

Curiosity is Key: How Chemviron GC Geneviève Bérubé Transitioned to Life in Belgium

Interviews and Profiles



In 2007, Geneviève Bérubé was working as legal counsel for AkzoNobel (a Dutch multinational), when she was given a chance to join the company's new expat program, which would move her from Montreal to the Netherlands. "For me, it ticked all the boxes; it was a professional dream come true,"

Bérubé recalls.

The assignment was supposed to last three years. Then the 2008 economic crisis happened, and Akzo began repatriating some of its expats. “After a year, they asked me to go back to Canada and I said no,” she explains. “So we made an agreement and I was left on my own to find something in Europe. I had limited time due to the conditions of my work and residence permits. But I could not give up without first trying and exploring new possibilities.”

It was a transition worth making. In 2009, Geneviève settled in Belgium, where she has lived ever since. Now nearly a decade later, Bérubé serves as general counsel of Chemviron S.A., the European head office and subsidiary of Pittsburgh-based active carbon purifying company Calgon Carbon. It’s a fast-paced role, and she feels fortunate to be able to support the company’s European interests as it expands into new markets worldwide. “There’s never a dull moment,” she states.



Geneviève Bérubé

Unlike in North America — where attributes of corporate culture are more or less the same — Bérubé says that differences in Europe vary widely depending on the country in question. “On any given day, I might speak to an Italian person, an English person, and a French person. From a legal perspective, you have to be aware that the system in each country might be different. Although a generalist in Europe will develop an understanding of the various rules, you don’t want to take anything for granted. Before you act, you check first,” she explains.

While she admits that she felt intimidated by the prospect of uprooting her life, Bérubé explains that her tenacity, coupled with years of experience, built her self-confidence and prepared her to make the change. “I am a curious person,” she says. “I had lived and worked in Canada for most of my life and I wanted to experience something new.”

Back to beginnings

Bérubé began her profession where most people finish — at the Quebec Court of Appeals. Starting as a clerk for the chief justice in 1995, she was thrown into the upper echelon of the legal world. She attended hearings, read factums, and drafted judgments for the court. The experience piqued her interest, and served as a driving force as she continued pursuing a career in law.

“I loved being a generalist. I wanted to get as much experience as I possibly could in different practice areas,” Bérubé explains. After two years, she signed on to the litigation team at Heenen Blaikie LLP, a then-leading Canadian law firm. While she enjoyed trial work, Bérubé quickly realized that she wanted to move in-house. Unfortunately, she didn’t believe she had the skills necessary to make the switch.

So she moved to the commercial department to get M&A and contract law experience. “I wanted to become the ideal in-house candidate,” Bérubé remembers. In 2003, she joined Sico, the largest paint company in Canada, as its legal counsel and advisor. In 2006, the company was acquired by Netherlands-based company AkzoNobel — kickstarting her transition overseas.

“Moving from Canada to Europe was an exciting period in my life,” she exclaims. “While I will always have roots in Quebec, I have grown to appreciate the way of life here in Belgium and in Europe.”

Safe smart

At Chemviron S.A., Bérubé works to oversee the legal requirements associated with developing what’s known as “activated carbon,” which is a filtrating agent used in hundreds of applications, the most known is to filter (drinking) water and air. Picture your water purification carafe in the fridge. The filter that you buy contains a bed of active carbon particles with pores that catch unwanted molecules that pass through it. Carbon adsorbs (not absorbs) these molecules until it gets saturated and loses its filtering capability. Then, companies like Chemviron reactivate it by heating it at over 800 degrees Celsius.

With 550 employees in Europe, many of whom are working in potentially dangerous conditions, Chemviron’s legal department must work to ensure that safety and compliance measures are of the utmost importance. Through a program called “Safe Smart,” employees learn to identify unsafe behavior to avoid accidents and near misses. Programs like these are implemented across the board, meaning that whether you’re in the factories or behind a desk, no one is exempt from safety training.

Bérubé recalls an instance a couple of months ago where she toured a production site with the company’s health and safety coordinator and spotted an employee who wasn’t wearing their safety goggles. In instances like these, she must not only instruct the employee about why such behavior is against company policy, but also educate that employee so that they modify their safety practices in the future.

“Everyone is really involved in the process. I consider myself to be the co-guardian of compliance for Chemviron [along with the group general counsel]. Safety should never be reactionary,” she states.

At Chemviron, the legal function is well considered a top priority and Bérubé feels heard at all levels of the business — up to the C-suite. In fact, as of April 2017, she was recently appointed as a member of the company’s board of directors. She has only been in the position for a short period of time, but

Bérubé argues that having a seat at the management table has already aided in guiding company strategy. However, for a company to be successful, Bérubé asserts that representation from every department is essential to ensuring that no single voice takes precedence.

“I think it’s important for the company to have a legal voice, but the same way I think it’s important to have an operational voice, and an HR voice, etc. Each opens the eyes of the other on important aspects that they may not necessarily be aware of,” she explains.

Instilling inter-departmental collaboration will be increasingly important in the coming years, as Calgon Carbon announced in September that Japanese company Kuraray Co. Ltd. will acquire it for nearly US\$1.3 billion dollars. While this project has yet to impact the company’s European operations, she expects that she will be called upon to facilitate the merger in the coming months.

“We’ll work to manage any European developments, as well as prepare for upcoming regulation such as the European General Data Protection Regulation,” she notes.

Whether it’s the transition from Canada to Europe, or from Calgon Carbon to Kuraray Co. Ltd., Bérubé has always taken life by the reins. With a career that has spanned various regions and practice areas, she is proof that modern in-house counsel can acclimate to any legal environment. All it takes is persistence, confidence, and the right amount of curiosity.

Getting to know... Geneviève Bérubé

Do you have any hobbies? What do you do in your spare time?

Tango. I started it in Belgium to get to know more people. I wanted to integrate more in the country and ended up liking it a lot. I built up my entire friendship network around it.

Where are you going for your next vacation?

In a couple of weeks, I’m going back to Canada. But next year, Asia.

If you could have dinner with anyone living or dead, who would it be?

Can I name three? Barack Obama, Leonard Cohen, and Louise Arbour [a prominent Canadian lawyer who played — and still plays — important international roles].

[Matthew Sullivan](#)

