

Latham Partner Nell Perks on Private Investigators, Having Fun and Not Writing Yourself Off

By Oscar Glyn

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Latham & Watkins' Nell Perks represents some of the world's largest financial institutions in disputes.

Making partner in 2023, she joined Latham in 2019 after spending 15 years at Hogan Lovells. She has worked on cases involving the Financial Conduct Authority, the Serious Fraud Office and the U.S. Department of Justice, and litigations involving some of the world's largest banks.

Here, Perks talks about the challenge of leaving her old firm, how to build a career alongside raising a family, making partner a little later in life, and why the "nitty gritty" matters.

This interview has been edited for length, clarity and style.

Why litigation?

Litigation was my fourth seat I did as trainee, and I had loved all my previous seats, so I turned up to litigation absolutely confident that I didn't want to be a litigator. Then, I wanted to be a real estate lawyer, and then I very quickly got put on a freezing injunction, which involved a 10 hour trip to Guernsey to serve papers. There, we had a private investigator out on this fraudster who would send me photos every hour, taken behind his newspaper. We had to rush to court, then we served the fraudster in a prison cell. And it was all really exciting and so from that moment on, I was like, "right, this is the life for me."

I like being part of things that are headline-hitting. Probably about two years after I qualified,



Courtesy photo

Nell Perks, Latham & Watkins

the financial crisis happened, and so for years after that I was doing work that directly arose from the financial crisis. I think it's a different sort of glamour, but I like being at the centre of things and where things are happening.

How would you describe your career path

I would describe my career path as carefully paced. I've always chosen to do things because I enjoy them, which isn't to say I love every single second of every single day, but I do really enjoy the work I do, and I've done it for that reason, not always with an eye to the next step on what I'm pushing for.

I was 15, 16 years qualified when I became a partner, which is fairly long in the tooth, but I had wanted to make it sustainable. If I'm planning to work for the next 40 years, I want to make sure that I am enjoying those 40 years. So I've built it

carefully and steadily in a way that's sustainable with other things I've wanted to do in life.

I think what has benefited me is I have been able to have a family and a career that I find really rewarding. For me, the right thing was I did reduced hours for a while when I had really small children, so that I could work out how to balance it. It's like you have two parallel things that you're trying to make work equally well at the same time. And it happens really suddenly, and you have no precedent for it. So I think I wasn't pushing for promotion at the that time, I was kind of taking it more steadily. I think that's worked really well for me, which isn't to say I get it right all the time.

I think there have been times in my career where it has been interpreted as a lack of ambition, which I don't think it is. I see it as I have a lot of ambition, and I want to be around for a long time, so I have to make it work.

What has been the most challenging moment in your career?

So I think one was actually moving firms, which, as I said, in retrospect, was brilliant, but looking back, I wonder if I made a massive deal about it, because maybe it wasn't as huge as I thought it was. And people move firms all the time, but I had been at my old firm for 15 years, and that's where I met my husband, all my friends. I just never thought I would leave. I mean I'd only really had one job. So having a second job when I was 39, I found that quite challenging.

What made you move?

It came at the right time, but it also came at a time when I was not planning to move.

I'd only ever been at one firm. I loved it, and I only ever have positive things to say about it. And so even when I applied, I still didn't think I would move. But there were two partners who I'd always worked with who moved to Latham, and that was the first thing that brought the opportunity to me.

But, actually, I sort of knew if I was thinking of moving, I had to make the move rather than them, because they couldn't do any sort of poaching. I

raised it with them when they first said they were moving, just to keep my options open, but thinking I'll never go. But the further I went down the process, the more people I talked to, and the more I saw about the opportunities—the more just sort of happened.

It was probably the right time to put a spring in my step and try something new and something different.

That was probably the thing I was most scared about—leaving all the relationships I built up and all the goodwill. But coming somewhere new and having to build that I found really invigorating, really exciting, and having to show people what I could do, which had previously been taken for granted—it brought a whole new lease of life to me.

How has Latham worked for you?

Where I think Latham has been really supportive is I wasn't the classic seventh year associate looking to make partnership. I was quite a bit older than those people, and I had a whole lot of different experience, but as far as I'm aware, that has only really been seen as a positive, and so I think Latham has been very supportive of me, and I didn't need to conform to fit the mould, conform to the stereotype. I was able to come and be who I was.

What advice would you give to someone at the start of their career?

Don't write yourself off before you tried it. Before I had a family, I looked at my career and thought that takes up all my time. How can it be possible to have something else that's a lot of time and effort and thought consuming? And I think if you'd asked me, then I'd have thought, "well, I can't, so I won't try." But, don't write yourself off before you've tried it, because there is more time and mental capacity than you think there is. For me, what has worked is taking it slowly, and working out each stage as it comes.

I'd also say, make sure you're doing a career that you enjoy and doing work that you enjoy, because there are times where you have to make some quite tough decisions about how you're spending

your time, and when you're doing something you enjoy and you get a lot out of that's okay, whereas I think if you are finding work fairly miserable, that why would you, why would you make the decision to spend more time doing it?

What cases have shaped the lawyer you are today?

I've had so many good cases. I worked on a LIBOR investigation for a bank, followed by the litigation. And the great thing about that was it basically took all of my time, for years but it was all stuff that was in the headlines all the time and every day.

I really love getting to grips with the nitty gritty and the detail and putting together good arguments. I acted on a strike out summary judgment application a few years ago, which was full of really detailed technical points, and was successful. That showed what I like about it, which is having a really big picture, but then delving right into the detail, to just make some tweaks in the detail, then have a big effect overall.

How important is your pro bono practice?

I do quite a lot of pro bono work. I, with others, coordinate two of our pro bono programs. One is assisting the victims and survivors of domestic violence and obtaining non molestation orders, and the other is we go to prisons and meet women in prison and help them have access to their children while they're in prison. Then when they come out of prison, we advocate for them when necessary. I love the fact that I can use legal skills that I have in a completely different context that benefits individuals.

Has Big Law gotten better for work life balance over your career?

I think it's really interesting. It's not like more people who work in law have families now than

used to exactly. I think having a family is no longer seen as something women do, because it's not something I would say is gender specific. It's less expected that if you have a family, you will probably have a spouse at home who is looking after your family. More and more you see people at really senior levels who are wanting to have a career and a family and be fully committed to both of those things.

Who were your mentors?

I think the people who have been most instrumental in how my shape my career are Jon Holland and Andrea Monks [both also Hogan Lovells to Latham movers]. Both pretty much taught me everything I know. I remember when Jon left my old firm and moved to Latham, I went to see him and burst into tears and said, "Oh, but you're the lawyer I want to be", so I had to, obviously, move so I could carry on trying to be. They both convey a sense of really enjoying what they do and being thoroughly committed to it but with a healthy sense of perspective.

What characteristics do you like to think that associates see when they look up to you now?

God, I hate answering this, because I bet they'll think "you idiot, we don't think that at all".

I like to think that they would think I bring a sense of fun, because I do really enjoy what I do, and I don't think there's any point in it if you're not having fun, not necessarily all the time, every day, but I really hope that people would see that I really like people to see or appreciate that they there is not one way of doing things, and nobody can tell you what the right way is for you. Nobody cares about your career as much as you do, and you can't expect them to. So work out what you want to make your own path and have fun doing it.