

EVERY FIVE YEARS, THE LAW FIRM FRESHFIELDS Bruckhaus Deringer holds an election to select its Senior Partner, an event well-covered by industry publications but typically ignored by mainstream media outlets. The firm's most recent election, held in September last year, broke that pattern, eliciting lengthy profiles in the *FT* and *The Sunday Times* of the groundbreaking victor, Georgia Dawson, the firm's Asia Managing Partner.

The surprise, at least for industry insiders, stemmed partly from Dawson's background. As well as its litigation and antitrust practices, Freshfields is renowned for its M&A advisory practice. In 2020, that practice advised on deals worth more than \$363 billion—fourth globally according to Mergermarket's 2020 rankings. Yet Dawson's background is in litigation and regulation. Freshfields is eyeing further growth in the US—which accounted for about 40% of global M&A activity in 2020—and its strongholds are in Europe. Yet Dawson ran its Asia business and was based in Singapore and Hong Kong.

Another factor was gender. Prior to her election, no woman had ever led Freshfields in its 278-year history. Nor had a woman ever before been chosen to lead one of the five venerable London-based firms known as the "Magic Circle," a label that Dawson regards as needing a refresh, for Freshfields is a global rather than British firm.

Dawson's victory was hailed as a marker of progress not only for Freshfields but also for the legal industry more broadly. She has built a reputation for championing diversity and inclusion, having appeared for three consecutive years on the *Financial Times* and Yahoo! OUTstanding Top 50 LGBT+ Ally Executives lists. She was also named the LGBT+ organization Stonewall's Global Senior Champion in 2019. Diversity and inclusion was a pillar of her campaign for Senior Partner.

In 2021, Dawson's first year as Senior Partner, half of Freshfields' 22 new partners were women, compared with 19% the year before—an achievement for which Dawson claims no credit. "Some of the press coverage would suggest that this improvement was attributable to my new management team. But in fact, the prior management team and our practice group leaders effectively built that class of partners as a result of long running efforts to improve diversity in the firm."

Beyond media interest, Dawson has been surprised by the impact her appointment has made. In the months that followed it, peers from other legal firms offered their support. She told Brunswick that letters and emails now come from total strangers.



GEORGIA



FRESHFIELDS' Senior Partner discusses her historic election, building a pipeline of diverse talent, and the importance of actually taking vacation days.
By **JOANNA DONNE.**

DAWSON

One typed letter offered both congratulations and music suggestions. More familiar congratulations came from Dawson's father, who celebrated 50 years as an Australian solicitor the same year Dawson celebrated her election triumph.

Dawson, who is relocating from Singapore to London, recently made time to speak with Joanna Donne, a Brunswick Partner who began her career as a solicitor with the law firm Linklaters. A few weeks after their conversation took place, Linklaters announced the appointment of its first-ever female Senior Partner.

When you joined the firm in 2004, was it your ambition to be senior partner?

No, it really wasn't. The senior partner from where I sat as a junior associate wasn't that visible—I mean, we knew who they were, but I didn't really have much understanding of what they were doing day to day. I joined in 2004—about four years after our big mergers in Germany and Austria. So I imagine the senior partner at the time was heavily focused on two things: integration and also growth, because we grew significantly from 2004 to now.

Today we don't have that integration challenge. We are fully integrated and truly global. What is different today though is the competitive landscape. The US firms are much more dominant today than they were in 2004 in key markets like London. The technology, the working arrangements, the priorities—they were all obviously quite different then too.

One area you've been visible on is inclusion and diversity. Your appointment was seen as a sign of progress; so too that this year's partner class was 50% women. What's the plan to sustain that momentum?

Our target is that at least 40% of new partners are women. And we've achieved that in year one. We will start the process for 2022 partners this summer and we will be focused on sustaining our progress.

Going forward, I think that having the management focus on building the pipeline of talent and sending strong messages about how people are doing at an early point in their careers will be really key. All of the things that we have been doing to support and advance diversity, we have to continue doing.

Then I think we need to be really thoughtful about curating our talent. Making sure that if you're on track, you get a strong message, that people are helping you get good mandate opportunities, client relationship opportunities, helping you understand the firm—so that when it comes to having interviews, all

candidates perform really well.

If you look at the talent pool that we will be drawing from, it is sufficiently diverse to achieve our goal of 40%. It then just requires management focus so that we are saying to the practice groups if they're not coming up with a diverse slate, "Why not? Because it looks like the talent is there."

One of the firm's new global environmental targets is a 30% reduction in carbon from business travel over the next five years. Do you think post-COVID there will be a sustained dramatic reduction in business travel?

The firm has been focused on this area for a long time. We've been committed to carbon neutrality since 2007, and since 2015 we've done so through a carbon offset program called the Reforestation in East Africa Programme that has been highly successful.

There was a pre-existing environment program and a pre-existing five-year set of targets. I refreshed that at the beginning of my term to set our objectives for the next five years. The targets for the previous five years included similar kind of topics: reducing carbon from travel, reducing paper use, etc. We achieved all of those targets, save for eliminating single-use plastics, which we had to reintroduce because of COVID requirements. We've given ourselves until the end of this year to get rid of the single-use plastics, and then we've adjusted the other ones to be more ambitious.

Will travel reduce? Yes, I think so. If I think about my own career, sitting here in Asia, the number of meetings I have joined dialing in from Asia late at night and not really felt like an active participant in the discussion because you're not in the room—[Microsoft] Teams has completely changed that.

People are now a lot more thoughtful about making sure that the right people from around the world are around the table on any given topic. It's more inclusive without the disruption of having to travel and do things face to face. As a management team, when we run the global management meetings—be that at the board level or the ExCo level—we'll do the majority via Teams and only do a few a year in person. And clients are increasingly comfortable organizing virtual meetings too.

But I really want to get back to bringing our teams together, to support and create those networks and friendships that grow in the firm. We pride ourselves on creating global teams that are highly collegiate and where people have fun together, because then I think you work better together and produce better results for clients.

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So returning to the office has a role to play?

Yes, it absolutely does. We are taking an iterative process to working out exactly what that is. Our colleagues in different cities will have a different approach or a different set of parameters for what will work for them, and we need to be accommodating of that.

If you compare Hong Kong, where we have a beautiful office with quite a bit of space and where the commute is quite short, I think we'll have high levels of occupancy, versus cities where the commute is both expensive and not always that convenient.

We're looking at a range of different options. But reinforcing and maintaining the culture of the organization is the core of one of our planning principles, as is learning and development, and ensuring the ongoing excellence of our work. They're the design features.

But it's been a long stretch of disruption and I think people are feeling less connected. We are very aware that many around the firm are continuing to manage heavy workloads alongside the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. To address that, and to say thank you for the hard work, we've implemented a new package of well-being measures over the summer for all our people around the world: shutting the firm for two days so everyone can have a couple of long weekends, community days, and internal meeting-free Fridays. We'll hope a lot of people can take the additional days of annual leave, and for those who can't, we will give them a backup day. I want to ensure people take their leave and can properly switch off from work in the coming months.

Yes, it's tough isn't it?

I know it has been for me at times. And when I have taken leave, because you're in the same environment, same house, and your computer's sitting there, you feel inclined to check-in on work more than you should. I have been putting out-of-office notifications on my email and tried to step back. And when I have, it has been really good. And I felt so much better as a result.

Your leadership style seems very personable and accessible. Do you think, given the year everyone's just had, people expect a more intimate approach—to see a person as opposed to a corporate?

I think that drive for authenticity predates the pandemic. Yet the pandemic has accelerated the focus on the quality of communication and the level to which

people are being human in how they're acknowledging the challenges that people are having, and trying to accommodate them.

Obviously the insights into people's lives through video calls have brought other dimensions of people's lives to light. While I think you could use the word "intimate," I still think people are expecting to see professionalism, resolve, clarity of thought—but they're also increasingly looking for empathy and the human side too.

I think there's also the need for increased communications as well and a variety of different forms of communication: blogs, newsletters, live talks, recorded talks. Coming up with a whole range of different ways of engaging with people to accommodate different generations within organizations and different styles of listening.

For a lot of organizations, that communication from leaders was critical over the last year. The question a lot of leaders are facing now is: "How sustainable is that? Do I still need to be the one who does it? Can we build a structure around it?"

Yes. Which I think is absolutely right. There was probably a need for a period of time for it to be a single point of contact and consistent messaging. Then I think as we go on people need variety. And then there's the sustainability element to it.

I've come across some impressive pro-bono work by Freshfields employees, who are already working long hours and days—what do you think's driving them to do that?

I think it's largely self-initiated. The firm does curate or create opportunities through our relationships with charities, NGOs and pro-bono networks. We have a really healthy pipeline of new pro-bono mandates. They get advertised internally, and people can put their hand up and say they want to be involved.

We've had some projects that have been multidisciplinary across the firm. For example, we developed an app last year for refugee applicants in Hong Kong. Some of the thinking behind that was to relieve the work burden on the in-house lawyers at our pro-bono client. If you've got applicants coming in on a regular basis and you're giving repeat kind of advice, this was a way of putting that advice on both an app and a web portal so people could read it. It's now been translated into multiple languages.

When COVID hit, it became clear that people couldn't come in-person to get the advice, so this was a way for them to be able to at least progress those early stages of their refugee application without

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JOANNA DONNE, a
Brunswick Partner based
in Singapore, specializes
in corporate transactions,
crisis and litigation.

having to make contact with people. That project was a mixed team of lawyers and tech developers from Freshfields.

I think part of the drive and desire to work on pro-bono mandates, particularly over the past 12 months, is that we are really fortunate as a firm and as a profession. People are conscious that we have skills that are valuable to people who are less fortunate and going through really challenging times. To play a role in alleviating some of the stresses and strains that they're under through deploying our legal and other skills is something people want to do.

Freshfields has long had a presence in the US, but it feels like you're really investing in it now. Is that part of your strategy—to grow your presence there?

The firm has had an interest in the US and US-headquartered clients for a long period of time. The impetus for expanding has come about because we've listened to client feedback around where it would be helpful for them if we were to have a broader and deeper offering.

There's this really positive sense of momentum in our US practice at the moment. We see real growth opportunities in the transactional space—be that M&A or capital markets work—and also for our litigation and antitrust teams. We opened the office in Silicon Valley in the middle of the pandemic, and the team there have been incredibly busy, particularly in the last three quarters of the year. They're now handling a large number of IPOs and some really significant antitrust litigation for some of the big tech companies, amongst others.

There's a balance between growth and integration. Since 2018, we've had 18 new lateral partners in the US. We've also promoted eight new partners internally. We've still got some areas that we either want to grow or we need to plan for succession. There will certainly be more hires over the next couple of years, and we are conscious of the importance of careful integration into our existing structure, to maintain our culture of collegiality—something I am proud of and believe is important when operating at a global level.

Part of what drew me to Freshfields, and what's kept me here, is the nature of the work. It's challenging, it's cross-border. But it's also that you're surrounded by really passionate, clever people who try to make work as enjoyable as it can be. There's no point working as hard as we do and being unhappy—we owe it to ourselves and each other to make it rewarding and fun. ♦