In the Spotlight: Maria Valente-Fernandes, Trolley

Maria Valente-Fernandes spent the first nine years of her career with us, focusing mostly on labour and employment (L&E) litigation at our Montréal office. Once in-house, her practice progressed along two noticeable axes, involving smaller and smaller companies on the one hand, but higher and broader responsibilities on the other.

BLG Partner André Royer, Maria's mentor during her BLG years, conducted a spotlight interview with his former pupil. Together, they explored her professional evolution up to her recent move to Trolley, an on-the-rise payout platform fresh out of a B-series financing round, where she is VP Legal & Corporate Secretary since July 2024.

Building on a solid BLG legacy

Looking back on what she describes as an incredible learning experience, Maria loved the variety of specializations and working styles budding professionals are exposed to at a full-service firm like ours. "It's an opportunity to observe various people who are further along in their career, learn how they became successful, and pick up on key behaviours that they have, including how they engage with clients. Those are things that you really absorb as a young lawyer," she says.

A BLG lesson that stands out is the meaning of exceptional service. "Part of it is responsiveness, seeing how, for clients, their file is the most important thing that's going on in their life. But another part involves building trust and developing a sense of team, showing that you're approachable, that you're knowledgeable and invested, and truly becoming that trusted advisor, which amounts to so much more than just a legal expert," sums up Maria.

Years invested in litigation further honed such lessons, and Maria notes how time spent preparing for trials, then appearing in court with clients, often ends up creating bonds that endure. Her litigation toolkit includes cross-examination skills she picked up from her mentor André, skills that come in handy to this day, well outside of disputes. The ties to André and other BLGers stayed strong after she left the Firm, and Maria has remained a BLG client through all of her subsequent positions; she's a client, a friend, and a fan, to this day.

The road to the top

Despite her initial litigation training — and temporary focus on L&E — Maria set in motion other possibilities once she made the jump to in-house roles. Over time, she would become more of a generalist, not to mention a business strategist. However, at Bell, her first in-house position actually deepened her L&E litigation savvy. "There were tens of thousands of employees and all sorts of unionized positions, so lots of litigation files. I was pleading multiple times a month in various provinces, which really accelerated that skill set," she remembers.

It wasn't long before a move to Lightspeed, a popular payment solution provider, would change all that. "Lightspeed was a global company, but much smaller, which gave me an opportunity to ascend into a leadership position. I also transitioned into more of a corporate role, this time running the employment function globally, touching on enterprise risk management, ESG, privacy, and more. All of a sudden, I had the opportunity to work more closely with the board of directors, which I'd never had before," Maria explains.

In July 2024, she joined Trolley, an even smaller organization and another payment solution provider, where she now runs the legal function in its entirety as part of the company's leadership. "Something that I've learned through my in-house career is that I love to be part of creation and building, of laying down some foundations. You have more of an ability to do so in a less mature organization. There are so many different growth opportunities and directions where we can go at Trolley right now, it's really exciting," says Maria.

On the heels of recently closing its Series B financing, a huge milestone for any startup, Trolley is sure to keep its VP Legal busy as it now strategically charts its future; Maria greets this new challenge with open arms.

On actioning all the lessons learned and giving back

In Maria's world, each experience, positive or less positive, is a building block. Taken together, these accumulated experiences are what provide depth to any counsel she offers. This is certainly true at work, but also for her associations outside of work.

"I'm currently involved with On Our Own (O3), a Montréal-based not-for-profit that provides transitional housing to single-parent households with young children. The parents are typically young, themselves, and can stay for a two- to three-year period as they develop skills in parenting, financial literacy, maintaining healthy relationships, etc. I love that the mission is to get people back on their feet," says Maria.

Using objective criteria is of paramount importance to the board of On Our Own (O3) so that they can ensure that the selection remains fair. Maria's legal expertise is of particular help in reviewing the entire selection process, at the moment.

"I believe the most critical skill that lawyers bring to the table is the ability to effectively problem-solve. I was instilled at a young age with the importance of giving back to your community, and this is a wonderful opportunity to do it."

Growing as a lawyer: Advice for doers and dreamers alike

With such a track record, you would think this BLG alum had it all figured out from the get-go. Not so, according to her.

“When you look at people in general counsel roles, or heading up a legal function, they typically have a very corporate background. I didn’t, and the biggest lesson that I've learned within the last year is not to let other people put limits on what you're capable of achieving,” concludes Maria.