Size matters

Revenue at CCA Ontier has doubled in the last five years, but the firm has plans for further expansion and wants to become one of Portugal's biggest hitters



Lisbon law firm CCA Ontier has enjoyed a period of consistent growth in recent years, but managing partner Domingos Cruz wants more. "The firm has had double-digit growth for the last five years, and in 2016 we opened an office in Oporto," he says. "However, in three to five years, we want to be one of the top ten firms in Portugal by any way you measure that, whether it's invoicing, profits per partner (PPP), or number of lawyers – we want to grow to around 70 to 80 lawyers." CCA Ontier does not publicly disclose revenue figures, however Cruz says that the firm's revenue has doubled in the last five years. The total revenue of Ontier – the global firm of which CCA Ontier is the Portuguese arm – increased 10.5 per cent to €51.2m in 2016. Ontier has offices in 14 jurisdictions.

CCA Ontier's growth has largely been driven by work for international clients, according to Cruz. "We have been advising on real estate deals, M&A, as well as advising companies opening businesses in Portugal," he explains. "We have also been active in the Brazilian market – when the Brazilian market fell, Brazilian investors saw Portugal as an option." In addition, the firm has been advising a significant number of family offices. "There has been a wide range of investments in Portugal, some clients came from Colombia and we have been advising start-ups from outside Portugal on setting up here," says Cruz. "We have also been advising venture capital firms from other countries, the number of investors coming to Portugal is increasing." Cruz also highlights the firms technology, media and telecommunications practice – as well as its intellectual property team – as having been being particularly active, especially in relation to data protection, compliance and gambling.

Further integration

A key objective for CCA Ontier is professionalising the structure of the firm. "We have a very professional structure, including a finance director, an events director, a marketing director – clients want a professional service, the growth of non-lawyers at the firm has been greater than that of lawyers." CCA Ontier currently has 20 non-lawyers in the firm, along with 50 lawyers, which includes seven partners, of which five are equity partners and two are non-equity partners. Strengthening CCA Ontier's ties with other Ontier offices around the world is another priority for Cruz. He says: "The main goal for us and Ontier is to have the same clients worldwide, we want to deepen the integration with Ontier – this could involve working jointly on business development with Ontier in Spain, or Portuguese lawyers doing business development in London, or greater integration of models of working, for example having Spanish lawyers speaking Portuguese." Cruz explains his philosophy in this way: "When you're doing legal work, you're developing business, and when you're developing business, you're providing legal advice - either way you're giving value."

CCA Ontier fact file	
Partners:	7 (5 equity, 2 non-equity)
Lawyers:	50
Revenue:	Undisclosed

Start-up culture

Portugal is currently a hotbed for technology start-ups, demonstrated by the fact that Lisbon was chosen as the city to host the Web Summit – Europe's largest technology conference, an event that included CCA Ontier among its sponsors. The firm's Startinnovation initiative seeks to capitalise on Lisbon's status as a magnet for entrepreneurs, both in Portugal and elsewhere. The Startinnovation team is a group of lawyers that specialise in areas of law that are crucial to developing a business, including private equity and venture capital, corporate, M&A, technology and telecommunications, intellectual property, employment, tax and international law. The team is geared towards advising entrepreneurs and offers particular expertise in advising start-ups and SMEs. Cruz says that CCA Ontier offers discounted fees for start-ups, but he adds that if the firm advises a start-up which then grows into a much larger business, it may have "found work for the next decade". He adds: "If we can't reach Galp, we want to reach the next Galp." Cruz says it is also important to understand how technology companies represent the future for many sectors. "Fintech is replacing banks and Insurtech is replacing insurance companies."

Point of entry

However, the Portuguese economy is still "weak", according to Cruz. "The economy spends more than it earns, and is affected by international crises." But he adds there are some positives in that pension funds and institutional investors are increasingly being drawn to Portugal, and in addition, Brazilian companies see Portugal as a "point of entry into Europe". He adds that Portugal also has a growing reputation as a "technology hub".

Unlike many other law firms in Portugal, CCA Ontier is not targeting the African market. Cruz says that CCA Ontier is not active in the oil and gas sectors, which are two of Angola's most important industries. Meanwhile, one of the problems with Mozambique is the fact there is a "lot of red tape", says Cruz. He continues: "It's easier to play to Ontier's strengths, which is in Latin America in countries such as Mexico, Ecuador and Paraguay."

Massive discount

Cruz is a firm believer in the benefits artificial intelligence can offer the legal sector. "Artificial intelligence can do half of what young lawyers do sometimes for around 70 per cent discount in cost," he says. "Consequently, law firms need to find new ways to structure added value – lawyers need to adapt, they need to become risk assessors and business developers, they have to develop business acumen, but they need a solid ground of legal knowledge." Cruz also predicts that there will be fewer law firms in Portugal in the future. "There may be very small boutiques, but you need to have knowledge management and that can only be done by bigger firms," he adds. Would CCA Ontier merge in order to get bigger? "We would consider the option," says Cruz.

Looking for inspiration

Ensuring lawyers work as a team is one of the main challenges facing law firm managing partners, according to Cruz. "We need alignment, we need to be rowing in the same direction. However, you need to address lawyers' frustrations and ambitions, because the new generation need to be inspired; it can be difficult to ask them to do a 12-hour day – the new generation act differently, their biggest aspiration is not necessarily being a partner." Cruz adds. "You need to reward them and give them the incentives they want."

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> Domingos Cruz
> CCA Ontier



Indeed, Cruz says the demographics of law firms will change considerably in the future. Of the firm's seven partners, two are women, but the balance will shift imminently. Cruz says: "The huge majority of lawyers in this firm are women – there will be more women partners than men in the next two years."