

Women in business: an interview with Katherine Neal

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Katherine Neal is counsel in Ogier's private client and trusts team in Jersey. She regularly advises professional trustees, settlors and beneficiaries on matters relevant to trusts and foundations, including drafting trust deeds and advising on complex structures including employee reward schemes, JPUTs and pensions.

In this interview which first appeared in Contact magazine, Katherine discusses her career and her views on opportunities for women in law.

Give us an overview of your career to date

I started as a trainee with Pemberton Greenish in London and was there for ten years, eventually becoming partner in the land and estates department. I then moved back to the Midlands (I am originally from Sheffield) and spent six years with Shakespeare Martineau. At that point, I was looking for a new challenge and planned to return to London. But an opportunity arose to move to Jersey instead, so I took it and arrived here five years ago. From a career perspective, moving offshore has meant that I now have experience in all aspects of private client work. The quality of legal work here equates to working in a large London legal practice.

What goals or ambitions do you still wish to achieve?

I am fortunate to have achieved many career ambitions at quite a young age. I was made partner at 30. So now one of my passions is to support the next generation of solicitors coming through. I am involved with supporting our trainees and I am very keen to encourage young people into the legal profession as a career choice.

Does the glass ceiling really exist?

The honest answer is I just don't know. I have never personally experienced any obstacles to progression because of my gender. I don't have children which means that I haven't ever needed

to take a career break. I have friends - also lawyers - some of whom have been just as successful having had children and others not.

I think that perhaps the legal profession is more of a meritocracy than some other environments because of the partnership structure under which it generally operates. It's in the interest of the partnership to manage progression based on merit to maximise fee generation.

What's your view on female quotas in the boardroom?

The key to a successful board I believe is diversity, through gender, cultural or educational background. No board should be made up of people all of a similar background and way of thinking. Personally I would never want to be appointed to a board to make up the numbers; I would want to know that I was there through my own merit.

The employment arena is changing as we move towards a gig economy, where flexible jobs are commonplace and companies tend toward hiring independent contractors and freelancers, instead of full-time employees. So arguably, it's too late to be discussing quotas in boardrooms.

How do you manage the work/life balance?

Much more easily since I arrived in Jersey. I work similarly long hours to when I was in London but of course don't have the long commute in overcrowded trains.

My commute now is a 15-minute walk which makes the 'come down' from the working day very easy. There are lots of outdoor pursuits to follow on the island and the fact that the weather is slightly nicer than the UK helps too.

What's the most important thing you have learnt during your career?

To be yourself and not to be afraid of who you are and where you are from. I was once invited to sit on an interview panel to appoint a headmaster of a well known public school for boys in the UK. I asked why they wanted me involved, as I had gone through the comprehensive system and was female. The answer was that the school wanted to have someone with a completely different perspective and background to bring fresh views to the proceedings. From that point I was always proud of who I was and where I was from.

What three words would you use to describe yourself?

Gregarious, dynamic and enthusiastic.

This interview first appeared in Contact magazine.

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