

‘Let’s get visible’

Bratschi’s appointment of Sandra De Vito Bieri as managing partner marks a watershed for law firms in Switzerland



Sandra De Vito Bieri has done something rather special. In June 2021, she became the managing partner of Bratschi. Formed from the merger of three firms in 2008, Bratschi is a sizeable player in the Swiss legal market with 54 partners and just over 100 lawyers across its offices in Zurich, Berne, St. Gallen, Geneva, Zug, Basel and Lausanne.

The appointment of women to top jobs in UK law firms has become almost de rigueur. Last October, Georgia Dawson broke the glass ceiling among the magic circle firms, becoming the first female senior partner at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer. Over the past six months, a flood of female appointees has followed: Karen Davies as the

new chair at Ashurst; Aedamar Comiskey as senior partner at Linklaters; Marie-Aimée de Dampierre as chair at Hogan Lovells; and Rebecca Maslen-Stannage as both senior partner and chair at Herbert Smith Freehills.

But De Vito Bieri is a first in Switzerland: a country where no woman has previously been a managing partner of any prominent, full-service law firm, and where, historically, the advent of diversity has often lagged behind some of its European neighbours. Her appointment therefore marks a watershed in the Swiss legal profession.

‘The Bratschi partners know me very well so they knew what they were getting,’ she explains.

▲ **Sandra De Vito Bieri is the first female managing partner of a prominent, full-service law firm in Switzerland**

‘The reason why I decided to be a candidate for managing partner was that I had spent the last few years on the board of directors of Bratschi Limited, where I was responsible for our business development. But being a board member, you don’t have the kind of visibility that you have as managing partner. I thought: it’s time that we got the visibility we deserve. So instead of, like a lot of women do – perfect jobs, great jobs and commitment behind the scenes – I thought: okay, let’s take the challenge. Let’s get visible.’

No Master Plan

In June, following her election victory, De Vito Bieri put the following post on LinkedIn:



‘Yes, I did it! The path has not always been straight until here, until yesterday’s election as Managing Partner of Bratschi, but it has been a wonderful path. About 3 weeks ago, when we celebrated our 20th wedding anniversary, my husband said I could be proud, my master plan had worked. I am indeed proud of our teamwork, but there was no master plan – looking back, I realise that I have always followed my heart – that was my master plan, to go the way I wanted to go, with all the bumps and turns that one has to accept. And I was lucky to have met people again and again who walked this path with me and occasionally removed one or the other stone from the path. This is a wonderful moment and I thank you, dear partners from Bratschi – you believe in me and trust me – I am looking forward to our common path.’

De Vito Bieri’s appointment has, however, been a quiet revolution, not much commented on by the international legal media. Nor does Bratschi’s new managing partner intend to bring revolutionary change to her firm – at least at first sight. She explains: ‘I will continue with the strategy we have established which was put in place by my predecessor, Simon Osterwalder: to continue the steady growth of our firm. We will welcome new partners of the younger generation and we will implement our BratschiAcademy, which connects Bratschi to the academic world and provides a platform for the evaluation and implementation of new technologies in the legal market.’

Plans and Dreams

She adds: ‘I will put a particular focus on dialogue. We will talk to each other more frequently – with our staff, with our clients, with the market. We will strengthen our relationship with the academic world. I rely heavily on the self-motivation

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Sandra De Vito Bieri, managing partner, Bratschi

of our lawyers at every level. My own experience shows me that talented individuals should not be prevented from achieving their potential. The whole firm benefits from this. So we support the plans and professional dreams of our staff. That is essential. In this way, we achieve a high level of motivation, not out of a diktat, but out of the conviction of each individual. That is also how we achieve outstanding results.’

As a measure both of De Vito Bieri’s popularity and her achievement, her LinkedIn post received hundreds of likes. In interview, she reiterates the point that her career has not had ‘a straight line.’ Having trained at Bär & Karrer, where she was an associate for six years, she worked for two other Swiss firms before joining Bratschi in 2012, becoming a partner and co-head of the firm’s arbitration group. She represents clients in commercial disputes in the finance, telecoms, media and tourism sectors and is a Member of the Special Committee of the Court of Arbitration of the Swiss Arbitration Centre.

‘Five or six years ago, nobody would ever have ever thought that we would have such an increase in the number of women sitting on arbitral tribunals and panels,’ says De Vito Bieri. ‘There needed to be some movement and we’ve really had a great improvement in that regard.’

Recognized by Chambers Europe and the Legal 500 as a leading arbitration counsel, her clients say that she is ‘brilliant and straight-to-the-point’, ‘a results-achiever who goes the extra mile for her clients as counsel’, ‘a very efficient practitioner, very quick and nice to work with’ and ‘a team player who understands the balance between cost and the requested results.’

More women: more natural

Clearly admired for her direct approach, De Vito Bieri poses some interesting questions: ‘How do we network? How do male lawyers network? How do they get their connections to external counsel, general counsel, or the heads of legal departments? How do women do that? Up until now, and I don’t think that this is a secret, it has been more difficult for a woman. Because you do not network in the same way as men do.’

The more women you have among your clients, or potential clients, the more natural it will become, she suggests. ‘If women become just as good as networking, will it be to the detriment of men? I don’t think so. General counsel will ultimately look at the best product and the best person for the best price.’

Commercially, she notes, Bratschi experienced ‘an incredibly strong 2020 – in our law firm’s history, the best of all years in commercial terms.’ Considering what is in the pipeline, she anticipates that this trajectory will continue.

De Vito Bieri accepts that she is a trailblazer in Switzerland, but she wants others to follow in her path. ‘My hope is that some other major Swiss law firms will think – the same as you have experienced in the UK – that the time is right,’ she says. ‘Because all the statistics indicate that women do a great job as leaders, so why not try it?’

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Number of partners at Bratschi