

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES — JENNIFER BOWERS

BY CATHERINE MCGREGOR

GLOBALISATION IS ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DRIVING FORCES CHANGING BUSINESS. YET IT CAN PRODUCE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR MANY COMPANIES PARTICULARLY IN REGARDS TO CREATING CULTURES THAT FULLY TAKE THIS INTO ACCOUNT.

JENNIFER BOWERS IS CURRENTLY LEGAL DIRECTOR AT ASCENTIAL. SHE CREDITS THE CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES GAINED THROUGH HER FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES AS A YOUNG LAWYER, WORKING AND LIVING ABROAD, AS FUNDAMENTAL IN DEFINING HER SUBSEQUENT IN-HOUSE LEGAL ROLES AT GLOBAL COMPANIES.



INTERVIEW

When working in private practice Jennifer spent a number of years working in Milan, what were the key learnings that living and working abroad gave her?

Jennifer confirmed that her Italian experience broadened her technical expertise but the more rewarding and lasting learnings were in terms of people skills and self awareness.

“In terms of technical skills, it was clearly invaluable to experience and hone my understanding of the reality of operating in both civil law and common law legal systems. Aside from the legal documentation, I was quickly made aware of local law and administrative matters such as the role of the notary, translations and the need to understand the economic and commercial context of a totally new market” She explains and

feels this knowledge added an extra dimension to her technical skills and has been incredibly beneficial in her career. “I thrive in a cross border context and it is not a coincidence that I have subsequently pursued global in-house roles.”

But the biggest learning for Jennifer were the non-legal ones, rooted in empathy and communi-

cation. “As lawyers, the way that we communicate, understand and build trust with our clients and colleagues is just as important as the technical advice we are giving. It was a humbling experience as an ambitious young lawyer to stumble across language and cultural barriers and recognise that I would need more than just my technical skills to succeed.”

Communication was a significant challenge as, at the beginning, Jennifer had not used Italian in a business setting before, how did she ensure crucial information was not lost in translation? “I worked hard to master business Italian but I still recall how difficult it was at the beginning to actively participate in meetings and how pleasantly surprised familiar clients were when my improving confidence and Italian language abilities allowed me to offer

“I THRIVE IN A CROSS BORDER CONTEXT AND IT IS NOT A COINCIDENCE THAT I HAVE SUBSEQUENTLY PURSUED GLOBAL IN-HOUSE ROLES.”

more technical opinions and input. I came to look forward to and value the passionate exchange of opinions which ultimately led to the best outcome for all parties.”

The lived reality of having to master legal and business communication in another language has stayed with her as she explains that, “In subsequent roles I have a particular empathy for those working in English where this is not their first language but am also sensitive to other factors such as hierarchies, culture or simply a lack of confidence that may discourage someone from putting forward their point of view.”

Sometimes being an outsider can give you perspectives that those rooted in a particular language and culture may not be able to have. Did Jennifer’s perspective as a foreign lawyer assist her in approaching matters or give her an additional view that Italian lawyers might not have brought? She feels that working abroad, in general, gave her a new perspective on working styles and approaches and eliminated any early assumptions that there is only one approach to any given problem. Further to that it was her international perspective but most importantly the ability to collaborate that Jennifer feels helped her in Italy: “I believe I brought an international style to my transactions particularly in terms of cross border project management but in Milan the key strength was in the teamwork and the collaboration between all lawyers involved. I thoroughly enjoyed flexing and adapting my approach to accommodate an Italian context. The creativity of thinking required

for each transaction was incredibly rewarding.”

This creativity of thinking and ability to consider views from more than one cultural viewpoint has continued to serve Jennifer well in-house both at Ascential and in her prior roles at Tesco.

And that’s been not just in relationships but in terms of legal advice, she explains, “I believe a sensitivity to cultural differences has given me the confidence to

“MANAGING GLOBALLY DISPARATE TEAMS, WHETHER GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANT OR NOT, IS CERTAINLY A SKILL MOST LEADERS NOW NEED TO DEVELOP.”

know when not to simply roll out a standard contract and to think creatively in terms of legal problem solving. I have worked on a number of transactions in Asia where following the relationship dynamics between business leads was a vital element of effective contract negotiations. Equally in a global business I have found it is beneficial to continuously assess the efficiency of central standardisation against the advantages of localisation and remain open minded as much as possible.”

Managing globally disparate teams, whether geographical distant

or not, is certainly a skill most leaders now need to develop. As someone who has managed a number of global teams, what does Jennifer feel are the skills leaders need to ensure there is cohesion in globally disparate teams? That’s first and foremost communication, she feels, “I believe that with any team the most important leadership skill lies in effective communication and the ability to take people with you. With globally disparate teams, capturing everyone’s input can be a real challenge particularly in terms of goal setting. While technology now helps us with a multitude of communication options, time-zones and language differences still make it tempting to limit discussion centrally and simply tell everyone else of the outcome.” What’s crucial for cohesion in global teams is also inclusion, Jennifer feels, especially around key decisions, “My most successful cross border teams have operated when I engaged everyone in discussion before setting final objectives. This wider approach ensures not only that key views and expertise are captured in the final project plan but that there is also a sense of shared purpose in the overall project objectives.”

Talent is a key challenge for all leaders; trying to develop talent cross culturally adds a further nuance to this endeavor, Jennifer shares that, again for her, it comes down to communication, “I believe developing talent is about having honest conversations about what career development means to that particular individual, what the current organisation can offer and then building a plan which works for

both parties. I have personally found encouraging my team to prepare a short personal development plan helps those conversations to be more productive particularly where the manager relationship is fairly new or the conversation is cross border and can not be face to face. However it is always important to stay culturally sensitive particularly where this means a team member may be reticent to formally admit a challenge or ambition.”

Jennifer certainly seems to have found a logical application for many of the attributes and skills she started to develop in Milan as a young lawyer by working in-house with a broad global perspective, but is there one thing she wishes she had known and learnt before you moving to an in-house legal role?

“I LEARNT A LOT EARLY ON AROUND THE IMPACT CHANGE HAS ON US AS INDIVIDUALS AND THE VALUE IN THOSE MOMENTS OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP.”

She acknowledges that she was not prepared for the pace of change:

“I wish I had prepared myself a little better for the amount of change that occurs within businesses and how the generalist in-house lawyer must be able to successfully tackle unexpected challenges on an almost daily basis. In each of my in-house roles I have experienced periods of intense business change. I learnt a lot early on

around the impact change has on us as individuals and the value in those moments of effective leadership.”

But Jennifer’s in-house experience, whilst often full of the unexpected has meant she also has had to develop the ability to keep on top of these changes as she deals with them,” One of the most rewarding things about moving in-house has been developing these professional skills on the job.”