

Member Spotlight: João Valadas Coriel

Philosopher, feminist, futurist... lawyer



João Valadas Coriel, Founder and Managing Partner - Valadas, Coriel & Associados

João Valadas Coriel is an experienced trial lawyer, strong on witness and evidence examination. He pleads frequently to the Portuguese Supreme Court as well as the five Portuguese Regional Appeal Courts, personally handling high profile cases for major clients.

He regularly advises CEOs and top directors of Portuguese companies on sensitive cases, weighing the pros and cons of settling or moving to full-blown litigation.

Currently managing partner of Valadas Coriel & Associados, he leads and coordinates across all departments. His expertise and decisiveness are sought to break deadlocks, close deals, and generally get things to the next level. He excels in leading teams and participates frequently as a speaker at workshops, seminars and conferences in his practice areas.

“Audaces fortuna juvat” (fortune favours the bold). The only way to truly experience the richness of life is to take risks.

That is the basic tenet that informs João Coriel's approach to existence; and it has played a crucial part in helping him find equilibrium between running a successful legal practice and enjoying a fulfilling home life.

As a young college student in Lisbon, João sat a vocational test which suggested three potential career paths; philosopher, journalist or lawyer. Following our interview, it is clear that he is all three of those things.

He began studying at law school but quit after two years, becoming disillusioned with a conventional teaching approach that did not encourage debate or creativity; all that was required was to memorise textbooks and parrot them uncritically. He ventured as a concert promoter when he was 20, promoting gigs with Alvin Lee and ten years later with The Teardrop Explodes, 999 and Tom Robinson Band. A total financial failure but a valuable lesson for life. He became a journalist instead, fulfilling the second career option offered up by the vocational test, unwilling as he was to risk starvation as a dream-eyed philosopher. That didn't last.

A year of travel in France and Morocco followed, sleeping rough and sometimes living off the kindness of strangers and friends, until he decided to embark on a legal career once more, excited by the new possibilities of Portugal's imminent entry into the European Union.

João says: “When I wandered through Europe in my early 20s, the Portuguese could not settle and work legally in Europe. We joined in 1986, but we didn't have free movement until 1992. I was often starving with very little money for food and I slept rough, but I was helped by complete strangers. These experiences gave me a great deal of faith in humanity, and, now, I always look for the positives in people. You can be wronged by bad people, but you cannot let this prevent you from taking the opportunity to meet interesting and caring individuals.”

Following this grounding experience João went back to law school and was again disappointed with their approach to law teaching; it still seemed that the faculty only cared for arcane Portuguese Law, giving little importance to European Law or the rest of the world. Despite this, he persisted in his training, graduated and eventually became a lawyer. By that point he had two young daughters

to support and could not afford to take the conventional route of becoming a trainee at a large firm; so, in 1995, he began to practice on his own.

Anyone with a different approach to risk would not have considered such a difficult undertaking, but João felt he had little choice and revelled in the challenge.

"I struggled at first and asked lots of people for advice or just plain help. I asked judges, prosecutors, teachers, colleagues; anyone with experience. I was humble and eager for answers and collaboration, so it was lucky I have an outgoing, extrovert personality.

"I started to build a small practice in everything from criminal to family law because it was all about survival. Back in those days there were severe restrictions on the cases an apprentice lawyer could take on, but if I was appointed by the court, within legal assistance to the poor, there were no such boundaries. That's how I found myself, semi-terrified, pleading before the Supreme Court. After a while I realised I was good enough; I had a lot of success with the Appeal and Supreme Courts, clients came back and I started working for more pre-eminent people, earning respect from my peers. My reputation rose."

Valadas Coriel & Associados is still a small practice, with four partners and 20 lawyers, but João's experiences have created an unconventional firm with a very clear philosophy. He likes to employ people with compassion and experience who value a good work-life balance; not surprisingly then, the majority of his lawyers are women. The testosterone-fuelled arena of big law is anathema to João.

He says: "We don't have lawyers willing to work 60-70 hours a week as a default mode, because we want them to have a family life, read books, travel, enjoy an opera, or do whatever they enjoy! People with life knowledge and fulfilled lives tend to be better lawyers, because they have a greater understanding of cultures and clients. More than

35 per cent of our revenue comes from foreign clients, so it's very important to know how to deal with someone from the USA, Brazil or China."

"We want our lawyers to have a family life, read books, travel, enjoy an opera, or do whatever they enjoy!"

João is also keen to embrace the future of law, believing that the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) will benefit law firms rather than threaten them. In his view, AI can be harnessed to carry out the more mundane tasks, leaving lawyers free to resurrect the noble profession first imagined by the great Roman legal philosopher Cicero and defend the rights of citizens against abuses of power.

"We are moving away from a paradigm in which lawyers just know about the law. We need to be advisers, showing clients what is best for them. Embracing this AI revolution will emphasise people skills, leaving the processing of legal documents to machines. Lawyers will make decisions and give advice in the future. Maybe the best lawyers will have to be polymaths."

João intends to use this paradigm shift to triple the size of his business over the next few years, concentrating on building an international client base that shares his principles. As senior partner, he will no longer manage the firm, but focus on business development.

Stepping back from day-to-day responsibilities should also give him more time to indulge in his passions for travel, history, reading and music. He is a keen follower of contemporary history and takes great care to impress the lessons of the past upon his youngest children, two boys aged eight and six; particularly during family holidays.

"It puzzles me how Europeans could kill each other on such a scale in the 20th Century, so I am keen to understand how our forefathers got into that mess. People don't have enough memory or understanding of the past and that is why they don't realise how great the time we live in now is."

"When we take the kids to France, we will spend two days at Euro Disney and two at the Louvre, or two days in Chamonix and two at Versailles. You have to tell a story to keep them interested in history. In Versailles it might be guillotined heads and in the Louvre it might be about how paintings preceding Instagram."

João is currently reading a few books: a biography of America's Founding Father Alexander Hamilton and Tom Wolfe's *The Kingdom of Speech*. He will also always have the latest book by Yasmina Reza, Michel Houellebecq or Malcom Gladwell on his bookshelf. Ask him for a recommendation though and he will suggest Gore Vidal's *Creation or Julian*; the perfect choices for a philosopher with an historical bent.

As time goes by though, João's priorities have begun to change: "Time is now my greatest luxury and I don't have enough to do everything I want to. I'm focusing on being a problem solver at an international level and I was recently admitted to the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators of London. I believe in going after the solutions rather than revelling in the process, and I'm sure most of the parties I work with prefer expediency and decisiveness over protracted and interminable processes."

One of João's other passions is pro-bono work in criminal cases, something that comes from a desire to help people who have made mistakes.

He concludes: "There are a lot of kids out there who have done stupid things, and they deserve a second chance. Putting an experienced lawyer in their corner helps. I did my share of stupid things back in the day, and it really feels good to give back."



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Valadas Coriel & Associados was established in 2001. VCA has build a very energetic team sporting partners and associates that combine experience and expertise from Law to Economics and Management. The dynamic yet informal work environment has attracted a number of lawyers from major domestic and international law firms.