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Succeeding as a family lawyer
with compassion,
collaboration and creativity
interview with Eve Smith





EVE SMITH

Interviewed by Aivee Chuan and Mei Gong

Eve Smith is a dual qualified international family lawyer. After having completed her LLB Hons Exempting Degree at Northumbria University, Eve commenced her legal career at David Gray Solicitors, a Legal 500 firm in Newcastle, England. Eve rose through to leadership roles at the firm and subsequently trained as a collaborative family lawyer, giving her additional tools to assist clients outside of the courtroom.

Eve now lives in Melbourne, Australia with her husband and two teenage sons. In 2018, Eve co-founded a boutique law firm, Umbrella Family Law, with her former colleague, Jane. The firm has since grown to a team of 12 like minded professionals who seeks to make a positive difference to the lives of their clients. Eve enjoys spending time outside, be it a walk with her Groodle dog, Guy, or riding her horse, Ben. On most weekends, she can be found at the side of a Rugby pitch cheering her sons on.

Requalifying in Australia as an experienced lawyer - unexpected surprises

Despite having qualified and practiced family law in the UK for 15 years, Eve had to undergo a tedious requalification process in Australia. She recalls the curious circumstance of being exempt to take the most relevant legal elective, family Law, while studying for many other subjects that had little relevance to her practice and were based on English law.

In addition to readjusting to tertiary studies as part of the requalification process (Eve was seeking to complete her studies in one year), she also began her first legal job in Australia. In this role, Eve was initially chasing down outstanding legal bills in a small family law firm. However, once her boss knew she was a foreign qualified legal practitioner, Eve was immediately assigned to do legal work (no more bill chasing!). In her paralegal role, Eve gained a first hand understanding of how Australian family law matters are run.

Eve candidly reflected on the complexity of the different roles she played as a law student, paralegal (and later law firm owner), and Mum and the demands and sacrifices she had to make along the way. Waking up at 5 am every day to sneak in a few hours of study time and having her husband take the kids out on a Sunday afternoon so that she can catch up on lectures were just a few examples of the sacrifices made along the way.

Co-founding a boutique law practice

While Eve never set out to co-found a boutique law practice, one year into her paralegal role, she decided to take a leap of faith and set up a boutique family law practice with her colleague, Jane, called 'Umbrella Family Law' in Melbourne in 2018. The name is symbolic. An umbrella can provide shelter in either sunshine or in rain, which is analogous to Umbrella Family Law's vision to keep their clients safe on their separation journeys.

Creative mental wellness initiatives to lift team morale during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

Eve reflected that back in the UK, mental health issues were stigmatised and ***"nobody really talked about their mental health"***. Eve's curiosity about mental health stemmed from an unlikely source - her children who got two mental health days per year from their school to recharge, no questions asked. After seeing how much her children benefited from the breaks, Eve realised that there was a far bigger lesson for adults to learn (and she was in the pilot's seat to make it happen being a team leader in her firm).

These days, you will find Eve developing and consolidating her strong personal bond with her team in different ways. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, she has implemented a 'mental health day' once a month for her employees, which is separate to any annual leave entitlements they may have accrued.

In addition, she has also tried a range of other initiatives such as 'games afternoon', virtual 'drinks' catch up, gifts to staff (in the form of cupcakes, Dan Murphy or UberEats voucher). On top of that, deliberately low billable targets have been set to promote mental wellness on a daily basis. The team even met up for picnics at the park when COVID-19 restrictions eased. Eve reflects:



"We were all finding it pretty tough, if you want a day to recharge, you can have it. We want our employees to be healthy and happy, and if having a day off is going to help, so be it."

Excelling as a family lawyer with compassion and collaboration

Eve shared the importance of being a 'collaborative family lawyer' and adopting a more 'holistic approach', which involves maximising the use of alternative dispute resolution tools (i.e., mediation) to resolve family disputes. Although family law is an emotionally demanding practice area, Eve shared how she dealt with 'aggressive lawyers' by being warm and amicable, which usually helped to change the dynamics of the matter and create a more positive case outcome.

While such an approach may not work for an acrimonious separation scenario, Eve nonetheless seeks to collaborate with other professionals where appropriate, including with accountants, financial planners and child psychologists to seek resolutions outside of the court.

A lifelong love for horse riding and travel

Eve recently purchased a horse, named Ben - who she lovingly described as a '**big gentle giant**'. She gushed about Ben, who shares her husband's birthday, as the new love of her life. Eve remarked that she has rekindled her passion for horse riding as she shared fond memories of growing up with horse riding with her younger sister back in the UK.

Aside from horse riding, Eve also shares a love for adventure, having previously taken a 3 year career break to move to Florida and Chile (following in the footsteps of her husband's construction projects). Although neither Eve nor her husband spoke Spanish, they nevertheless enjoyed their South American adventures. Eve reflected on her time exploring the Atacama desert in the north, glaciers in the south, and neighbouring Argentina and was particularly fond of the friendly people and safe city of Chile. Ever since migrating to Australia, Eve has continued to explore its surrounds, including having ventured to New Zealand and Fiji, and hopes to explore the amazing natural surrounds of the Kimberley and Tasmania in due course.



Advice to other aspiring foreign qualified lawyers

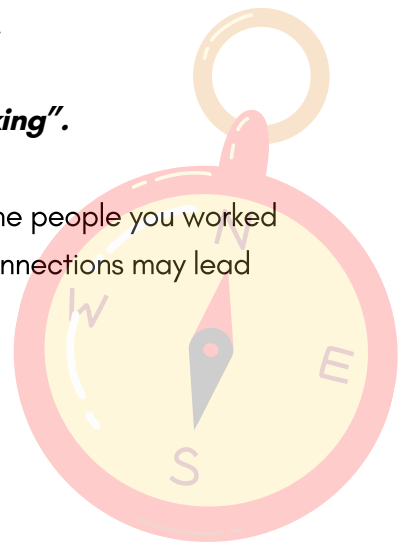
Reflecting on a serendipitous career journey where she got the first job she applied for as a fresh university graduate (in both the UK and Australia), Eve shared three valuable pieces of career advice for aspiring FQLs. Firstly,

"Be honest, tell it how it is and people will respect you. If you are struggling, say it, don't pretend to be somebody you are not."

Secondly, she shared employers are looking for someone with a different character, not just legal experience. For example, Eve recommends traveling to broaden one's horizons.

"Go out and explore, don't spend your whole life just working".

Thirdly, she emphasised the importance of staying connected, especially with the people you worked with as the ***"world is quite a small place"*** and you never know where your connections may lead you to.



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