



# A culture of friendship

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**Iberian Lawyer caught up with Ian Gray, chairman of Eversheds Sutherland Europe and Rodrigo Almeida Dias, co-managing partner of Eversheds Sutherland FCB, two years on from their integration.**

by michael heron



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is delivered. Gray also highlighted just how much fun they have with their new Portuguese partners and this is also the Eversheds way. When I first met Gonçalo da Cunha, co-managing partner of Eversheds FCB, nearly ten years ago, he referred to the firm as "a culture of friendship." Both parties being on the same page in this regard, has clearly made this integration so successful.

**It would be fair to say that Eversheds has changed a lot in recent years. Growing from a firm that merged with several regional UK firms, to Eversheds merging with Cambridge-based Palmer Wheelton in 1998. I understand you joined the Nottingham office the year before in 1997. How would you describe the culture back then and how does it compare with today?**

*Ian Gray:* The culture has actually remained remarkably similar. A lot of organisations refer to it, but teamwork and everyone pulling together really does make this place stand out. I have felt it every day since I joined the firm in 1997 and it gets reinforced when we have new lateral partners, new firms and new countries that join us. They then say to us that we emphasised our culture of togetherness, and that they didn't fully appreciate it until they were inside the firm and could feel it for themselves. When I started in Nottingham as a relatively young man, I was given enormous amounts of encouragement, support and

To merge, or not to merge, that is the question. Many of the top Portuguese independent law firms contemplate this every year. Lisbon has been on the map of global law firms for many years. It is not just about Portugal, however, but also the lucrative gateway into Lusophone Africa. When the news was confirmed on the 21st June 2021 that FCB was integrating into Eversheds, it may have seemed from the outside that it was a decision taken quickly due to COVID. This could not be further from the truth. FCB has been working with Eversheds Sutherland for well over a decade as their referral firm in Portugal. As Eversheds has continued to expand and grow its international footprint, the project was becoming more and more attractive to join. For a global firm like Eversheds, the challenge during rapid expansion is always to maintain its culture. Gray sums it up perfectly during this interview. He says it would be a mistake to diminish what makes a firm unique in each jurisdiction and it is more about consistency with how client service



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opportunities created for me. This continues today. Unlike other law firms, we don't reward partners who take the approach or mindset of "my client". We reward partners for creating opportunities for others with their client relationships. We reward people for sharing our clients across the world and across different practice groups. This is really what binds our whole firm and ethos together.

**That makes a lot of sense. How difficult is it to integrate new firms and countries into Eversheds and maintain your culture? Especially given the rapid international expansion the firm has embarked upon in recent years?**

IG: It is a fascinating question, and it has been a real privilege to be in this role. Establishing our presence in Saudi Arabia compared with driving business in Germany or creating a joint venture in Singapore. They all require unique cultural approaches, with different customs and behaviours. Broadly speaking, however, all of our clients want the same things. So, marrying this natural cultural predisposition in any given country with the requirements of consistency is a fascinating balancing act. You don't want to



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#### **RODRIGO ALMEIDA DIAS**

Rodrigo Almeida Dias joined Eversheds Sutherland FCB in 1997, became a Partner in 2006 and Director and co-managing partner in 2015. Rodrigo co-heads the Corporate, Commercial and M&A Department. He also develops a significant part of his practice in the Real Estate and the Banking and Capital Markets sectors, notable expertise in Private Equity and Corporate Finance and substantial knowledge of the TMT sector. He further focuses on Art Law, as a specialty sector. He is a regular speaker in seminars and conferences, and he is the author of multiple opinion articles for national and foreign publications.

try to diminish the particular local flair, skill or individuality, and yet for some of our clients we are working with them in 90 different countries. There will be a businessperson or a lawyer wanting the service to be delivered to them in the same way. One of the biggest cultural challenges for law firms is the combination of the UK, Europe and the US. But from the first meeting six and a half years ago with our US integration, we felt the cultural parity from the very first moment. It is also not just about different jurisdictions, because you can do a combination merger, acquisition, or whatever you want to call it, in the same country, and have two completely different behavioral approaches in a law firm. Sometimes integrating new lateral hires in the same country is more challenging than a firm like FCB in Portugal integrating within Eversheds.

**Rodrigo, you joined FCB the same year that Ian joined Eversheds in 1997. Does it also still feel like the same firm culturally despite all these years?**

*Rodrigo Almeida Dias:* In terms of the overall feeling, it is the same. When I joined in 1997, we had an association with other international firms. Therefore, working with international clients has always been within the D.N.A. of FCB. Now that we are Eversheds Sutherland FCB, it feels like a seamless transition and I can honestly say that after 25 years at the firm, the culture feels the same.

**What was so attractive about FCB that it culminated in their integration with Eversheds?**



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*IG:* It has been a very smooth journey with them. They were our referral firm in Portugal for over ten years before the integration and all of our relationships were well established. Going into a formal integration was the next step. We have 22 continental European countries within Eversheds and we have a well-established and detailed process that we go through before integrating a new country. The first meeting that we had with FCB about the possibility of them joining Eversheds Sutherland, was with Gonçalo da Cunha, Rodrigo Almeida Dias and Pedro Guimarães. It was so obvious that they were a team. Both Rodrigo and Pedro had been Gonçalo's trainees, so that was tight. They talked in very positive terms about Miguel Castelo Branco and his role as the senior partner, who I subsequently had a one-on-one meeting with. FCB were so committed to long term progression and opportunities for everyone within the firm. I felt very confident it was going to work. We had a big event in Portugal in May 2023. We took our entire European Board to Lisbon. Rodrigo spoke about every single one of the partners during the event and he asked one of the youngest and one of the

oldest people in the firm to give their thoughts about their culture and it reflected perfectly the Eversheds Sutherland way.

**Given that FCB has been a successful independent Portuguese firm for a number of years, why was the decision taken to integrate with Eversheds in 2021?**

*RAD:* During our period as an independent firm, we had a number of best friend agreements with international firms and received referrals from them. During the last ten years Eversheds became increasingly important and already represented a huge stake of the referrals. Eversheds has also evolved a lot internationally during this period and we felt it was a perfect match in terms of culture. I am often asked if the integration had anything to do with COVID, and the answer is no. The timing is purely coincidental as our talks had been in our minds prior to this.

**Having spoken with a number of partners at FCB since the integration, they have all told me not just how happy they are, but that the level of work has gone up a notch. I guess without this, all the talk about culture can sound cheap?**

*IG:* Absolutely, after any merger or integration, the new partners, lawyers and business services staff will be thinking, "what's in it for me." Having been involved in many of these new integrations across Europe, I can tell you that we are still just at the beginning of our journey in Portugal and have huge potential to grow even more.

#### IAN GREY

Ian is Executive Partner, responsible for the firm's client strategy and Chairman of Eversheds Sutherland (Europe). In addition to being responsible for the firm's 19 continental Europe countries, Ian works alongside Managing Partner International and Co-Chief Executive in the running of Eversheds Sutherland (International). He is also a member of the Global Executive of Eversheds Sutherland. He joined the firm in 1997 and became a partner in 1999. Previous senior roles have included International Managing Partner (2015-2017), leadership of Litigation Practice Group (2008-2015), and senior management sponsor for Gender Diversity (2011-2017).



**Rodrigo, you mentioned the similarities between the culture at Eversheds and FCB, what were they specifically?**

*RAD:* The approach that they have, their proactiveness and the type of answers they give to clients. As Ian said, it is impossible to generate the same culture across different jurisdictions, but where we are all the same, is in the way we deliver our services to our clients. That is what I believe defines our shared culture. After two years as part of Eversheds, I can unequivocally say that we made the right decision, and this is all down to our cultural synergy.

**What impact has the integration had on your business in Portugal and lusophone Africa?**

*RAD:* There is clearly a big difference between being a relationship firm and an integrated firm. So, despite a high volume of quality work we had been receiving before the integration, things have massively stepped during the last two years. We are now more sophisticated regarding our internal policies towards ESG and conflicts of interest, for example. We would have reached this point by ourselves, but it would have taken us much longer, as the Eversheds world has already been organised perfectly for us to integrate into. We now have access to several global clients of the firm which we didn't work with before. The biggest difference is that previously our referral relationship consisted of the UK predominantly, whereas now we work with other international offices such as the US, France and Germany.

**How important is FCB to your Africa strategy and were you aware of just how strong their presence is in lusophone countries such as Angola and Mozambique?**

*IG:* Yes, I was very much aware of this. I was our

international managing partner from 2015-2017 and have been on our international executive committee for 12 years. We have been in Africa with a presence in South Africa and various francophone jurisdictions for a number of years. In 2014 we put together an African group to give our multinational clients a one stop shop. It is really significant that we now have Eversheds Sutherland Angola and Eversheds Sutherland Mozambique through FCB, as it allows us to project anglophone, francophone and lusophone Africa to our client base.

**We have seen a number of international firms try to manage their lusophone Africa strategy from their South African firm. Is this a mistake given the natural gateway Portugal allows into countries such as Angola and Mozambique?**

*IG:* To be fair, ever since 2010, our South African leadership told us, don't think for one moment you can run other parts of Africa from here. They were consistent on that and never tried to do it. What we now have is a five-pronged leadership group for Africa. This includes João Robles from FCB, our leader for South Africa, our leader for Tunisia, our Paris based partner who manages a lot of our Africa work our overall leader John Kemkers and a partner who splits his time between Lond and the Middle East, given the important UAE gateway to Africa. Since FCB joined Eversheds we really feel things in Africa have stepped up and we feel more connected with the continent. If I can just finish by saying that, despite Spain and Portugal being two very different countries, having a full Iberian presence is also critical for us. We are really optimistic both countries can help each other grow.

**Rodrigo, how important was it for FCB to integrate into Eversheds, in order to also attract the top law graduate talent?**

*RAD:* For law graduates, we can offer the opportunity to go on secondments abroad and travel. This has already started to happen. Whereas previously we were a Portuguese, Angolan and Mozambican firm, we are now a global firm. I think this offers huge opportunities to graduates who want to build a career with us. We also have a culture that rewards loyalty. This has been the case with most of our partners who joined the firm as trainees, myself included. 

