

BEYOND THE BILLABLE HOUR

How Vieira de Almeida is using foresight to prepare for the future of law

Law is often imagined as a profession of precedent. It looks backwards to move forwards, building arguments from what has been decided, tested, codified and settled. But what happens when the questions facing the legal sector no longer fit neatly inside the logics of precedent?

For Vieira de Almeida – one of Portugal’s leading full-service law firms, with a dominant position in the national market and strong international reach, particularly across Lusophone economies – this was not an abstract concern. The legal services industry is entering a period of unusual turbulence. Artificial intelligence is changing how knowledge work is produced. Regulatory environments are opening space for new players. Clients are becoming more demanding and more sophisticated. The hourly-rate model, once treated as almost natural to the profession, is increasingly being questioned. And geopolitical fragmentation is making cross-border legal advice more complex, not less.

In this context, VdA chose not to approach its next strategic cycle through a conventional strategy exercise. Previous work had relied more heavily on quantitative analysis and familiar consulting frameworks. This time, the firm wanted something more exploratory, creative and long-term. It needed a way of examining not only the business as it is today, but the worlds in which that business might need to operate in coming years.

Together with the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies, VdA undertook a strategic foresight process exploring the future legal landscape. The project combined research, interviews, future issues mapping, scenario development and partner workshops. Its scenarios were built around two jointly identified critical uncertainties: the role of AI in legal and professional services, and the future direction of geopolitical shifts: from global fragmentation to bloc-centric interoperability. The result was not a prediction of the future, but a structured way to discuss possibility, risk and strategic choice.

We spoke with Margarida Saragoça, Director for Business and Knowledge at VdA, and João Vieira de Almeida, the firm's founder, senior partner and chairman, about why the firm chose a futures-oriented strategy process, what it means to make lawyers discuss uncertainty, and why discomfort may be one of the most useful signals that strategy is doing its job.

Margarida Saragoça and João Vieira de Almeida led the conversation from two complementary positions inside VdA. Saragoça, a lawyer by training, is Director for Business and Knowledge, working across business development, client value, new frontier business, knowledge management and knowledge integration. She has been involved in several of the firm's strategic exercises, including VdA's first light-touch encounter with foresight through a World Economic Forum scenario planning process in 2019.

Vieira de Almeida is the firm's founder, senior partner and chairman. Having served as managing partner for many years, he now leads the firm's strategic work. At VdA, strategy and management are deliberately separated: the senior partner develops and proposes the firm's strategic direction, while the managing partner is responsible for execution. This made him the natural lead for VdA's collaboration with CIFS.

VIEIRA DE ALMEIDA





Why did you decide that this strategy process needed to be futures-oriented rather than more conventional?

João: The transformation our sector is undergoing, and will continue to undergo, brings such significant impact and uncertainty that we felt a different approach was necessary.

If we want a different outcome, we need a different way of approaching the issues. We did not believe that a conventional strategy exercise, pulling the usual levers and looking at the business from the same familiar perspective, would take us where we needed to go.

We felt we had to take a bolder approach to strategising our future. We believe we are facing existential risk. On the one hand, we have all the advantages of being an incumbent in this market. On the other, we also carry the risks associated with that position. We are in a very particular situation, and we wanted a fresh approach to the future. That is how CIFS became involved.

When you say the sector is facing great uncertainty, what do you see changing?

João: The sector is changing very quickly and from several directions.

On the regulatory front, non-lawyers are increasingly able to perform work that used to belong exclusively to lawyers. The regulatory environment now allows them to do that, which means that parts of what was once legal work are moving elsewhere.

AI is also entering the profession, bringing a wide range of implications. It challenges our existing business model, which is based on hourly rates. I do not think that model will be sustainable in the future.

We will have to reinvent our organisations: the way we work, the people we work with, and the way we engage with clients. I think this is the biggest transformation the industry has ever seen. The legal profession has not changed fundamentally over the last 150 years. Now, it is facing a revolution.

Margarida: And the speed of that change is important. The pace matters as well.

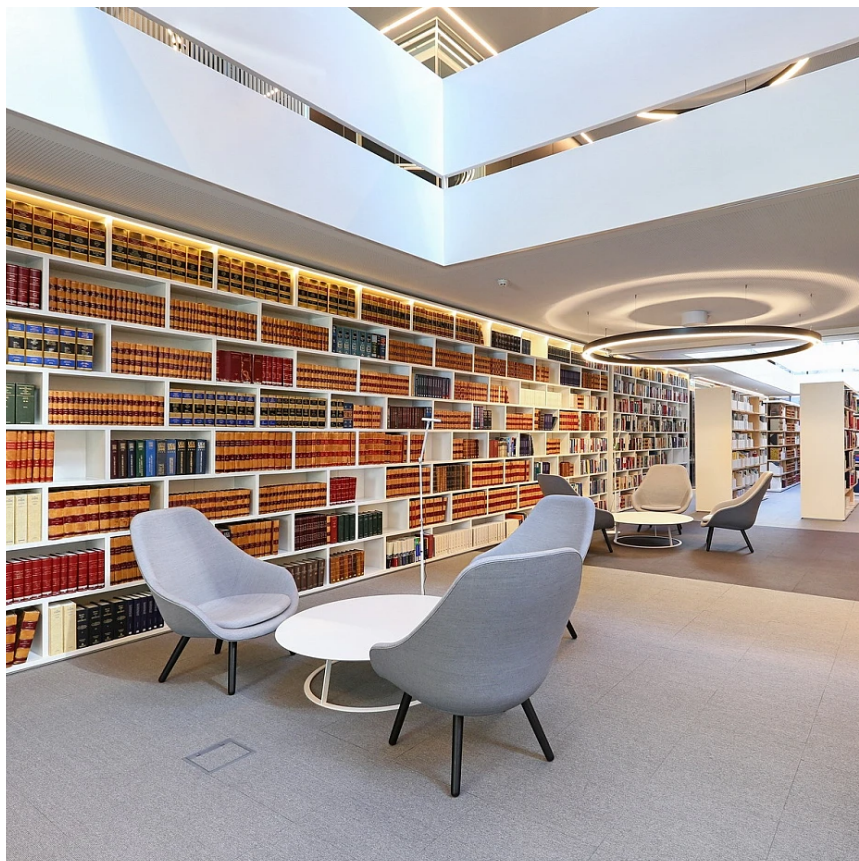
CIFS proposed a different approach to the one you originally expected. What made that difference valuable?

João: Consultants often begin from the business as it exists today. They identify adjustments and suggest that, with those changes, everything will be all right in the future.

I do not think that approach makes sense when the future no longer feels certain. We do not know what it will look like, and that is what made the difference.

With this process, partners were not only discussing the business; they were discussing the future. Because that future is likely to be very different from today, the process helped people recognise that a major transformation is coming, that we will be part of it, and that they need to be part of it as well.

VIEIRA DE ALMEIDA



As lawyers, we are trained to be highly objective. We focus on the current matter and the current issue. It is difficult to ask lawyers to think about what comes next, especially when what comes next may be very different from the work they do today. That is where CIFS' methodology and think tank approach added value.

How did people respond to being asked to work with uncertainty and possible futures?

Margarida: There were several workshops, and people participated in different ways. Some were part of sounding boards, where they received information and had the opportunity to be heard. Others were more directly involved in the exercises.

People were very willing to read the material sent to them in advance. They came well prepared and made a real effort to understand the process.

It was not always easy. Shifting the mindset required people to move ten years into the future and then return to the present. But we could feel the energy throughout the workshops. People were not always comfortable at first, but they became increasingly engaged, took ownership of the conversation, and voiced their views.

They were not always in agreement, but that was productive. It was part of the energy of the process. It gave people space to express their concerns.

João: Some of those effects can also be achieved with other consultants and methodologies. We have experienced that before. But the difference here was that partners were sitting together discussing the future.

That was new for us, and it created a different kind of conversation.



MARGARIDA SARAGOÇA

Foresight often creates productive discomfort. Did you feel that in the process?

João: We are used to receiving figures, numbers and business recommendations. That was not what this process delivered. It was not what we expected it to deliver either. But did that make us feel somewhat insecure? Perhaps.

CIFS delivered what they said they would deliver, and that is what we chose. Now the work is in our hands. We are not using the usual tools, so we are outside our usual comfort zone.

Would it feel reassuring to have the kinds of tools that firms such as BCG or McKinsey provide, with KPIs and dashboards to analyse every month? Of course. Those tools create comfort.

But it is useful to be uncomfortable, because the future itself will not be comfortable.

Margarida: Part of the uncertainty comes from the fact that we now need to treat foresight as a discipline. As you said, we are now the strategists. We have to keep this work present in our minds and continue the exercise, because strategy is not fixed, the future is not fixed, and the narrative is not fixed either.

The narrative is there, but the future continues to unfold. We have to keep pace with it, identify the signals, and understand how to translate them into operations. That is what I now think we need to build.

What made the collaboration work in practice?

Margarida: The CIFS team should be mentioned. It was a strong team.

Patrick Gallen, for instance, had a legal background, which meant he could understand and sense the dynamics of the industry. The team also brought Spanish, Portuguese and Brazilian cultural perspectives, which was valuable. Combined with Lasse Jonassons's seniority, it created a good mix.

Having them being present throughout the process made a difference.

“The transformation we are facing is so significant that, without this capability, it will be difficult to cope.”

How are you moving from scenarios to action? Will foresight become embedded more permanently in the organisation?

João: What we are now considering is the creation of a group led by Margarida, focused specifically on strategy and foresight.

That group would work on an ongoing basis with the projects, while also looking ahead as part of a regular management function, together with the firm's more business-oriented functions.

The way I see it, we will need that. The transformation we are facing is so significant that, without this capability, it will be difficult to cope.

Has the process already started changing conversations inside the firm?

Margarida: The conversation is already happening.

The future may be two years away, but right now I also have to address short-term concerns. The profiles we need are not yet fully defined. It is not business as usual, but we also recognise that the future is present, even if it has not fully arrived.

So we are watching both the present and what may come next. That is the situation as I see it.

João: It is on top of everyone's mind, even if changes are not yet fully taking place. The future is now in people's minds and in front of their eyes across the firm.

It is becoming clear that things are going to change, that we will have to change, and that we should take control of how that change happens.

Margarida: That is part of the process: helping people's mindsets evolve. Otherwise, change would arrive as a shock, and people would be unprepared. This process helps us address that.

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VIEIRA DE ALMEIDA

Looking back, what do you think was bold about the project?

Margarida: It was bold from both sides: CIFS took on the challenge of entering a new sector, and we chose to take this journey with you.

I believe we did something different in the sector – certainly in Portugal, and perhaps in Europe as well. I trust it will be valuable for both organisations.

João: Perhaps CIFS will now start speaking with more lawyers, although I am not sure that is necessarily good news.

And looking forward, what would you like to keep alive from the collaboration?

João: It would be valuable to reconnect from time to time, to discuss how the work is progressing and share some of the anxieties that come with it.

Building our capacity to continue this work is essential. If there are parts of this capability gap that we cannot address by ourselves, we may seek CIFS' perspective. Maintaining the relationship would therefore be useful.

Call us in three years' time, and if we answer, it means that CIFS has done well, and so have we.