

Sally Penni (INTRO)

Hello and welcome to Talking Law, the podcast where you can hear barristers, judges, solicitors, managing partners and more, talk about their lives and careers.

I'm Sally Penni, MBE, I'm a barrister at Kenworthy's Chambers in Manchester, the Joint Vice Chair of Association of Women Barristers and founder of Women in the Law UK.

This episode is supported by DLA Piper.

DLA Piper is a multinational law firm with offices in more than 40 countries throughout the Americas, Asia Pacific, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.

They assist clients with legal issues in a large number of sectors, including employment, finance, real estate, tax and arbitration.

Find out more at dlapiper.com

Today I'm Talking Law with Alison Hagan

Ali Fagan is a Construction Disputes Partner and the Head of the Infrastructure Funds Sector Group at DLA Piper UK LLP.

Ali provides risk management advice on distressed, high value or strategically critical infrastructure projects for a wide ranging pool of clients, from private sector partners to delivery contractors.

Ali started by telling me about her journey into the law.

Alison Fagan (00:00):

So I have a very traditional journey into law in that I studied law at university at Lancaster University went straight on and did my LPC here in Manchester at BPP and then I got a training contract with a Addleshaw Goddard.

Sally Penni (00:16):

Wow.

Alison Fagan (00:16):

Worked there for I think eight or nine years.

Sally Penni (00:20):

Oh my goodness.

Alison Fagan (00:21):

And then came here to DLA, so relatively straightforward route through, albeit it hasn't probably felt so straightforward at times. But traditional, I should say.

Sally Penni (00:31):

Yes. Yes. So yeah, I suppose quite straightforward journey really? Yeah. Into the law. And I wanted to ask you actually, because I know I don't want to reveal too much about you, but you know, you live in the

Northwest. I know you go to London an awful lot yes. For work purposes. Was that a deliberate decision because often, you know, we think about the legal world and the success of those leading in law as being based in London.

Alison Fagan (01:03):

Yeah. I've always, always traveled between mainly Manchester and London, but other cities as well. And I suppose at one point, have I thought, 'do I need to relocate to London'? Possibly. And my funds practice is very much London centric, but I've just found that over the years I've been able to manage working between the two. I get to live in the Northwest with my family and with lots of outdoor space. But I travel yeah. Most weeks to London didn't always have. So it involves a lot of time on the train. But I don't mind that I quite enjoy it.

Sally Penni (01:37):

Well, well it allows you to listen to my podcast indeed or not or fall asleep to it. I do. I don't know, but it does actually provide another option, doesn't it? Definitely for people who might perhaps be thinking it's all London or a big city or nothing.

Alison Fagan (01:54):

No, I've, I've always felt that I've managed to secure really high quality work and I've never felt I've missed out on that work by not being based in London. You do have to do a little bit more of the traveling, stay over, you know, a bit more in hotels and be away a little bit more. But I think that's a, a balanced worth striking to get the quality of the work that I want and the exposure to London. It's a great city. There's so much going on so many opportunities, so many great people, but I'll, there is something sweet about being on the train north at the end of a long week. Yes, Yes. And seeing the Hills roll into the roll in to view. Yes. And knowing that I'm Home.

Sally Penni (02:33):

Yeah. Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. So tell me what is infrastructure, as I said at the beginning, it sounds very grown up. And I'm think, what does your day to day job entail? So for example, if I was sort of thinking about, you know, becoming a solicitor, looking at all the different areas, what is the infrastructure as a specialism for you?

Alison Fagan (02:59):

Yeah. That's a really interesting question because it's not an area that I trained in through my degree. You don't do it on your degree course. It's not an area that's available to people on an LPC necessarily. And I only really knew infrastructure construction existed when I joined Addleshaws. And I had a, an absolute powerhouse of a, of a supervisor. They're a great woman who just inspired me with all things, construction infrastructure. Yes. And in reality, it's, it's the world we live in. It's the buildings that we occupy. It's the roads we use. It's the airports that we like now to frequent more often than we have in the last couple of years.

Yes. you know, it, it is the world, the practical operational world that we live in and all of the, for me, I'm a litigator. So all of the problems that can arise when you build yes. Great bits of, of working, living, breathing infrastructure.

Sally Penni (03:57):

Amazing. Is it really quite practical because the other thing that struck me when I was looking you up and looking up sector, is that there aren't many women. No. Which, which is consistent with engineering, you know, in the business world, the real world, if I may say so - construction tech and all of that, there are many women at all. So for, you want to have had a supervisor, he was female. Yeah. And secondly, then you, yourself being a woman how is that? If you don't mind me asking.

Alison Fagan (04:27):

Yeah. It's it, it's, I'm glad to say it's a changing position and changing for the better. So now when I walk into a room for a client meeting or an event, there are other women. Often. Yes. Which is good and multiple other women, not one other woman, but a number of other women in the room. Yeah. But historically that's not been the case. No. And that is a real shame because it's a superb area to practice. I think actually being a woman in the way that we approach certain tasks and certain work makes a, is really fit with the practical technical nature. I am not good at maths. I am shockingly bad at maths. I was awful at science at school. So you don't, I am living, breathing proof. You don't have to be good at those sorts of areas to work in what it's a traditionally male dominated environment.

Alison Fagan (05:22):

But I ask a lot of questions and I sit with a lot of technical experts and when they're describing polymer science to me and it's completely going over my head, I I'm very happy to say, I don't understand that. Yes. Take me back to the beginning, walk me through it. I need to know everything that you know, and actually, I think that makes is one of the key skills, because if, if they can explain it to me and I can then explain it to a court as a litigator. Yeah. Then I think that is a strategic advantage. Not a disadvantage. And yeah, I've, I've just, there've been some inspiring women in my, in my history and in my past. Yes. And hopefully I can now be one of them. My team currently is far more women than men. Wow. So it really is a changing picture.

Sally Penni (06:10):

Absolutely. Crikey. Yeah.

Alison Fagan (06:12):

I'm really, really proud of that. And, and I think it's, it's, it's indicat the industry more generally in terms of the construction and infrastructure sector. Yeah. There is an awful lot of support and push for diversity of all forms of diversity in construction and infrastructure and law. We've been a little bit behind that push. Yeah. but as I say, hopefully this is not a question we should be asking in 10 years time.

Sally Penni (06:39):

No, absolutely. I think my daughter indeed, your daughter shouldn't be having it in that time. No.

Sally Penni (06:46):

Okay. Yeah. And maybe if they're having it, maybe be for different reasons. I suppose. I wonder then if that's one of the reasons you've been quite keen to be involved in the law network here, which is all about gender, you've been very supportive for supportive of our annual women in the lower UK annual conferences, which have been excellent, you know, they're so wonderfully attended and I have of course horrendous amount of emails of people saying how brilliant it was and all rest of it. I wonder if they are some of the reasons I've led you to that being involved in that network. So I was interested in

what's happening at DNA generally on gender. And what you've been pushing because you're one of the few law firms with a black managing partner. Although I think she's got a new role now.

Alison Fagan (07:35):

She has she's Managing managing director for UK and Europe now. So she's onwards even higher than she was. No, it's something the firm takes very, very, very seriously. And I equally, it has to be the top of our agenda and is the top of our agenda. We are not where we should be. Yeah. As a firm. Yes. And as an industry, I think it's, you know, we are not where we should be there either, but I think the key thing is a commitment to make real, real change. Practical change. Yes. And interestingly, the, the, the role that I have on the legal Alliance for women are sort of law network in the Northwest. We did a consultation recently out to the business to say, look, tell what we can do, what we should be doing as a business to, you know, remove some of the barriers or the perceived barriers to entry and success.

Alison Fagan (08:28):

Yes. And it was incredibly interesting to just get perspectives from everybody. And some of the things were so small, you know, really minor things that actually we can change really, really easily. And we will change really, really easy. There's bigger things that will take more time and more policy issues. But for me, I think we've just got to have more in depth conversations about the realities of the business we work in and, and how we can improve it. Yeah. We're not perfect. Absolutely not. But if we can acknowledge that and come up with ways to help, particularly our junior team members. Yeah. Then, then that's our commitment and that's our, it's an absolute imperative.

Sally Penni (09:12):

Yes. Well, it's, it's interesting, isn't it? Because I'm now wondering, you know, if, if someone was starting their career then, and they were fortunate enough to have trained at Addleshaws as you did or at one of the big, I dunno what they're called now, they're still called magic circle or not, because I'm just showing my age. Aren't I, you know, the top...

Alison Fagan (09:34):

Tier!

Sally Penni (09:34):

The, yeah. The top tier. And at the bar a bit hopeless with that, but what career advice would you give and then I'd like to ask you some questions about sort of family life and, you know, the changes there. Yeah. What career advice would you give to somebody? And I asked you this question. I dunno, if you remember, when I wrote talking law book one, which was celebrating hundred years on from when women were allowed to practice law and I was showcasing what the profession looks like a hundred years later, what women and men were doing and how the profession looks so different to, you know, 1919. And you gave me some interesting answers then. So I, I'm just curious, you know, if you had maybe three tips or something or career advice or whether entering the law or staying in the law that you might be able to share with us.

Alison Fagan (10:22):

Yeah. This is a tricky question, cause it's such a range of, of, of possible answers and there's so many small things and big things. But for me, I think one of the first things I would say to anybody entering the law is really go deeper in your reading and your understanding when I do the interviews, you know,

have done aging and here at daylight for our vacation scheme candidates, the key for me is the depth yes. Of understanding and knowledge. You know, don't just read the website, find things that really interest you and then go off, down that rabbit hole, reading more and more and more about a particular issue or an initiative or an incentive. Because I think the more you read, you can develop an authenticity yes. Into why you're giving certain answers in interview because you know, the understanding of what we do, why we do it, what you're passionate about is different for every single person in the legal business and legal industry.

Alison Fagan (11:20):

Yes. And I just like to have engaging conversations with people about things that they're genuinely interested in. Yeah. So for me the first tip I would give is just be really interested in the law and the business and certain elements of the law that you wish to practice in. And, and, and really think about that. And sort of built into that, talk to people, you know, I think ask questions of anybody who you spend time with about the law, about what they do about their interface with the legal profession, their interface with a particular sector. I'm a, well, I'm big talker, as you well know,

Sally Penni (12:00):

I love it. I love it. I

Alison Fagan (12:01):

Like to engage, you know, there's only so much having just said, read a lot. I also say there's only so much you can get from a book so talk to people and really get that depth of understanding and knowledge of, of, of what we do and why an individual might want to come and join us. Yeah. In, in the profession. Yeah. and then I suppose going one step further on is just get experience, you know? Yeah. And it, and be creative about what that experience is. You know, we here have all the set routes into law. We have the apprenticeship scheme, we have our training contracts, we have our vacation schemes. It's all really formal and really structured. Yeah. But for me, you know, some of the best experience you can get is, is far more informal, you know, for me as litigator go and sit in the court yes.

Alison Fagan (12:49):

And watch yes. Just soak it all up and experience it and understand it, or, you know, go an offer to work in, in, in a business and - doesn't have to be a legal business, any business family business or, or, you know, use all your contacts, but then really think about how that business interfaces with the law. Do they have an in-house legal team? Yes. Do they have legal problems? What do they do about their legal problems and requirements? I think we can get more creative with our experience as juniors with our junior team that it doesn't have to be a formal, you know, vacation scheme and training contract. Yeah. Because ultimately, if you've done some of that more informal experience building, when you then go to the formal schemes and answer those questions is really authentic. Yes. And it comes from a true experience. Or, you know, you can explain how you worked in a family business and there was no legal interface whatsoever. And explain why you think that might be or what you would do if you were the managing director of that company, you know, get a bit more creative because I think people can get a bit channeled into, well, these are the boxes that I need to tick.

Sally Penni (13:59):

Yeah.

Alison Fagan (14:00):

And I think that will only get you so far – true depth.

Sally Penni (14:03):

Yes.

Alison Fagan (14:03):

And authenticity for me the big, the big sort of pointers that I would have.

Sally Penni (14:09):

About the apprenticeship: how does it work? And is it working on the job? Cause quite a few law firms have got it, but I'm not sure it's still so clear for people in the way that we are the bar have been used to it for God knows how long!

Alison Fagan (15:03):

Yeah. So for the the fee earning practice in terms of the trainee solicitor route, they do their training contract for two few years and they spend six months in four different departments with us yes. And move around. And hopefully they see the bright side and come to litigation and, and express a wish to do construction. In which case they join my team and we, we have a lovely time. But you move around and I think that's great because you get the different experiences of different areas. You know, if you told me when I walked in the doors on my first day that I would be an infrastructure litigator I'd have laughed said, 'no, no, no, I'm gonna be a corporate lawyer. I'm gonna be, you know, some, some other form of lawyer that I knew'. So I would never have planned my route to be here doing something that I now absolutely love.

Alison Fagan (15:48):

So yeah, the training contract allows that formality of, of movement around four different and other firms do slightly different timing, but similar concept. And then there's all sorts of other things in terms of pathways into law that we do. So lots of schemes and I think it's just the idea of getting that experience. Yeah. For me, is just fundamental, fundamental because it's a huge commitment to, to say you're gonna be involved in law and to not have to not know what it is or understand the job before you walk in is a, is a risky situation.

Sally Penni (16:24):

Of course it is, you know, LA in with lots of costs and absolutely, and the expense as well of coming into the profession and, and the, the solicitors profession.

Okay. I, I want you to tell me a little bit about wellbeing. The law is hard work. Yes. We know him. It's hard to work and, and certainly at the bar and there's higher rate of burnout. So I'm wondering ESP and then we've had COVID for the last two years. So that's been a complete shocker. And I, I must admit that some people are better at it than others. We talk a lot about it. You know, this bar wellbeing and lots of active things. So I'm wondering what you do for wellbeing, because let me give you an example.

Sally Penni (17:18):

Or what would you like to do sometimes? Yeah, we have this grand idea, don't we?

Alison Fagan (18:16):

Yeah. So I'm quite an outdoors person. So for me, the one of the worst things you can do is sit me at a screen from, you know, eight till six. And that's, that's what I, what all I'm allowed to do that day. Yeah. So I like to get out, I like to be in the fresh air. I've always ridden horses, so I still have a horse and I go and ride whenever I can. But for me, moving away from the four walls of an office away from your screen and working or spending time outside of that box is critical. So if I feel I'm getting a bit stale with something, or I can't just make a piece of advice work or something, I'll pick up my computer and go somewhere to a bar, to a coffee shop, to a spa just to move away from the office environment for me just lifts a weight.

Alison Fagan (19:10):

And actually I consider that to be well being associated with work because it means at the end of the day, I don't feel quite so sort of drained if I sit at the screen all day. Yeah. You can just feel so drained. And I think people, we are quite a traditional business and people think that you have to, you know, come to the office even, or, you know, go to your home office. Yeah. The log on, stay there for the day, you know, make sure that green light on Skype is showing us green. So everyone knows you're in the office. And then, you know, finish at six and that's the end that just hasn't ever really worked for me. Yeah. I'm more, I will work on, you know, nontraditional hours. I'll pop in and out. I need, I'm rubbish at three o'clock from about three, till four. I'm just awful. So I like to go out into the gym or you just move away.

Sally Penni (19:57):

Yeah,

Alison Fagan (19:57):

Yeah, yeah. Just move around and, and get different experiences and, and yeah. Different pictures in front of your eyes, I think can be, make you more creative.

Sally Penni (20:05):

Well, at work, there's lots of studies on it. So it's quite interesting that you know, that's, that's how your mind works and you're still, you know, performing your productivity is high. Yeah. So do you think post COVID will never return to what we knew before 2020?

For years we've talked about flexibility and so on and so forth, and I'm just wondering what you think, do you think we'll ever go back? Because my husband's a non-lawyer and he's not been to an office of any description for now about two years. And I think there are pros and cons, you know, of going into an office and wellbeing, but more and more in our sector. And I talk to different people, men and women, they're like, oh yeah, two days in the office, great. Or three days is great, but you know I'm really enjoying just the two days of working from home. Yeah. So do you think we'll end up in that sort of hybrid

Alison Fagan (21:19):

Or definitely?

Alison Fagan (21:21):

I don't think we can go back. I don't think we should go back. I don't want to go back to that expectation, you know, I've had a young daughter through COVID and I've spent more time with her because I have breakfast with her. Oh, I'll pop down and have lunch sometimes, you know, I'll, I'll be able to finish it and play with her, put it to bed, and then I might do some more in the evening and yes, you know, I, I love being in the office. I love the people. I work with the team that come artery, but I can get that and have for me a more healthy balance in terms of my family life, but also actually say my own wellbeing. You know, again, sitting here in the office as lovely as they are from eight till six in front of my screen is still sitting in front of a screen in one place.

Alison Fagan (22:05):

And I think we've just got to be more dynamic and accepting of, of the fact that we all, we are no longer attached to a desktop computer that you couldn't drag around. Yes. You know, I can work from anywhere I can work from anywhere in the world. I can certainly work from a local coffee shop or a park or a beach if you need to get just some fresh air. So I don't think we can go back because I think that's certainly not where my team want to be. Yes. but also, I don't think we should. I think it, it genuinely will help balance our lives more. If we can be more flexible with how and when we work.

Sally Penni (22:44):

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I know my dog will be happier. If that comes in to the bar!

Now, listen, I, you are what I call like the kind of traditional look, your blonde, your quite tall. And I'm wondering here, whether you had a favorite fictional, legal character, it's clearly not. Rumpole of the Bailey like mine. When you were growing up who may have inspired to you, and then I'm also interested perhaps in sort of, you know, whether you've got a favorite book or a book that has inspired you or has some meaning for you.

Alison Fagan (23:26):

So these is a bit cheesy and I'm a bit embarrassed, admit it. But obviously my name is All and when I grow up, I watched Ally McBeal. MCBE quite a lot in my formative years and I'm not sure I would hold out as a role model,

Sally Penni (23:41):

Particularly,

Alison Fagan (23:42):

Or somebody that I seek to emanate in my day to day life.

Sally Penni (23:46):

She was great. Well,

Alison Fagan (23:47):

She was, she was quite, you know, it was quite powerful and it was a, a gang of, of, you know, quite a lot of female characters and they were doing some cool stuff. And I think that was that stuck with me. And actually when I was on my interview for a training contract, many, many years ago, they asked me why'd you want to become a lawyer. And it was my first interview that I'd done. And I said, oh, cuz I like Ally McBeal and laughed. And the chap interviewed me didn't and I thought, oh God, wrong answer. But

then to be fair, he did say to me, oh, mine was and then named another, another film sort of character. Yeah. I was like, oh, so everyone's got one.

Sally Penni (24:22):

Oh, absolutely. And this is why actually, I think things like podcasts are important because if our role models come from television, which is great, but you never see the real lawyers like you or, or the, the other 60 odd people who've been on this podcast, then we never really feel them. So it's, it is important to have that. And it's important to know that, you know, lawyers are, are real and they do like Ally McBeal and law and whatever. Absolutely

Alison Fagan (24:50):

Whatever else I must say, actually my most inspiring character in, you know, in sort of not, not law strictly more, more politics is and a big west wing fan.

Sally Penni (24:59):

Oh yes.

Alison Fagan (25:00):

CJ Craig off the west wing, whenever I'm sort of, you know, feel a little bit of imposter syndrome, I think, oh God, I can't do this I think, 'What would CJ do' as sort of channel that moment? So she found her inspiring. Oh super. But you know, the references that you need in your life.

Sally Penni (25:14):

Totally. Totally. For those, for those moments, you mentioned something I'm going to come to in a moment, but I just wondered what about a book before I go on

Alison Fagan (25:22):

Totally different. I love The Count of Monte Christo. I read it over and over again. I just love the depth of the story and the layers and the complexity. And I just find it, you know, it's a bit slightly magical, slightly far places. Yes. So, and it's really long. So it, it grabs my, it keeps me focused on something for a prolonged period of time.

Sally Penni (25:44):

Yes. yeah, no, that's a good choice. Actually. We've got a book club, so we're always keen to look for books.

Alison Fagan (25:50):

Have to commit a long period of time for that.

Sally Penni (25:52):

I know I was thinking that

I want to ask you Ali about an you were topic perhaps, which affects us all which is imposter syndrome. And I kind of now feel and talk about it because I think, well, if, you know, for us in England, one of the greatest lawyers that ever lived, Lady Hale and this documented in articles, but specifically in her book

Spiderwoman talks about her imposter syndrome and incidents of imposter syndrome. And one of which was when she went to law commission, then I think all of us are okay to, to admit that we, we suffer from it.

Sally Penni (26:40):

And it's that feeling that, you know, you're an imposter, someone's gonna tap you on their shoulder and say, you know, you shouldn't be here or whatever. So I wondered if you'd experienced and how you got over perhaps some of your imposter injury

Alison Fagan (27:37):

And yes, I've experienced it throughout my career always. And I'm not sure it's something that you ever get over. Yeah. As a, as a woman in the law. Certainly I don't think it's anything I've put behind me and you know, never to darken my doorstep again. I think it's just something you learn to manage. Yeah. As you go through. So in the early years of my career, I, you know, sat with at that point, lots of men who knew lots about construction contracts, about the way things were. And I would sit in meetings and think 'that's not right'. You know, that answer that's just been given isn't correct. Or so my way to deal with it then was just to become an expert in. So I, when I spoke up, I absolutely knew I was. Right. Absolutely. So, you know, that was almost pushing and imposter syndrome to one side, you using the tool of knowledge and, and knowing that I was right.

Alison Fagan (28:27):

Spending longer researching things, spending longer understanding things to make sure that when I did say something, it was right. Yes. So I think that's how I dealt with it in the past. I think now I actually get quite a lot of support from the people that I work with. So returning to from maternity leave was another time when I thought 'God, you know, can I do this? And I'm, you know, where's my pen and my security pass to get into the office and, oh my God, I've gotta put a suit back on' and at that point, my tool that I used was to rely heavily on the people I work with. So one of the chat apps in my team Robin has just been there. You've worked together for a long time and he had my back and covered for me at times.

Alison Fagan (29:11):

And, and almost when he didn't, I knew I had the confidence in him that he would, yes. So I didn't feel like an imposter and then slowly but surely I've, I've come back and now I'm absolutely fine. And, and I'm going through a stage where, you know, things are on a roll different times. I think you need different tools and, and to rely on different things, you know, back in the day, it was knowledge when I moved here to DLA, you know, I'd moved from one firm to another yeah. And thought, 'oh my God, what have I done? Yes. How, how am I gonna do this?'

Sally Penni (29:41):

Because the studies show that actually women tend to overstay in, in in the places of work, you know, or, but too long and they've progress because they're comfortable and they fear they don't have the confidence to move on by way of progression. Yeah. Yeah.

Alison Fagan (29:56):

And I had, I had all that. I stayed too long and, you know, I moved and, and was just absolutely happy, but then did think, oh my God, now I've actually got to deliver all those things that I said I could. And

would. And there was a time when I was terrified. But to be honest with you, I think if you're not having those feelings, sometimes you're not pushing yourself. Absolutely. And it is imposter syndrome actually.

Sally Penni (30:20):

It's a drive

Alison Fagan (30:21):

A good thing. Yeah. You know, I would, I want to live my life without it. Probably not because I wouldn't have, you know, pushed myself in different areas in different ways. So I think it will be here certainly with me forever. Yeah. But I think I'm okay with that. Yes. As long as I have these tools, tools to, you know, be it people and support and the ability to talk about it as well,

Sally Penni (30:42):

Because actually, you know, men suffer from it, it's just that they don't talk about it as much, or haven't been doing, it's a bit of a, feels like it's a recent phenomenon, but we've actually known about it.

The knowledge point is really interesting cuz that's what I use now. So goodness is what I'll use once I, you know, become an old fart!

Alison Fagan (31:00):

Just flexing, acknowledging that it exists understanding how it makes you feel and then thinking, right. Well at this moment in time, what do I, what are my tools for dealing with it? Yes. And they may be different, you know, if I go into a new area or, you know, when I took on the role as international head of info funds here, again, I probably went back to my knowledge again and thought, I need, need to really book up here. Absolutely. You know, absolutely. I need to push up a little bit. So I think it's just, yeah. Flexing how we deal with it. Yes. Rather than trying to either a make it not exist or, or B thinking of it necessarily as a bad thing.

Sally Penni (31:40):

Yes. Now I want to ask you about partnership and female role models specifically at work, you had this phenomenal woman called Anna Davies.

Alison Fagan (31:51):

I do.

Sally Penni (31:52):

And I don't like her title because it's, I think it's something like PA or something and I have PA and she's not like Anna at all. Now there, I think about a hundred thousand people who listens to this podcast. I don't think my PA is one of them. So she won't hear me saying this, my clerks might hear it, but that's a different story.

And and actually she's an Executive Assistant. Yes. And, and in law they are crucial. Yes. And I just wanted to really, what ask you about what role she's played in your own development? You know, you are a high flying lawyer and the women sometimes in our lives might be our cleaners might be our grannys maybe our moms who are picking up the children sometimes. Yeah, yeah. Who are saying, 'go for that application. You've got it'.

You've had, you know, Anna for a long time. Yes. So what impact have you had she had on you and how important it is have just somebody who's also got your back in a different way.

Alison Fagan (33:03):

Just huge, huge, huge, huge. You, you cannot do what I do or what we do yeah. On your own. Yeah. And Anna makes sure everything happens and I'm big believer in there's only so much. I hate the phrase that we, I could come up with a better one, but bandwidth for any one individual has. Yeah. And if I had to do or engage with the things that Anna does, I would not be able to do everything else that we have to do. So Anna and, and others like her are fundamental to being successful in this business and yeah. Without her, I probably wouldn't be, well, I definitely wouldn't be sat here on time.

Alison Fagan (33:43):

With the right information doing this. So no, absolutely massive. And, and you know, Executive PA is important, but it's anybody who supports you. So you, you know,

Sally Penni (33:53):

Oh totally.

Alison Fagan (33:54):

Since I have my daughter, I rely so heavily on, you know, I've got a nanny. I'm very lucky to, but I've got my mom. And, and granny comes on a Tuesday and looks after my daughter and you know, my husband, you can't, you want to be so independent. Yeah. You know, that's sort of the nature of, of who I am and how I've always operated. And actually the more senior I've become within DLA, then having my daughter, the more I've realized that is a pipe dream. Yeah. And one that I must just, you know, forget because without Anna, without all the support, without all the help yeah. You just can't do it. I can't do it. Yes. and, and I think it's, it's quite hard thing to come to terms with actually. Yes. You can't do it just on your own.

Sally Penni (34:41):

No. And I remember having coffee with you before you were pregnant actually. And you know, you were, well, you were here one day and you were there one day. I thought that sounds like my old life.

And then and then you had, you had your daughter and I was thinking, 'it'll be really interesting to see the shift of the change and how, you know all these different people kind of affect your life'. Yes.

Because we do get used to it just being us. Yeah.

Well, Allie, I know you, weren't expecting me to be asking you about Anna Davies who has been brilliant in all our conferences as well. Absolutely. So thank you.

Sally Penni (35:29):

Yeah, absolutely. For sharing with you, with us can I ask your final question, I suppose, which is this it's about the law, I I've said this on numerous talks and panels and keynote speeches. It's like a marathon, not a sprint. And sometimes people are very keen to get on, get on, get on, get on. And so I wondered what you thought, whether it was advice or tips about longevity.

Alison Fagan (36:27):

Yeah. It is a marathon. It really is. I don't know, ask me probably in another 10 years, but I, on a serious note, we lose too many people at critical points. Absolutely point we really do. And that's something that I'm quite passionate about now because you know, we don't have even at DLA, but it's not a DLA specific problem. It's across the industry. We don't have enough senior female role models.

Sally Penni (36:51):

No, or black seniors.

Alison Fagan (36:53):

Of course, and yeah, absolutely. And you know, I still sit around this table and look and think I am, you know, one of a few and that's not good enough. And when we sort of looked at it internally, everyone was saying, well, we don't have the candidates for partnership. You know, it's that point, we just don't have the numbers to put through. And my point was it's because we've lost people years ago, years ago. And for me, we've got to be less structured about how we work with women at more junior stages of their career. So if, you know, to ask somebody to come back from maternity leave and pick up that day, you know, utilization targets, the same expectations are the same. Yeah. You know, jump back in. It's all. Okay. It's not all okay. And you can't jump back in and it's not that easy.

Alison Fagan (37:48):

And if that's the expectation, then that's our problem to deal with. Yes. because if we make it too difficult at that point, which I think we have been, that's why we lose people and that's why we lose people. Yeah. And it's been a real eye opener, me being out of the business and back in. Yeah. Because I see it now. Yes. I see it more clearly. And I think there are small changes that we can make to make that retention at that critical point, easier for people because it's really hard. Yeah. You know, I love my job. I love the firm. I love the, you know, the law and the area that they work and I'm really passionate about it, but it's really tough. Yeah. And then you add having a baby or not just having a baby, you know, having a life crisis. Oh totally. You know,

Sally Penni (38:32):

Caring responsibilities

Alison Fagan (38:34):

And yeah. There's so many impacts on challenges. My, my father was very little, unfortunately died when I was a junior lawyer. Oh. And that powerhouse lady that I spoke about early on, she just made sure it was all okay. You know, she just said, essentially, screw the policies. We're not gonna do that. You just do what you need for a short period of, and I did was very, very thankful to her. And so I came back and was fine and able to carry on. Yeah. But you know, I think we've got to be more flexible and more dynamic with how we deal with situations to retain our really good people.

Sally Penni (39:10):

I, I totally agree with you and, and you know, and talented people retain talented women, as I say, including, and especially minority women. Cause the stats shows are even worse off. Yeah. There we are, and then, and then we've lost them. Yes. We've, you know, we've lost them.

Alison Fagan (39:29):

And you can't get people back, you know, it's too hard. I think once you've been out for a long time, you know, it's much harder to get people back and, and, and re-engage. So we've just got to do better. We have, we must. And we, we can't, you, you can't stick to structures that are not working. Yeah. And at the moment we have structures and expectations that are not working. Yeah. And until we change that you're not gonna get the senior role models and the people coming through and the partnership candidates because they're gone too soon. So this for me is, is, is fundamental to what we have to do. And I've been very privileged in terms of being, you know, I went on maternity leave as a partner, came back as a partner. Yes. I have that flexibility inherently built in, I have incredibly supportive partners here actually.

Alison Fagan (40:21):

Not that I will admit that to them. Of course. No, but you know, there's a chap called Paul Giles who brought me into DLA and he's been brilliant. He's got a wife, you know, and, and she's a lawyer and, and they have children. So, you know, he's, he was almost saying to me, stop pushing yourself so hard. It's okay. So we've got to- there's got to be more support. There's got to be more flexibility, but true flexibility. And we've got to understand going back to your original question: it's a marathon. We need to keep people through the challenging parts of their lives and their careers, because they'll be here for a long, long time if we do.

Sally Penni (40:56):

Absolutely. Absolutely. And in your answer there, you know, the importance of allies, male allies. Yeah. Of course. And the importance of you using all the privileges that you've outlined yes. To me in this interview to make change. Yes. And when we identify the privileges we have and then identify how we need to use it. Yeah. That's also the way we make change.

Alison Fagan (41:18):

Exactly. And, some things are small, you know, minor changes that can be hugely helpful. You know, the ability for somebody to, to go take their child swimming on a Wednesday afternoon, you know, a newborn or a six month old, 12 month old baby, take her to swim class because actually for a couple of hours out in the afternoon, you've got a much happier mum or dad. Yeah. And then, okay, they've not done some work on a Wednesday afternoon, but do you know what, doesn't matter, they'll do more on Friday. Or of course they do, you know, they're such high achievers anyway, that they're probably 10 steps ahead. Yeah. You know, that's not a, a policy per-se, but it's something we should just do and it should be normal to be able to do those things. And that I think small things can make quite big changes in people's experience of work. And then there's the obvious, big things as well. You know, we need to make sure that we are addressing problems and if there are barriers or challenges that we are talking about them and changing things. Yeah. And I'm quite a doer, you know, I don't like a lot of chat about just

Sally Penni (42:20):

No, no

Alison Fagan (42:20):

Pretending to do things. I actually want to deliver some practical things. So that's what we, that's what we try and do here.

Sally Penni (42:27):

Fantastic. Well, I feel very empowered now Allison Fagan. So I look forward to, to hearing more, thank you so much for Talking Law with me. It's really, really fascinating. And thank you for your time and your support for all the work that we do at Women in the Law UK

Alison Fagan (42:46):

Oh, I couldn't be more delighted to be involved. And women in the law UK is just a phenomenal power and force for good. So oh yeah. Anything I can do or we at DLA we are always happy to, to join on, cause it's such an important, such an important part of the industry.

Sally Penni (OUTRO)

A big thank you to Alison Fagan for Talking Law with me, Sally Penni MBE.

And thanks again to DLA Piper for supporting this episode. Do visit dlapiper.com to find out more.

If you would like to support Talking Law, then please get in touch. You can find me on twitter @sallypenni1 or search for Sally Penni or Women in The Law UK on LinkedIn or Instagram.

I also have a new legal text book too, called "A practical guide to dealing with vulnerable witnesses in criminal courts and beyond". You can also find that on Amazon and it's available via Law Brief publishing as well.

Do make sure you catch up with previous episodes of Talking Law where you can hear my interviews with guests such as barrister and TV presenter Robert Rinder and campaigner Gina Miller.

Thanks to our production team, Sam Walker and Michael Blades at What Goes On Media.
I'm Sally Penni MBE, Bye for now.