

Strata-g / SISTERS IN BUSINESS

SISTERS MAKE INROADS IN MALE DOMINATED ENVIRONMENT / EYES WIDE OPEN FOR SISTERS IN BUSINESS

Two sisters, Jennifer Da Mata and Roxanne Goncalves of Strata-g Labour Solutions, have harnessed their mutual strengths to build a labour law and human resource consultancy that handles all aspects of the employment chain for clients, from dealing with recruitment and dismissal issues, to ensuring compliance with BBBEE, transformation and other regulatory requirements.

The business was established by Strata-g MD Da Mata, who left a partnership position at a competitor company in 2008 to start her own business. The move gave her the freedom to make her own decisions and operate the business according to her own vision.

Da Mata says starting a new business wasn't always easy. "As a senior person at my previous job, I was restricted from approaching any of my former clients. This meant I had to actively look for new business, which was quite a difficult and lonely road to travel initially. In addition, I had to handle every other aspect of the business, including finance, marketing and IT."

When Strata-g won a contract to outsource staff to Pick 'n Pay, Da Mata approached her younger sister, Goncalves, to assist her with the contract. This allowed Da Mata to focus on growing the labour law aspect of the business.

In 2013, Da Mata created a transformation division at Strata-G. "The focus of the new division was to assist our clients with Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) as well as Skills Development and Employment Equity compliance. I needed Roxanne to head up the division, which led me to asking my older sister, Jacqueline Da Mata, to come head up the Pick 'n Pay account.

"I didn't choose to involve my sisters because of the family connection. I got them on board because of their skills and knowledge. Their expertise dovetailed with what I wanted to achieve in the business. With her background in economics, Roxanne understands the BBBEE environment intimately. Jacqueline did an amazing job on the Pick 'n Pay account, taking it to a whole new level. At the beginning of this year, however, we decided to let go of Pick 'n Pay because of a change in legislation. Jacqueline now heads up our recruitment business," says Da Mata.

One of Da Mata's key strategies has been to award shares to key players in the business. In addition to awarding shares to Roxanne and Jacqueline, Advocate Tertius Wessels, who runs the legal side of the business, was also given shares. "Once again, they were awarded shares because they are exceptionally good at what they do and possess skills I don't want to lose. We have great fun working together, making money and building an empire," says Da Mata.

Strata-g does not market itself as a largely female-headed organisation. "I was against promoting ourselves as women in business. This is so because I came from a background where I was the youngest shareholder amongst seven men and learnt to operate more like men do."

"I wouldn't want people to use our services because we are a predominantly female-owned business. I want clients to work with us because they know we are brilliant at what we do. Our environment, especially the legal sector, is highly male dominated. We've had to be extremely tenacious and apply the never-give-up principle. This is because we've had to establish ourselves in an industry that is dominated by players who have been around for many years. We've had to face the same challenges all businesses have faced in the current economic climate and we succeed through persistence! We do not tolerate anything less than absolute service excellence from each other and from our staff," says Da Mata.

Another key strategy adopted by Da Mata and her team is to focus on building relationships with their

clients. "We have excellent client retention, with less than 2% client turnover per annum. We focus on getting close to our clients and become strategic partners to them. We go above and beyond to service them, basically becoming their right hand in terms of dealing with staff and employment compliance-related issues. And these are not small clients. We service big players such as Bidvest, Imperial and Walt Disney," says Da Mata.

Today Strata-g has more than 1000 clients nationally and employs 37 professionals located in all major centres around the country. To build the business, Strata-g forms joint ventures with existing operators in the various regions. "We buy a big stake of an existing and strong operator in a region. These operators remain shareholders in their businesses, but now operate under the Strata-g banner," says Da Mata.

Asked what it is like to work with her sister, Goncalves says it is mostly fun. "We both do what we are passionate about, which allows us to watch each other in our natural element. We are both highly competitive so the culture we have created is very driven and inspiring. We do argue at times, but we make sure not to mix business with personal matters."

Goncalves says her role in the business is two-fold. "I head up the Business Development and Marketing Division, which is the hub of all new business creation, as well as the marketing of the brand. I also oversee and consult for the Transformation Division, which involves consultation to clients relating to BBBEE, Skills Development and Employment Equity in their organisations."

She concurs with her sister that it is more important for Strata-g to deliver exceptional service, than use the fact that they are women as a drawcard. "Our industry is extremely male dominated and while I am sure they enjoy working with us as women, I think they appreciate it more that we are professional and great at what we do. Although I'd like to think it is an advantage that we are females, making a success of our business in a "man's world" is something to be very proud of. "

Da Mata concludes that women in business always need to have their eyes wide open. "Often people think because you are a woman, you not going to react in the same way as men would. For example, they think you won't take the necessary action because you'll be scared to. Being successful in business requires being brave and taking calculated risks. One supplier we worked with on certain accounts poached my staff and then began trying to poach my clients. They then went on to say, "do these women really think they will take us to court?" We did exactly that. We fought them, because we had to, and we won."

