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Q and A with Charlotte Parkhill



Congratulations! You've recently been made a partner at Kensington Swan. How are you dealing with the weight of responsibility?

Well, it has only been about a month, but so far, so good! It is much the same as last year in terms of the legal work and managing the team and clients. The biggest change of course is more responsibility around the financial side of the business. And a lot more internal meetings! I am really enjoying partnership, so the additional responsibility is well worth it. I also share the running of the Auckland employment team with my colleague, Michael O'Brien, so that helps.

What, if any, additional challenges do you think women face in progressing up the career path to partnership?

I have been practicing law for nearly 15 years now, and there has been progress made by law firms in recognising the need to have women in leadership roles and calling out issues like unconscious bias which stop us from getting there. However, we all know there is more work to be done.

I think the biggest challenge for women in the partnership race is that everything often seems to converge at once in terms of your family and your career. As a mother of a two-year-old, I wondered whether I could make partnership work or whether I would end up compromising too much on my family time. I wondered whether it was the right time to focus on my career. Luckily for me, Kensington Swan has embraced flexible working which made the decision much easier. I currently work the equivalent of four days a week over five, and I choose the days which are best for me in any given week to meet the needs of my daughter and/or my clients. As I understand it, to have that opportunity as a new equity partner is pretty uncommon in the NZ legal market.

You practiced employment law in the UK for a number of years. What are the biggest differences between their system and ours, and is there anything in particular we can learn from the UK approach?

The most striking difference is the number of discrimination claims in the UK compared to NZ. I would estimate that around 60 per cent of the contentious matters that I worked on in London included an allegation of discrimination, usually discrimination on the grounds of disability. While discrimination claims seem to be on the rise in New Zealand, it is nowhere near the level I saw in the UK. In terms of anything we can learn, the established tiers of compensation for injury to feelings made it easier to advise clients on likely exposure for a grievance claim, but it seems the Employment Court in NZ is moving in that direction too.

Who or what has had the biggest influence on your career?

The who is a hard one to pick as I have been lucky enough to work with some great lawyers both in the UK and in NZ, so I will focus on the what. One significant influence early on would be starting my career as a prosecutor at Meredith Connell. I had so much time in Court with that firm as a junior lawyer, which taught me to be nimble in Court and to

think on my feet. It also instilled in me a real passion for courtroom advocacy which continues today ... when my cases don't settle!

More recently when applying for partnership, one of the influences for striving to make partner was the feeling that I was standing on the shoulders of the women who have come before me. I noted my fears about achieving the right balance in my answer to the second question above as I had heard horror stories from other women (and men!). But so many women have fought so hard to get us to this point, and I wanted to show that women can, and should, "have it all" in this profession.

What is the one thing that has given you the most satisfaction in your career so far?

Again, it is hard to pick one thing, so I will pick two. Achieving that mystical status of being a truly trusted advisor to a client is always a great feeling. You enjoy working with them, and you know the feeling is mutual. It makes coming to work all the more worthwhile.

I also get great joy out of seeing younger lawyers I have worked with flourish either as lawyers, or go on to do great things outside of the law.

What advice would you give to someone considering a legal career in a large commercial law firm?

If you are considering working in a commercial law firm, I would recommend thinking carefully about the conjoint that you choose. I studied political science which hasn't been very useful from a practical perspective since I joined the workforce. Maybe it will become more useful now that I'm sharing partnership with 30 others.

Work experience outside of the summer clerk program is also often overlooked by undergraduates. Any experience in a firm is invaluable, whether that is in the post room, as an administration assistant or in a major discovery.

And finally, participate in the competitions. I didn't, but I hear from my very talented team that they are an excellent opportunity to experience law in practice and they also serve to differentiate you on your CV.

What do you think is going to be the most significant issue in the New Zealand legal system in the foreseeable future?

Probably the cost of litigation. We see that often as employment lawyers -- when the overall award may not come near the cost that a party has incurred with legal representation. But it is also a wider issue in terms of civil litigation. Unless a client is particularly well-heeled, they may be forced to settle, even if they are confident of their legal and moral position.

What do you enjoy doing outside your professional life?

Spending as much time as possible with my family and friends. That probably sounds trite, but the demands of private practice mean that you do treasure your time with those you love outside of work. If there is a boat involved in that equation in summer and some snow in winter, even better!

When you were growing up did you think you would become a lawyer? If not, what did you want to be?

No, I wanted to be a diplomat, largely because I had delusions that travelling for work was impossibly glamorous. I thought I would try being a lawyer first ... and the rest is history.