

Cultural connections

Combining elements of his old and new homes underpins the success of Australia's first practising Portuguese lawyer, writes **LYNN ELSEY**.

PHOTOGRAPHY: JASON McCORMACK



An important but often overlooked strength of migrants is that they bring different cultural and intellectual knowledge to their new home and apply it in their work there.

Duarte Bazaliza is no exception. His law firm, Bazaliza Lawyers, incorporates a strong element of Bazaliza's native family-oriented value system, along with detailed knowledge about Portuguese legal matters for his Australian clients.

Bazaliza, who says he is the first Portuguese bar-qualified lawyer to practise in Australia, established his firm in January. The firm covers general legal practice – including migration, family law, property, wills and estates, and immigration – and specialises in Portuguese concerns. His Australian wife, Penelope, is a key part of the enterprise, providing everything from marketing to administrative support.

Like many migrants, Bazaliza came to Australia seeking a better life. After receiving his LLB (equivalent) from Lusíada University in Lisbon in 2004 and carving out a successful career in Lisbon, Bazaliza wasn't satisfied.

"I was doing what I wanted, working in a law firm in Portugal, but questioned what I was getting out of it," he explains.

He decided to spend a year checking out various options, and the opportunity to combine travel with work made Australia an attractive destination. A year later, Bazaliza had fallen under the Aussie spell and found it difficult to leave. So, he decided to take up residency. He wanted to continue to practise law – a decision that undoubtedly tested his resolve at times, as it meant returning to university to complete 13 subjects.

Four years later, after juggling studies at the University of Sydney with part-time work – everything from working in bars to construction –

Bazaliza completed his Legal Profession Admission Board degree. But then another challenge awaited him: finding a firm that was willing to sponsor his mandatory two-year Practical Legal Training program.

He found that getting a foot in the door of a law firm is more difficult for non-traditional students. Those who go straight into law after school are more likely to get selected for summer work programs, internships and graduate roles.

"It's easier for recruiters to pick candidates that tick all the boxes than to give a chance to someone who doesn't," Bazaliza says.

Luckily, he connected with Rob McCourt, the principal of Pymont-based McCourts Solicitors, who agreed to supervise and mentor him.

"It turned out to be a great opportunity," Bazaliza says. "I got great support from Rob. Without him, I wouldn't be where I am today."

Although Bazaliza is well versed in the intricacies of Australian law, he still favours the Portuguese system, as evidenced by his well-loved, multi-tabbed copy of the Portuguese Civil Code. “I still use this, even though it is from 1999,” he explains. “The Portuguese system of law is much easier and more concise, and it changes less frequently. In places such as Italy, Germany and Portugal, written law is based on statute rather than case law. It is much easier when your principles are extractable from the codes.”

Doing business

Bazaliza’s office overlooks Sydney Harbour. But to Bazaliza, the view is secondary. From his viewpoint, the most important aspect of the compact space is that it allows clients and potential clients to see him at work and the importance he places on his family. Photos of his wife and children are key parts of the decor; Penelope is often on hand to keep the office running.

She provides some insight into how a newly minted firm has managed to thrive in Sydney’s competitive market.

“Duarte’s really good at building relationships with people,” she says. “Since starting the firm, he has never needed to invest in advertising; all of his clients have come through word of mouth and LinkedIn.”

Unsurprisingly, Bazaliza has taken full advantage of his Portuguese legal experience. “I have contacts in Portugal, Angola, Mozambique and Brazil, so I have people who can help with problems in those areas,” he explains. “For example, if a lawyer in Portugal needs a solicitor in Australia or vice versa, I can help.

“I liaise with lawyers in Portugal to help my local clients feel confident that everything overseas is okay. I

can speak the language and I have knowledge of Portuguese law and the culture, including how long things can take. It’s important to understand more than just the legal bits, including the cultural side.”

In an increasingly global economy, having the ability to work across cultures is a useful skill, as Bazaliza illustrates.

“When you work across jurisdictions and different countries, you need to see the law as one. I am able to build bridges for the Portuguese,” he says.

Connecting

If Bazaliza ever decides to embark on a new career, he would be shoo-in for a position with the global networking organisation LinkedIn as he has more than 20,000 contacts on LinkedIn. “I spend time on it every day. It generates a lot of leads and a lot of work,” he says.

Bazaliza attributes the success of his firm to the efforts he has made to meet people and make connections.

He also credits his values and the importance he places on being family-oriented. “There is so much emotion involved in legal cases and it is often so stressful, whether someone is trying to buy a property or start their first business,” he says. “I try to give my clients a sense of humanity and let them know I really care about them.”

Bazaliza says that, for now, he wants his firm to remain small and retain its close contact with clients.

“We need to make money but we also need to help people,” he says.

“My office reflects this. I want clients to walk in and know that I am not just their lawyer; I am more than that. I want them to feel comfortable, which is why we set up the office this way, with a beautiful view.” **LSJ**

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