

“Winning factors: active listening and lack of arrogance”

Interview by Alessandra Zocca



Giulia Mauri

Partner at Verhaegen Walravens - Aviation & Transport

Giulia, I was very pleased to be invited to an interesting event organised by “Intercompany Talent Platform”, which is a collaboration project between IBM, Starwood Hotels and Verhaegen Walravens, the latter being the law office where you are a Partner.

Can you explain more about this platform that Verhaegen Walravens sponsors?

I met Melanie Barker of Fulcra and Yves Veulliet of IBM at an event organized by PWI. Together with Starwood Hotels, we all share a strong interest in the promotion of diversity and talent within companies and organizations. Therefore, some time ago, we decided to create a joint project for the organization of a series of small seminars promoting the debate around issues such as gender policies, diversity and the role of talent within companies.

The idea is to reach an audience of about 20 people per event. This relatively small number of participants allows everybody to speak up to share ideas and doubts, and to ask questions. We launched the format in September and we were very happy about the level of participation that the first seminar has attracted. The debate that followed the presentation indicated clearly that the participants were honestly interested in the topics discussed; they wanted to share their views and were open to various suggestions.

The last event took place on October 15th. I believe that the two speakers at this event were complementary: so I, together with Mr. Thierry Hubert, director of Brussels South Charleroi Airport, have presented a comparative view of the different regimes in place in different EU countries to promote the participation of women in boards of directors and we have in particular discussed why and how quotas were introduced in different countries, how directors are currently selected and what it is important to do or not do if you wish to sit on a board.

These seminars proved very interesting and we are planning to deliver a similar seminar to other interested parties who could not participate to this interesting Intercompany Talent Platform's session.

How did you get interested in topics such as gender, diversity and talent development?

For most of my working life, I believed that if you want to reach a goal, you just have to put your mind to it. Even though I still believe that you cannot reach a goal if you do not put all your efforts into reaching the objective, I have also come to realize that, as a woman (like other minorities), you are often confronted with stereotypes that act like a glass wall: you hit the wall, but you do not see it and you do not understand what has blocked you.

By discussing with other women about their working experiences, I came to realize how, as a woman, you may not only be judged on the basis of your skills, but also on the basis of other people's stereotypes:

- If you have young children, you are too busy to become a business partner
- If you are pregnant, you should relax and stop travelling
- If you do not stay at home with your children when they are little, you are a bad mother
- If you can no longer be available 24/7, you cannot do your job properly, and so on and so forth.

This new awareness made me curious to know what were the issues involved, the studies that had been done and the discussions currently surrounding gender issues. I started reading materials and having a look at statistics. I went to seminars and conferences and I slowly started developing my own idea about the problem.

I now believe that we all use judgmental shortcuts that allow us to categorize people without making the effort to really listen to the person before us: all Germans are well organized and good at producing technological goods; all Italians are extremely creative, but very disorganized; all lawyers are clever and slimy and all women love shopping and gossiping about their friends.

Like all "general" statements, they are wrong and therefore produce errors when they become an unconscious bias for (or against) recruiting or promoting people. Let me give you an example: you are recruiting a fashion advisor for a famous brand of clothing. Would you appoint a German?

The fact is that you are not recruiting "a" German; you are recruiting "that specific person" before you, with that CV and that expertise. If candidates are judged on the basis of stereotypes, the recruiter may make the wrong decision and appoint the wrong candidate.

This hits women in particular as there are so many stereotypes about women, often perpetrated by the media, and by our own families and friends, that being considered as a person and not a category sometimes proves to be extremely difficult.

How are women perceived in your profession of law, and in the aviation and transport industry your main sector of specialization? Please can you also give us an overview of your responsibilities?

I have been working as a lawyer in private practice for almost 16 years. Even though I practice general corporate and commercial law, my main fields of expertise are the negotiation of international contracts and international finance. In addition to this, I have been working closely with the aviation and transport sectors (including rail, road and logistics) for more than 10 years and I now feel that I know these sectors quite well.

At Verhaegen Walravens, I head the Aviation & Transport Department which advise on legal issues relevant to companies active in the transport and logistics sectors. As I am double qualified to practice law in Italy and Belgium, a few years ago I created the Italian Practice. The Italian practice is a cross-sector and cross-practice group that delivers Belgian law advice in Italian for Italian companies and Italian law advice for foreign companies willing to invest in Italy. The in-depth knowledge of two different legal systems allows us to be able to compare the two systems and to deliver clear and comprehensive advice to our clients.

Both of my fields of expertise (finance and transport) are fields where women still remain a minority. I often sit in meetings where I am the only woman usually surrounded by men with strong personalities (and egos).

I believe that my strong points in dealing with legal issues are my ability to listen and my lack of arrogance. These two elements have allowed me over the years to learn quite fast as people who are proud of what they do (and luckily in the transport sector people are still proud of their work) are usually very happy to explain things.

Active listening proves to be rewarding, here are some examples:

- Listening to a client's expectations is for me of paramount importance to understand their needs and finally for being able to advise him or her correctly and in line with what they are expecting. Arrogance is for me an enormous limitation when doing business as it "blinds" you and does not allow you to see things as they really are.
- The ability to listen has also allowed me to overcome a stereotype that is sometimes present in the transport sector: it is a common belief that women and lawyers (and for that matter a female lawyer!) cannot understand technical aspects linked to this sector.
- I still remember a meeting with the engineers in charge of maintenance at the fleet of a European airline. We were negotiating a lease agreement and we had to negotiate the technical aspects linked to maintenance. The engineers walked into the meeting room, looking desperately at their watches. Their faces clearly indicated that they considered this meeting was a waste of time. As we started discussing the lease, they realized that I knew what I was talking about and they asked that the meeting time be extended and we all worked together to define a contractual strategy that could suit our mutual needs.

I asked questions and carefully listened to their answers and explanations. The result of this exchange of ideas and the development of a legal/technical strategy was a great saving for the airline

in maintenance costs for each of its aircraft. I do believe that if engineers and lawyers work hand in hand they could bring huge results!

How did you develop your interest in the law practice? Has it been a tradition in your family or were you inspired by a fact or by somebody?

Since my early days, I have always had a strong sense of justice and independence.

I clearly remember the day when I decided that I would become a lawyer. I must have been 16 or 17 when I watched "*Legal Eagles*". In this film, a handsome Robert Redford plays a district attorney who starts working with a young lawyer (played by Debra Winger) on a defense case involving a troubling and mysterious Daryl Hannah. I would have loved to be the character played by Debra Winger: clever and passionate about her job.

Five years of university studies, several years of badly paid traineeship and a difficult exam to be admitted to the Bar have contributed in bringing my feet back to the ground, but I still remain convinced that I made the right choice.

What do you particularly like about your job?

My direct contacts at clients' level are either the internal legal department or the directors of the relevant company. Whether I work with the in-house legal experts or the directors depends on the internal organization of the company and the strategic importance attributed to the relevant project.

For important projects that involve mergers and acquisitions or strategic developments, I usually work directly with the board of directors. This is an extremely interesting experience. Indeed, as a lawyer, you have the opportunity to witness how decisions are taken at board level and you may contribute to the discussions and to the development of a project, but you always remain an external, independent and technical expert. This gives you a privileged position as you may observe how each board functions, what the interactions are between the different directors and how decisions are finally taken.

I very much enjoy this part of my work.

I also like my sectors of expertise and, in particular, the aviation sector. In this industry, people are extremely passionate about their job. It is not unusual to find that CEOs of airlines are also former pilots or engineers with a passion for flying. In particular, in the sector of business aviation, many companies have been founded or are managed by former civilian or military pilots.

This gives the industry its characteristic feel of being pioneer-led. The aviation industry is also by definition extremely international and you have the possibility to work with people coming from extremely different cultures and backgrounds.

What advice would you give to a young woman lawyer about developing her career?

As general advice, I would tell every lawyer that all law firms are "pyramids": only a few go up all the way to become partner. At a certain level of the pyramid, the competition becomes tough and you will be dependent on other people's choices, on internal policies and on a number of other variable factors that do not depend on you or on how good you are.

What will be required of you, will be to have a portfolio of clients. In most cases, this request will be brought to you completely unannounced. Until that point everybody told you to work 24/7 on the clients of the firm, and to be available night and day and at weekends, and, all of a sudden, you need your own client base. And when were you supposed to get those clients?

My advice is: always remember that as a lawyer, clients will want to work with you if they trust you. Be honest to yourself and to your clients and act in a correct and ethical way towards your counterparts. Try to develop your own clientele at an early stage: working for your own clients is extremely satisfactory.

As regards female lawyers, I would like to remind them that it is obviously important to do your job properly and be good at what you do (this is a pre-requisite), but you do not have to underestimate the importance of networking even at an early stage of your career. This suggestion is based on my personal experience, as I know that many networking events and occasions are quite "male dominated" and it is often difficult for

women (and even more so for young women) to break into “male-dominated” conversations. If I may share a piece of advice it is this is: if you are confronted with a wall of ties and black suits, imagine you are wearing one yourself and, even if you do not believe it, act as if you belonged there!

For a couple of years you worked as editor for the “Airlines Magazine”, a non-profit internet journal on air transportation matters, with a broad target readership of both academic and business backgrounds. Tell us about this experience and your talent in writing.

The experience with Airlines Magazine has been extremely interesting since, as you mention, we hosted articles about aviation written by people coming from different backgrounds: we had articles written by economists, engineers, scientists and university researchers. The project was run on a voluntary basis and we reached a point where we needed to become more professional, but unfortunately we did not have sufficient resources to take the step to become a quasi-professional publication.

However, I have always liked writing and I write quite regularly on specialized topics for the Italian and international press. I co-operate quite regularly with Bart International, a publication dedicated to the business aviation industry, where I write the section called “The Docket” containing a legal analysis of issues affecting the industry. I also work with the Italian publication “Contratto & Impresa – Europe”, a quarterly publication of high level legal articles. The publication is read mainly by academics and law firms.

I am currently writing an article for “Rivista Tir”, the publication of the Italian Foreign Minister dedicated to road transport in Italy. The article will make a comparison between the Italian system which controls road transport operators and the systems of control used in other European countries.

I truly like writing. It gives me the opportunity to give my point of view on legal issues affecting a certain sector of the industry. It also gives me the opportunity to make time to study certain legal problems more in-depth in order to be able to deliver a piece of work that could contribute to the debate surrounding topics which are judged “hot” by the industry.

Short Biography

Giulia heads the Aviation & Transport Department and the Italian Practice of Verhaegen Walravens. She has more than 15 years' experience in advising national and international clients on international contractual matters and she specializes in aviation and transport law, including asset-finance and leasing, regulatory issues, carrier's liability and litigation matters.

Giulia holds an LLM in International and European law from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven and a Diplôme d'Etudes Universitaires Françaises from the University Jean Monnet, Lyon III. She graduated in law at Turin University.

She publishes on selected topics of transport law and international law in the specialized press and she is regularly invited as a speaker at seminars and events.

She speaks English, French and Italian and has a working knowledge of Dutch

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