The Value of Ethics: How Joana Guerra Transformed Compliance At Nestle?

Interviews and Profiles

As the senior labor relations, compliance, and business principle manager for Nestlé in Portugal, Joana Guerra is constantly called upon to ensure company compliance with changing labor standards. While many lawyers view this practice as an easy way to protect revenue, Guerra has a

different perspective. By integrating ethics into company practices, she hopes to expand productivity at Nestlé by ensuring that labor standards are viewed as more than just a compliance requirement.

“I have a broader perspective on compliance” she explains. “Many people view compliance as a company’s best weapon against a regulator. To me, it’s important to also consider the ethics behind any decision you make. You can be compliant and not be ethical. You need both [ethics and compliance] to be successful. By bringing this integrated perspective on compliance to Nestlé, I am able to add value to the company,” she says.Guerra attributes these values to her parents, who emphasized the importance of hard work and compassion when she was child. Joana’s father was the oldest of eight brothers, and started working when he was a 12-year-old. Joana’s mother enrolled at university after taking time off to start a family, and would go on to work in the mayor’s office in Lisbon, Portugal’s capital.

“I was always very inspired by how hardworking they were. They set an example for how to succeed, and emphasized the importance of caring for others,” she says.Guerra’s ambition would ultimately motivate her to study law at a young age. In the Portuguese educational system, students in the ninth grade are required to select a track that will ultimately dictate their adult profession. When it came time to make that decision, Guerra just wanted to make a difference.

“I never knew anyone who practiced law in my family. I would look at people around me, and think that I wanted to make them proud. I wanted to work hard. I didn’t want to be lazy,” she says.Guerra found her passion for justice at the University of Lisbon.

“At 17, I thought I knew everything already. I wanted to have the power to change the world a bit. I didn’t like to see people in positions of power take advantage of those below them,” she remembers.This drive prompted Guerra to join an elite international legal competition for student lawyers. The experience served as a crash course in European law, and allowed her to network with some of the world’s brightest legal minds.

While participating in the competition, Guerra met a partner at Garrigues, a multinational law firm. Admiring her work ethic, the lawyer, who had posed as a judge for the competition, offered her a position at the firm upon graduation. The fast-paced environment enticed Guerra and allowed her to hone her legal abilities outside the classroom.

“I was there for five years. It taught me how to work. At the firm, you can either move up the ladder, or you fail. It’s highly competitive. I am so grateful for everything that I learned there. I learned how to anticipate the client’s needs and not settle for what they ask for,” she recalls.Although the experience was valuable to her professional evolution, Guerra became increasingly enticed by the world of in-house counsel. After five years with the firm, she started searching for an open in-house position at a company with a well-known ethical background.

Guerra submitted an application to Nestlé Portugal as a junior labor specialist. While the company had already begun interviewing for the position, they allowed Guerra to enter the application process as a finalist. Although she had no experience in labor relations, Guerra’s quick wit and innovative perspective ultimately landed her the role.“I said to them, ‘I will learn everything there is to learn in one month’s time. Give me the opportunity, and I will do it. You will never see me ask for help, or be unable to finish a task. I will master this position.’ And so I did,” she says.

At Nestlé Portugal, Guerra focused the scope of company compliance to focus on the country’s hyper-local laws. While this ensured that Nestlé was compliant with even the smallest of jurisdictions,

it also required her think quickly and mitigate compliance risks before they arise. To remain ahead of the curve, she began to observe regulatory trends in Spain and Italy, and adapted new standards to the Nestlé model.“In Portugal, we still don’t have a law that regulates diversity and inclusion. However, other countries already do. I try to be attentive to that. So if we come to have a law in Portugal that implements this kind of regulation, Nestlé would not have to worry because we are already aligned. I try to anticipate these changes so that we can focus on our business while our competitors have to stop and adapt,” she says.

Guerra underscores the importance of her role in protecting the employees that rely on her. On a personal level, she hopes that strengthening job security to Nestlé’s workforce will contribute to higher levels of engagement and bolster the company’s reputation on a global scale.“I count on all of Nestlé’s employees to be the main ambassadors of labor compliance. If they are happy, they will work harder. If not, they will clock in during regular business hours and refuse to put in the extra effort. I believe that if you make your work environment positive, your employees will be more willing to put in the extra effort,” she says.

When Europe began to experience an economic recession in 2010, there was often pressure on companies to compromise their ethics for the sake of revenue protection. Nevertheless, Guerra remained determined to consolidate Nestlé’s compliance practices in Portugal and ensure that her employees were protected.“I don’t think it’s fair to cut off the dreams of people because of an economic crisis. During the recession, young people were strongly affected. I tried to advocate for them as much as I could. They would ask me: ‘Are we being compliant?’ I would say ‘Yes but think beyond compliance. Think that a persons’ dreams are behind this decision.’ This is not just a piece of paper,” she says.

It was through her clear vision for the future of compliance at Nestlé that Guerra was honored with a 2016 ACC European Counsel award. To Guerra, the award represents the power of remaining faithful to one’s convictions. “It was of course a great recognition. It motivates my passion for work and validates my vision of compliance at Nestlé,” she says.After seven years, Guerra is considering a transition to Nestlé’s human resources department in the hopes of adapting her experiences in labor to help people on a broader scale.

“I’m 34 years old, and if I were to be doing this all of my life, I would be happy. But I’m trying to get out of my comfort zone. I’ve always wanted to lead by example and pave the way for the future of labor law practice. This change will allow me to explore that further,” she says.

Looking back on her professional career, Guerra has never strayed from her moral compass. Her steadfast leadership and unyielding interest in building strong corporate business principles have reinforced Nestlé’s main objectives by applying ethics to both internal and external business practices. When asked to summarize her career, and the effect that she hopes to make in the future, Guerra simply stated:

“I’m in-house counsel. I’m not selling anything and I’m not face-to-face with the customers. But I am still driving labor law, and I have a responsibility to act on my ethics.”

Getting To Know… Joana Guerra

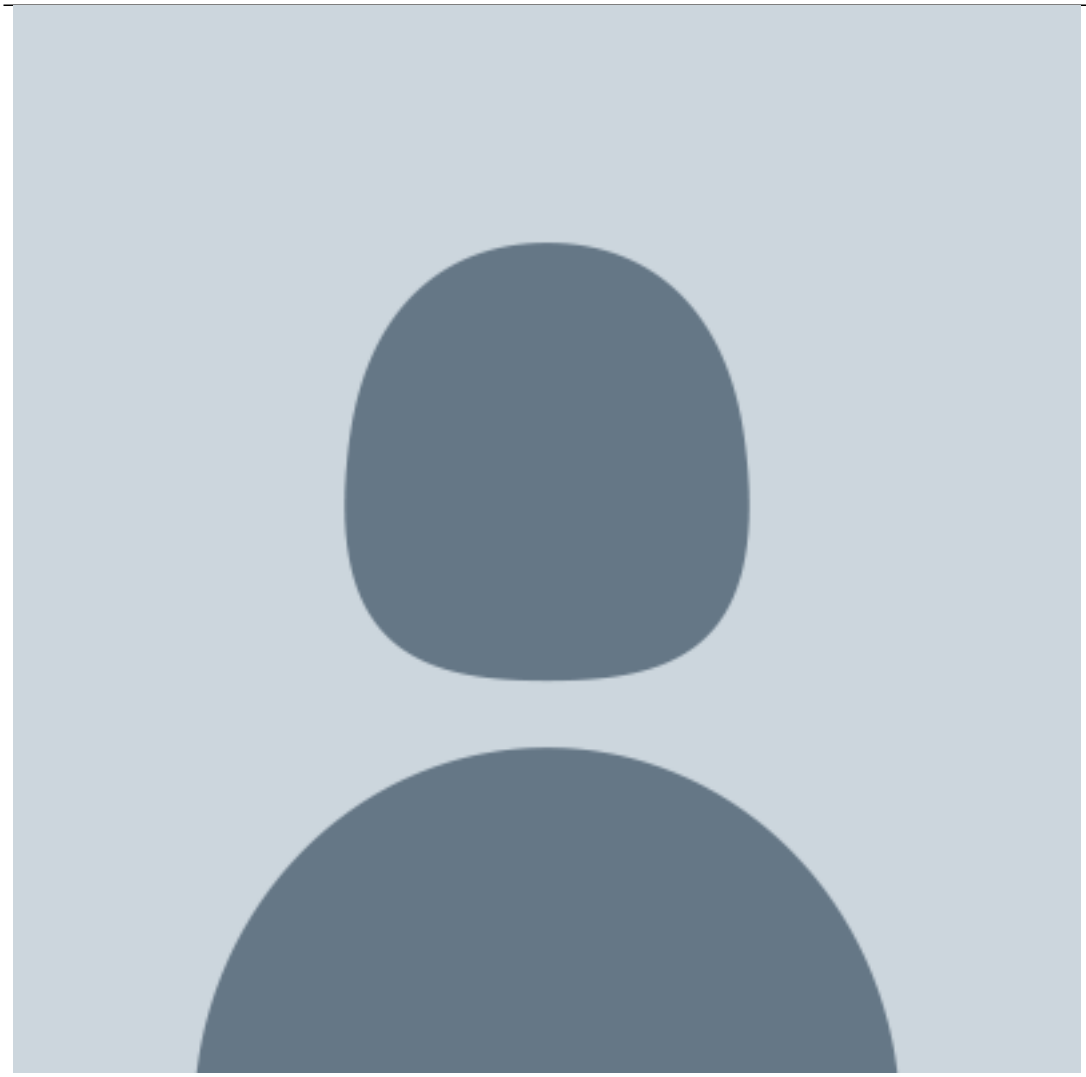
WHAT BOOK ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING AND WHY?

Right now I’m reading about pediatrics. I became a mother recently. Because I didn’t grow up with any brothers or sisters, parenting can sometimes be a challenge. The book helps young parents navigate the difficult early stages by outlining tips for modern parenting. Hopefully, I will get a better sense of child behavior when I’m done.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING FOR YOUR NEXT VACATION?

New York. It’s an amazing city. I was there in June and I wanted to go back as soon as I left. It makes you feel small and realize your own dimension. It has so much to offer culturally. I would love to live in the city for six months. I can’t do it now, unfortunately, but I want to experience everything it has to offer.

WHAT’S YOUR FAVORITE FOOD?

Seafood. Here in Portugal we have amazing fish from the Atlantic coast. To me, however, it is much more important to be eating in a beautiful place and with people that I love. So I would say that I prefer eating fresh caught grilled fish by the beautiful Portuguese sea with my friends and family.

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