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Q&A With The EIC – Claire Debney

Interviews and Profiles





Claire Debney

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“Life tests you. Professional life tests you. Your personal life tests you. You just need to embrace it and go with it. Be prepared to be adaptable and flexible.”

– Claire Debney

Originally from the United Kingdom, Claire Debney’s journey has taken her from London to Australia, and back again. From aspirations that included translating for the UN, to working in IP and trademarks, to in-house practice in the consumer products industry — Claire’s career has definitely required flexibility and adaptability. An advocate for continuing education (outside of the classroom), she’s worked to create professional development opportunities for in-house counsel, been active in developing and clearly communicating technological efficiencies in the legal department, and acted as a mentor to women in the profession. Here, the legal director of Shire talks to Docket Editor in Chief Tiffani Alexander about her journey, the burgeoning legal operations field, the importance of professional development, the evolving role of general counsel, and the future of in-house practice.

Claire Debney’s professional journey

ACC: Why law? And was it always the law?

Claire: I did a bilingual law degree because I wanted to be a linguist — I wanted to be an interpreter. I was really good at languages, not too good at sciences and things like that. I wanted to combine languages with something more structured, and I decided to do the law rather than economics.

So no, I did not always want to be a lawyer, I hadn’t really thought about it. I wanted to be an architect or an archeologist, but I wasn’t talented enough to do either of those things [laughs]! When I went to university, I didn’t mind studying law, and that made me think about a career in law, but even then I wasn’t sure. I did a post grad in languages and translation, because I was determined that I was going to be that person at the UN that does all the translating and interpreting — and then I realized it wasn’t all it was cracked up to be — it just wasn’t for me. I did a couple internships in London and realized that I could actually enjoy the law if I found a bit that I liked, which is exactly what happened.

ACC: What happened next, and how did you find yourself moving to in-house practice?

Claire: I found a mid-sized London firm that specialized in media and intellectual property where I trained and qualified. That was the area I was interested in. Then I moved to Melbourne, where I worked in two big law firms, doing IP, anti-counterfeiting, and trademark work. And then I used my international experience to leverage myself into an in-house role — I wrote a “pain” letter. A pain letter identifies a company’s pain and sets out how you can help fix that “pain.”

I wrote a cold [pain] letter to Gillette in the UK explaining what kind of work I had done and that I really wanted to work for them and actually it worked! I moved back to the UK in 2003. This was my first In-house role, and I got the position in the unconventional way, by miraculously writing them a letter and getting a job! I wanted to work at a company where I understood the product. At Gillette I was responsible for Venus (the women's shave brand) for the world except the United States. That was my introduction into in-house and consumer products, and I stayed in that space for 13 years, until my recent move to Shire.

ACC: How did you go on to join the legal team at Reckitt Benckiser (RB)?

Claire: When Procter and Gamble bought Gillette in 2006, I took the opportunity to move to Reckitt (RB). My job has changed and evolved in the 10 years I was with RB, and it was an interesting, demanding, challenging, and fascinating experience.

ACC: What do you know now that you wish you knew during that first in-house position?

Claire: It would have been not to sweat to the small stuff. When you've been in private practice, you can't leave any stone unturned and you have to make sure you've dotted all your "i's" and crossed all your "t's." And I think in-house, you soon develop your risk appetite for the company, what they are prepared to tolerate, and what you are able to do within the broad spectrum of work that you have and what they need. And they don't always need the "i's" dotted and the "t's" crossed.

ACC: To date, what position have you held that caused you to grow the most professionally?

Claire: I've had the baptism of fire: In my earlier days [at RB] when I was the European GC, we had a lot of pressure on the antitrust front with raids — the consumer products sector was the focus of the regulators; it wasn't only RB, it was a number of companies. That was a real turning point for me in terms of dealing with really challenging cases, aggressive regulators, and more than one jurisdiction coming after you. When you're raided, it's not a pleasant experience for anyone. For me, that was professionally an enormous responsibility. This litigation piece lasted about five years (I felt like that was my only job at times!). However, from that, we developed a compliance function. It kind of was the catalyst that led to everything else: we did right by the company, but we also took the company to a new level in the way we approach risk, governance, and operational excellence coming out of those challenging times.

ACC: You've had a varied career — working on everything from issues surrounding IP and compliance, to managing global risk and developing new approaches to the legal operations function. What aspect of your career has proved to be the most challenging, and on the flip side, the most rewarding?

Claire: The most rewarding was the opportunity to build the academy and to have a great general counsel in Bill Mordan at the time. He believed in investing in people, and he allowed me, and one of my colleagues, the opportunity to build something for RB lawyers, which showed how valued they were. Because people can get plenty of training on the technical side of things, but to invest in peoples' professional development on the soft skills side — for me that was really rewarding. It mattered to me, it mattered to the company, and it mattered to my general counsel.

Legal operations

ACC: ACC recognizes the importance of legal operations professionals, and supports them through

it's member-driven organization ACC Legal Operations. What role does the legal operations function play in the overall success of the legal department?

Claire: It's very different for us [in the UK] and I think the United States is ahead of the game; the function is more structured. It's much more blended here, because we didn't have a legal operations team, at RB it was the members of the legal team, and we did it as parts of our roles. However, I see the role of legal operations increasing, because I believe a lot of companies will go through transformative changes — things are constantly moving and evolving, and your operational excellence is really important. As I said, we are much more blended here, but it should become interwoven into the fabric of the business. I think legal operations' place is naturally within the legal department because it's about efficiency, governance, risk, and delivering legal services in an inventive way.

ACC: I understand you've worked to develop and drive legal strategy, and helped create a new approach to legal operations, called i-Legal at RB. Can you tell me a bit about this approach and how it differed from what others may be doing in their legal department?

Claire: At RB, we took a view that we needed to talk the language of the business. We did the more traditional legal operations piece, in that we put in matter management. Then we decided to look at full contract automation — not just templates, full on, cloud-based, automated contract-building solutions. And we handed the keys to the business for the contracts, which filled some people with dread! For us, it was empowering the business to make the decisions in real time, with the support of legal built into that system. Then we adapted the system and built in a compliance layer on that. Therefore we were able to blend compliance and contracting together at a very early stage to get a sense of where the risks lay.

i-Legal is the name that we applied to the system as a whole as I felt that was important to give it a brand, because when you're working in a branded company, and that's what people in the business could relate to, so it became synonymous with the services and tools offered. People aren't going to say, 'I want to go to the legal mastery system.' They want a name that's catchy, that resonates. And it was important for it to feel user-friendly — not just feeling user-friendly, but *actually* being user-friendly.

At RB, we built the i-Legal portal on the intranet. It was really simple so that people in the business could access all their legal needs in one place, and it was designed to streamline that process. It was really a different way of doing things around management of contracts, and things like that. So, yes, it was fun to do. For me, it was a real education and I found it absolutely fascinating.

ACC: I understand this approach leverages technology in order to “enhance efficiency and delivery of in-house legal services.” Can you tell me briefly how this works, and offer additional suggestions on how GCs can better leverage technology in general?

Claire: I believe that you shouldn't just buy technology for technology's sake. I think there are a lot of tools out there — you just need to find the right one for your business. You cannot just buy a piece of software and slap it on the legal department or your business. It needs to be implemented in a way that engages with your users. Do a pilot and find your champions within the business. Ours was very much grassroots-up, rather than top-down approach. So you need to find something that makes it a positive experience for you and for your business users.

And that's what we did. We engaged with the business directly rather than deciding just what we needed in the legal department, because what we need isn't necessarily going to dovetail with what

the business needs. You need to find a sort of synergy, and you need patience. But I think if you're working in an innovative space, you can lead that agenda.

Continuing education & leadership

ACC: I read online about a program you termed a “mini university” targeted at developing the legal team at RB’s leadership skills. Can you tell me a bit more about this program?

Claire: We called it the Academy and it was the learning piece of the i-Legal platform that we built. It links into my view of how you look at operation and transformational change, that you need the education piece as well. You get your education in law school and then you do your training on the job. But there’s very little focus on your personal development and your EQ piece. And also on the other business skills, there are operational skills that you need to learn as well. I had done the ACC Mini MBA in Boston and I did the advanced course as well. And it really made me think — it was probably the best course I have ever been on, particularly in terms of the psychology element and how you influence people, and even the finance part is important, although obviously not my favorite. But it’s crucial to have that understanding when you work in a big company.

So we designed our program around what was needed at RB. We focused a lot on the personal piece: we designed specific 360s; did a lot on how you work with people, self awareness; the impact you have on people; your personal brand and how you show up. We focused on the fact that you are a part of the company and the small steps that you take in one market is like dropping the stone in the pond — that ripple effect can go a long way; everything is connected. Really, the Academy was about giving the participants that operational armor to be more than just a lawyer.

ACC: Speaking of university, tell me about this legal apprenticeship trend in the UK. Lawyers who don’t go to law school?

Claire: In the UK, the legal apprenticeship scheme has been launched where you don't have to go to law school to become a qualified lawyer. It’s kind of revolutionary. You come out of what would be the equivalent of high school at 18 and then you go and work and train within a regulated environment, which the in-house profession can offer as much as law firms — and I would like to support those sorts of initiatives — and you train for seven years and you become a qualified lawyer by doing it on the job. It’s old-fashioned, back-to-basics apprenticeship, but I think it’s a fantastic way of learning for those who would find college to be too daunting or expensive. There are some potentially brilliant lawyers out there, people who may not have been able to go into the profession because previously they didn't have that opportunity.

Therefore, I recently began undertaking my training to qualify as a coach, because I think it will help me even further understand and improve my mentoring and coaching skills. And I also think it fits naturally with the transformation piece that legal operations naturally is. It’s called legal ops but basically it's transforming the workspace. It really is. It's having rigor. It’s having structure. It’s being forward-thinking about new ideas of how to deliver legal services. And I think influencing and coaching people around that change is something I want to be a part of. I feel passionately about developing people in that way.

Mentoring and paying it forward

ACC: On the topic of mentoring, how important is it for organizations to have mentorship programs,

and what are your thoughts on cross-functional mentoring?

Claire: Mentoring in all shapes and forms is a positive thing. RB recently launched a mentoring program for women, and I know in other big companies that they have cross-functional mentoring. However, I don't necessarily think it needs to be formally organized. A company-created program can really work, especially in instances where people don't have access to an appropriate mentor, but often it's the informal relationships that make the most impact. You don't see that much of the cross business function mentoring, I think it's more driven by relationships that people have. I co-founded Mosaic mentoring to meet a need for the in-house legal community to have access to mentors across different industries. It has grown from 20 mentoring pairs in the pilot to well over 50, and continues to grow. Mosaic stands for Mentoring Opportunities Shared Amongst In-House Counsel. Shire has assumed its sponsorship, and I will continue to develop this as part of my role there.

ACC: We often learn from those we think we are teaching. Has this been the case in your own mentoring relationships?

Claire: I think it's refreshing for me to hear a perspective outside of my own business. It is also quite reassuring to hear that often people have the same challenges. I find it incredibly rewarding to spend time with these women, who are so bright and dedicated. In fact I have three women as my mentees in Mosaic, who are really taking the time to think about who they are and what they want to do with their lives. And I don't know if I had that level of introspection at their age, so I think that's really refreshing and really bold because they're trying to take control of their own agenda as much as they can.

ACC: In terms of women in the profession, especially those working internationally, and in business in general — in your experience, is that road tougher or getting easier? Any differences you've noticed between regions?

Claire: Well, I've worked in developed markets, and in markets where a woman doesn't have the right to even drive a car or have an education — it's a long, long, long road. I think the United States has made really great strides, so has most of Europe, but I think there's more to do.

ACC: How can women elevate their careers, and what role does the legal profession as a whole play?

Claire: I think it's building flexibility into the legal profession. I also I think the path needs to broaden and people need to not just be fixated on being a general counsel. It is an amazing thing to be, but I think there are just as many opportunities that you can create for influence and paying forward, paying back, and delivering transformative change, quality legal advice, and taking your board to the next level. We need to be a bit more fluid about it.

Evolving roles

ACC: The role of in-house counsel has evolved tremendously over the years. What do you think has lead to this evolution, and what do you think the future holds?

Claire: I think the profession is going to keep changing because hopefully you're going to line a group of lawyers up and they're going to look and sound different in 10 years time. You will have someone who does the traditional legal work and then you're going to have someone who's thinking, 'Well, I'm doing the tech piece, I'm responsible for operations, and I run our Learning and

Development (L&D).’ And L&D is actually important: It doesn’t stop the moment you leave law school and you just tick the box for CLE. The CLE tick box thing needs to be more fulfilling, and I think apprenticeships and transformations through education, and the operational piece, are all going to blend together to change the legal profession and broaden its spectrum.

In-house counsel started this revolution 20 years ago, and are we not making those law firms tremble a bit? I think we are, quite rightly we should. Twenty years ago it was seen as, ‘You’re going in-house because you can’t cut it in a law firm.’ Now it’s the brave, bold, gladiatorial, change-the-world, be-the-business choice for the in-house community.

ACC: More of these gladiator GCs are sitting at the executive table. How do they keep those seats, and what advice do you have for those waiting to sit down?

Claire: The most important thing for lawyers is to be authentic. For me, it’s a core attribute of who you are. I also think you have to be a bit brave — no board should want a “yes” person. You are an important clog in the wheel and you need to be able to feel confident in what you do and that your voice matters. It’s about influencing and it’s about your relationships, building trust, being authentic, and trying to lead from the front.

As a woman, I am conscious that it’s more challenging for us and sometimes we lean back, but we need to lean in and I think general counsel need to lean in as well, regardless of gender. We have the expertise. We have the knowledge; we have the key role. We have insight into all of the business and we should be pushing that agenda as much as anyone else. It’s so much about influence and relationships, and you have to be patient. People need to buy into you and into who you are.

Parting words of advice

Claire: Don’t be afraid. If you don’t ask, you don’t get. And you can’t be afraid to try. And if I look at my career mapping and life mapping, there are a lot of dips and there are a lot of highs and that’s how it should be. If it was one straight line, gosh, that’ll be so boring. And I wouldn’t be who I am today.

Getting to know... Claire Debney

WHAT BOOK ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING?

I always read two books at the same time, one fiction and one non-fiction. At the moment I am reading According to Yes by Dawn French. She’s an English comedian. But I’m having her read that to me on my audible book. And I’m reading Willful Blindness by Margaret Heffernan.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR YOU?

I describe myself as an optimistic change agent for the legal profession. I am delighted to be working with Bill Mordan again and to be able to support the Shire legal team in this newly created role of Director of Legal Strategy. It reflects the investment in the team there, as well as an opportunity to innovate through process, learning, and technology. One of my first responsibilities is to build an Academy at Shire. I will also be focusing on developing the Mosaic mentoring program further, as the demand is there.

GUILTY PLEASURE?

My guilty pleasure is baking and decorating cakes. Not cooking. I'm not doing Master Chef. Just baking.

NAME ONE PERSON, LIVING OR DEAD, YOU'D LOVE TO HAVE A CUP OF COFFEE WITH?

I think I could spend ages talking to Bill Clinton; he's charismatic and even more so with him potentially being the "first husband." Can I have Nelson Mandela too? And I'd really want to ask Marilyn Monroe what went on with JFK. Can I have mini dinner party instead?

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