA’s billing increased an impressive 15 per cent to €51 million. In 2018, it increased again by almost 2 per cent to €52 million. Vieira de Almeida says that he expects the firm’s real estate, IP, health and IT practices to grow in the coming years. But it will be someone else who oversees VdA’s long term future as the firm’s managing partner. Vieira de Almeida says he will stay on for a while to aid the transition when he finally does stand down, but he is already thinking about what he will do when he retires. He has three daughters (two of which live in London, though interestingly, none of them are lawyer). A keen mountaineer, he is hoping to spend some time in Nepal pursuing this hobby, while he will also spend more time playing the drums. Many have followed Vieira de Almeida’s beat, but is he the best managing partner in Europe? He is certainly making a strong case. 



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**PORTUGAL'S LARGEST LAW FIRMS**



\*Figure for total number of lawyers represents number of partners, associates, counsel and trainee lawyers at firm's offices in Portugal