

The Hot 100 career quiz: “Moving to a US firm as a junior was a risky move back in 2005”

“My career has certainly not been one straight line from trainee through to partner. There have definitely been bumps along the way.”

By The Lawyer 6 July 2023

Farah O'Brien
Latham & Watkins



THE LAWYER Hot 100 2023

WHAT'S YOUR MOST VIVID MEMORY FROM BEING A TRAINEE?

Less a memory, and more a general feeling of being out of my depth! This was an unfamiliar feeling for me having always felt pretty on top of everything at school and university. Looking back though, I hadn't had any exposure before to a professional environment or lawyers, so everything was completely new and therefore a fresh

challenge. It's one of the reasons I am so supportive of our first generation professionals group at Latham. Having said which, I'm always so impressed with the current generation of trainees – they all seem to take everything in their stride.

I also equally remember how good it felt about nine months in when things started to click – I had a great training experience at Freshfields.

WHAT IS THE THING IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL CAREER THAT HAS TERRIFIED YOU OR TAKEN YOU OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE THE MOST?

Probably being co-chair of the London corporate department. It's not something I would have naturally put myself forward for, but days after being appointed, we went into lockdown and I had to get on with it... I have however loved every minute of it, and learnt that there are many different ways to lead, and while you can admire how others do it, you have to find your own style. It's also a great lesson that sometimes we need to give those who are a little reluctant to lead a bit of a shove forwards.

WHAT IS THE WISEST THING ANYONE EVER SAID TO YOU (AND WHO SAID IT)?

I'm incredibly fortunate to have had many wise pieces of advice but the best by far (and which is key to me being here now) is Mike Bond, my fellow M&A partner telling me that this career is “a marathon and not a sprint”. This was while I was a senior associate and

on maternity leave with my first child, and gave me the confidence to take as much time as I wanted on leave, a very precious time which is so brief in the span of a long career. I took his advice (twice more!) and have passed it on many times since.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE WHO WANTS TO GET TO WHERE YOU ARE/DO THE JOB YOU DO?

This is a hard one but my top 3 would be:

Find the right organisation for you: Moving to a US law firm back in 2005 was definitely seen as a risky move as a junior associate. While I would love to say that I knew back then that the 60 lawyer office I was joining would grow to over 500 in London, and have the global success that it has, I don't think anyone would believe me! Looking back however, I was attracted by the diversity of the people, and their energy, enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit, and it is that that I believe has been so key in Latham's success. It has been a lot of fun to be part of that success, and while I've been at the firm over 18 years now, every year has felt different, interesting and challenging. I work with a lot of very talented people, who make it fun, and are also supportive when needed. It is much easier to be successful when you are surrounded by such great talent and support.

It gets easier: My career has certainly not been one straight line from trainee through to partner. There have definitely been bumps along the way, especially around the time I was a senior associate, being progressed to partner, which also coincided with me having my children. As a profession we still lose far too many women, especially from transactional practices. I often speak to women at this stage of their career, and tell them that while there is

no doubt that they are going through an incredibly challenging time, if they can find their way through it, it does get so much easier. And is definitely worth it when you find yourself on the other side with a very fulfilling career.

Do things your own way: I owe this one to my husband actually, and it was a close contender to the wisest thing anyone has ever said to me! In order to be successful and have longevity in a career, you have to find a way of doing the job in a way that will make you happy – especially as transactional lawyers, when work plays such a huge part in our lives. It is important to realise that there are lots of different ways to make a career work, and while you can take advice from others, as to how they make their lives work, you do have to find your own unique way that works for you.

WHAT'S YOUR BEST FRIEND FROM LAW SCHOOL DOING NOW?

Sadly we are no longer in touch so I had to look this up, but she is legal counsel at a university.

Name: Farah O'Brien

Organisation: Latham & Watkins

Role: Private Equity / M&A Partner, Co-Chair of the London Corporate Department

Location: London

Trained at: Freshfields

Year qualified: 2004

One of the main contributors to growth across Latham & Watkins' London corporate practice has been practice co-chair Farah O'Brien, who was the firm's first female M&A partner in Europe and has played a role in ensuring it was ranked number one in *The Lawyer's* Corporate Report for the first time ever in 2022.

O'Brien is responsible for Silver Lake's \$200m private equity investment in New Zealand's All Blacks and worked on the mega-deal throughout the course of the pandemic which rumbled on for two years to get to closing. O'Brien routinely acts for US sponsors trying to net UK assets, and last year acted for the likes of One Rock Capital, Spectrum Equity and Platinum Equity.

As a head of Latham's corporate department, O'Brien oversees the management of more than 150 lawyers – whose practices also encompass real estate and financial regulation – and helps to recruit partners and associates. She is also the vice-chair for the firm's Women in Business committee, helping female partners on a range of business development initiatives.

As Latham continues to expand in London, the spotlight will shine more brightly on O'Brien as she plays a central role in expanding the firm and working on complex transactions.