

Sally Penni:

Hello and welcome to Talking Law, I'm Dr Sally Penni, MBE, 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.

On this podcast, you'll hear leading barristers, judges, solicitors, managing partners and more, talk about their lives and careers within the legal sector.

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Before you meet today's guest, a reminder that tickets for the Women in the Law UK Annual Dinner and Conference in Manchester this November are on sale now. Please visit womeninthelawuk.com for more details.

I'd also love you to watch my recent Ted Talk, where I discuss whether love can conquer hate. Please head to Ted.com and search for Sally Penni.

Today I'm Talking Law with Shelley McGivern, a partner in Addleshaw Goddard's corporate team, with a particular focus on acquisitions and disposals and joint ventures in the real estate sector. She was also appointed a Deputy District Judge in 2013

I began by asking Shelley what attracted her to a career in law, and more specifically, corporate law.

Shelley McGivern:

I always either wanted to be a lawyer or a vet – bizarrely - and then decided that I, there were quite a few animals that I wasn't actually that keen on so went down the, the law route. And then why corporate? I like doing the deals, so, you know, bizarrely my favorite part of the, the job is actually right at the end of the transaction, when, you know, it's pressured the hours along, but we're all there as part of a team working with the client, trying to push the transaction over the line. I like that sort of business and commercial. Elements that and probably, I also like the fact that, you know, it begins and, and ends to some degree in a reasonably short period of time. So I, I think it suits my personality probably as well. I work much better under pressure. Yes. I'm not very good if I haven't got people chasing me for things.

Sally Penni:

Oh yeah. That's like me. It's the adrenaline, isn't it? I know I talk a lot about wellbeing and I will come back to that, but I totally get that because I'm also the same.

Shelley that's brilliant actually, just to know that and I mean, we are recording this in Manchester and I want to ask you, are you from Manchester?

Shelley McGivern:

I am. Yes.

Sally Penni:

Yeah. And have you stayed here? Did you go to London for a bit? You know, I'm keen for people to be less London centric, obviously AG is a global law firm.

Shelley McGivern:

No, so I've never lived... I travelled to London probably sort of pre-COVID, you know, once a month or so, so I love London, but I wouldn't want to live there. When I first qualified I actually got to do six months in New York which was very exciting and enjoyed that. But no, I absolutely love Manchester and I've never felt a huge desire to go and join the hoards in London. I think we're really lucky up here actually in that, you know, we kind of have everything particularly in law that I don't think, you know, the quality of the work that we're able to do up here in Manchester completely rivals that in London and therefore never felt like we're missing out or any desire or pull to go down there.

Sally Penni:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Shelly, what are the interesting things about you as a solicitor partner in a law firm - you do sit as a deputy district Judge.

Tell me one, how long have you been sitting and two, how did that come about? Because you are, you are the example I've been, been looking for for all the women in the law solicitors.

Shelley McGivern:

Yeah. So how it came about. I, I think it was a law society event and I can't remember where somebody was just, it was one of the speakers who was talking about sort of diversity in the judiciary and you know, saying that they wanted to sort of widen the pool and I thought, 'oh, that's quite interesting'. And they were talking about, you could go for a day, judicial shadowing.

Sally Penni:

Which is observing. Yeah.

Shelley McGivern:

And I just thought, oh, you know, why not? So I, I went on that really enjoyed it completely, utterly different to my day job. Yes. I mean, you know, I've never, ever done litigation. So as a qualified solicitor, I've never been in, in court. Yes. and, but that didn't seem to be any sort of barrier. Yeah. I think one of the good things then, which I've actually changed, which I don't think is a good thing is so I have to sit a minimum of 15 days a year, which actually is a real struggle to try and juggle that and fit it in. It doesn't sound like a lot, but actually it can be difficult to fit that in. I know they've recently increased that to a minimum of 30 days.

Sally Penni:

Yes.

Shelley McGivern:

Yeah. Which I think is, I don't think is a good thing at all because did you, well, I, I wouldn't have been able to do it so there's no way on earth. I would be able to fit in 30 days a year sitting. So I actually think that might discourage people

Sally Penni:

Cause that's sometimes an annual holiday. Yeah,

Shelley McGivern:

Exactly, exactly. And, and it's hard to fit in. So that, that's an interesting point. I think I don't, I don't know. I can see why they did that because they obviously desperately want people to sit and there's a shortage.

Sally Penni:

Yes. They gain the experience.

Shelley McGivern:

Yeah. Yeah. But actually, I, I think if you want more diversity from a wider range of people who are doing different things yes. I think increasing that will have actually a negative impact. But yeah, but I, you know, I, I do really enjoy it. I think by the time I get to the end of the day <laugh> <laugh> and I've survived and not been appealed. And it's just so different. Yeah. And I think it, you learn so many skills from doing that yeah. Skills for yourself, but also skills in watching the advocates and yeah.

Sally Penni:

Going 'I'm not gonna do that'. <Laugh>

Shelley McGivern:

Exactly. And, you know and, and I think another, which you will know anyway from having not done litigation, I think you can often sort of read the papers before the parties come in. Yeah. Have a, a sort of an idea about where you think this will, this will go enrichment will go. And then actually until you see the people and hear the evidence, you know, you can have a complete completely 360 degree turn on, on what, so that, I think that's quite fascinating, you know, it may means, I think even in my day job, it's made me step back and don't sort of jump in and make assumptions, just kind of wait. And so that that's really useful. Yeah.

Sally Penni:

Really interest really interesting. And how did you manage you used the term flexing, which I love flex your career. So for example, when your children were younger did you use to take, this is my research. I want to make sure I got it right. Used to take sort of the summer off with them or sitting. Yeah. How did you juggle that? Or I just love the word flex. How did you flex it?

Shelley McGivern:

<Laugh> yeah, so I, I think, and I think that's the great thing about Addleshaws is that they've always supported that flex. So you know, most, some people see it as a sort of one career path, whereas actually we don't see that here at all. So I think the point in time when I came back after having my first child was probably the, the point in time that you start to think about actually, where am I going with my career? You know, do, do I want to go for partnership? Those kinds of things. And actually, I mean, there's only 20 months between my two children, so, at that point in time sort of pushing for partnership was kind of the last thing that I felt I thrown into the mix. So I decided that I would, I wouldn't do that then, but I took the role of legal director. And what that enabled me to do was say, you

know, I still want to do the same level of work, but actually I don't want to do any business development activities. Yeah. I just wanna come in and wanna do the work good job. And I don't want all those things around it. Yeah. And at the same time as the children got a bit older you know, I, I really wanted to spend more time with them. So it wasn't just the summer I had offered all the school holidays.

Sally Penni:

Oh, right.

Shelley McGivern:

So yeah. So I work term time.

Sally Penni:

Yes. That is good.

Shelley McGivern:

Really good. And actually worked well with corporate law, I think because, you know, we work on less matters, but they're very intense. So if you're going to be off for two weeks, for instance, you need to hand over all your matters because they will definitely need work doing on them. Yeah. And therefore, in some ways it doesn't really matter whether you are off for two weeks or

Sally Penni:

Six weeks or six

Shelley McGivern:

Weeks cause you've already handed it all over. Yes. So it works perfectly.

I don't do that anymore. No by children are that bit older. And actually, I think these days they see me more as a head risk, a taxi service than an ATM machine. <Laugh> they're, they're my key key contributions to them. Yeah. So then as the children got a little bit older and you know, you get your life back a little bit more, don't you start to think about yourself. And actually I'd felt like I'd kind of outgrown the, the LD role for me personally, but it had worked perfectly for that period of time. And then I thought, yeah, you know, I'll go now and take the step up to partnership. Yes. Which the firm we're really supportive about. And so yeah, my career I've, haven't taken the sort of normal traditional straight up route. I've taken it in different directions, which is suited my life that point

Sally Penni:

In time. Yeah. Which is fantastic. I didn't want to be biased there for an advertised. Sure, sure. Cause I'm sure there'll be bad things here. I'm sure. I'm sure everywhere here. Yes. Everywhere. Yeah. I couldn't, you know, it just sounds great to be able to do that. Shelly, we we're sitting I'm in black. I think I'm being adventurous today because I'm wearing a dress with a jacket, you know, suit dress jacket. It's still black. As you know, I'm on the bar and you are wearing what I would wear out of work. A nice Boden dress, I think is Boden because I know the catalog well <laugh> and I did some fundraising and you know, and you look very fit and healthy and I want to ask you about wellbeing. What, what do you do then? You know and have you embraced this kind of, I won't say it's informal because you are very professionally dressed, but I was expecting a suit, but you know, we are the bar a bit behind with the day job. If we're in court, can you share with me, what do you do for your wellbeing? Cuz let's face it particularly in the

corporate department, it's long hours, you know, complicated deals and it can result in burnout and staying up late. So how do you look after yourself?

Shelley McGivern:

Yeah. And, and I think that is a, a really, really good point. And I think key for me has always been set in very sort of clear parameters about this certain things that you are just going to prioritize. So for instance, you, I have genuinely never missed one of my children's sports days. I know can cause you generally know when they are going to be far in advance. Yes. You know, and even if you run there and then, you know, run out and run back to the office, they they're really important to me. So I just will not miss those. Yes. I think you also have to accept that, you know, there are times when it is just going to be really real, intense and long, long hours. Yeah. but I think what you need to do is make sure then that when you do get the opportunity to take some downtime, which, you know, sometimes can't come as often as, as, as you'd like it to that you do really do take that time.

Shelley McGivern:

You know, and also sometimes, you know, it's not a sacrifice to yourself, but for instance, if I think, oh gosh, I am gonna have to do some work this weekend. Then you know, now my children are teenagers and will sleep half the day. Well, you know, yes. I will just get up really early and do that because you have to find a way to make it work. It's, you know, I'm not, I didn't sign up for a nine to five job. I knew that it was, it's never going to be that. Yes. So I think it's, you just have to work your way through it at different points in your life as to, you know, what works for you.

Sally Penni:

Yeah. well let me ask you then, you know, we've been in, in COVID - a global pandemic. I dunno, half the people dress anymore, you know, my husband's constantly in his shorts <laugh> even when he goes in <laugh> do you think that will have an effect or a longer term effect on wellbeing? You know, attendance at in the office and how we work and how we approach work in, in the long term? Cause certainly I do. I just wonder if you, what you thought about that, do you think we will think more about that self care?

Shelley McGivern:

Yeah, definitely. And I think I think, you know, there were massive advantages and disadvantages of, you know, for me personally. Yeah. You know, I actually really enjoyed that period if I'm being perfectly honest. Yes. But that's from a really privileged position, isn't it is that, you know, we had a house big enough for, you know, the kids to have their own bedrooms. Weather was amazing. We had a nice garden and I could afford to buy them things. Yeah. So, you know, I, I look at that from a, you know, how lucky we were. Yeah. But it was, was really nice to be around and spend time with them much more, just eat dinner with them every night and those kinds of things. Yeah. But equally I did find myself where there was no sort of, so you could interact with those kind of things equally, you were basically working, you know, not 24 hours a day, but seven days a week because there was nothing, there was no delineation between a weekday or a weekend!

So it's just like, oh, I'll finish that on Sunday or I'll do that on Saturday afternoon. Cause there was nothing. So I don't think that was that. Wasn't good. Yeah. And I think people got into bad habits around that. Yes. I think for some people it was really isolating. Absolutely. You're a single person, you know, living on your own in apartment somewhere, then again, there was no delineation of the day. Yeah. You

know, they just sat there all day and there was nothing else to do than work. So I think, I think, I think people's experiences of COVID were so different depending on your own personal circumstances. And I think that's the same now coming back. So you know, we've got people who are in and it would like everybody else to be in five days a week. Yes. And we've got some people who would probably happily never set foot in the building again. So that, that, you know, I don't think it's over because I think we're now just in that sort of transition phase where, and, and what you have to do, then we have to find, and it comes back to what we said before flex just

Sally Penni:

Yeah. Oh yeah. Oh everybody

Shelley McGivern:

Has their, yeah. Everybody has their own views of what works, but you know, we have really extreme views and, and again, so it's finding that balance in the middle isn't, it's something that works for everyone. So what we are currently saying is a minimum of two days in the office for associates, we're having an anchor day for our team where, you know, unless there's a reason why you can't, you get all good to come in on a Thursday, at least, least we all see each other then.

Shelley McGivern:

So yeah, I think, I think there's a lot to still work out mm-hmm <affirmative> but I personally think if you don't, it's very easy to lose your culture because if you're just, everybody's just sat at home all day. Yeah. well then what is the reason why you are wrap up firm or place of work? Yeah. Because you can sit at home on your computer and work for anyone and then what does it become about just who's gonna pay the most money

Sally Penni:

Or yeah. Do you know your spot on there? Shelly, because in lockdown running all these webinars daily one til two, so people had somewhere to go and one of the consultants we worked with was all our culture and leadership. And it's really interesting because they were saying this right at the beginning of the pandemic, the culture will become even more important. And you know, during, cause I was talking about, you know, cheese boxes being sent and wine box hampers mainly to my husband, that was, I was just snooping around it.

Shelley McGivern:

Eating it!

Sally Penni:

Yeah, you do then happy to do. But you hit the nail on the head there. The culture is so important and we have to re revisit it. Can I ask you really two questions really? And one intern, firstly, you mentioned associates before and I've been concerned about people entering the law now. And I wonder if you had any advice for them, just some quick tips or a quick tip about what to look for or how to choose where to go. And secondly, for women who sometimes they like, you know, attrition rates certainly at the bar have improved, but we know in the profession are not brilliant. There are few female partners it's much better now. Certainly not fewer equity and certainly managing partners. But I just wonder if you had anything to say about one, any tips for anyone wanting to enter the law and secondly, for people

women as well, especially because we're both women about progressing in the law. Have you got anything to share with me, maybe?

Shelley McGivern:

I think I would say, you know, find an aspect of the law that you love. I think that's the most important thing is, you know, we are a long time working and it's a hard job in whatever you choose to do. So you, you have to really, really enjoy what you do would be what I would say. So don't, you know, don't go because that's the most fashionable thing or it's paying the most or- because actually fundamentally, if you don't enjoy what you do, it's gonna be hard to motivate yourself to get up every day and, and go in. So I think look wider than the initial sort of things that you might target.

And I, and I think for, for women I, I think I would just say be brave actually, and sort of you'd, you know, set out what you want from your career and how you want it. And I, and I think I'd also say be patient and be realistic. Yeah. you know, I dunno whether I should say this or not, but fundamentally it's our job. Yeah. So it's not your entire life. Yes. so, you know, does it really matter if you are, you know, three or four years later than some of your peers and getting to where you want, if it means the balance of your life?

Sally Penni:

Is better!

Shelley McGivern:

Better touring, that aggression is much better then. Fantastic. Because you, you are, I think you're always balancing everything around. Yes. So I would never see that, you know, do I say, oh, well maybe I got partnership five, six years later than I could have done if I'd have really pushed.

I look back and think, oh, how lucky was I that was able to have all that time off with my children when they were here. So I think that would be the key thing that I'd say. And I think I'd be, say be really sort of brave in saying what you're prepared to do and you know, how you're prepared to do it.

Sally Penni:

Yes.

Shelley McGivern:

During that period of time, because I dunno what you think - I'd be interested, what you think. I think often women put their own limitations on. So actually I would find, you know, when I was younger and you know, some, just put some diary appointment in your diary for, you know, five o'clock just at the point you would be leaving, have to go back and you think, 'oh my gosh, oh, you know, what am I gonna do'? And, and then actually if you just email the person, say, 'sorry, five doesn't work for me'. They just go, oh, okay. Yes. It's not because, but you've put their own pressure on you. Yeah. Whereas actually they're not thinking anything because they're not going to pick up their children. Thus, they've just seen five and they've put it in. Yeah. The second you push back and say, actually that doesn't work. They don't hesitate.

Sally Penni:

They don't hesitate. Do you know, it's a good point you make. And I do think it's a good point and it's confidence as well, to be brave because I remember listing an employment case, complicated. It

required me, but actually it could have been returned. And I said to the judge who was, who was a male judge, lovely man when he was listing it. And it was a preliminary point, which if we'd won it that actually, that would've been the end of the case. I was actually for the respondent. And so he was listing it and he was in October, half term wasn't that long ago, but I was at least 20 years call I think then. And I said, I thought, I ummed and arrrrred, shall I just say it? So I just leave it in ruining another half term by going in. I dunno if we were away. And I just said, I'm sorry, I think that's half term. And so I won't be available. And he said, 'yes, of course. I think I'll be skiing'.

Shelley McGivern:

Exactly. Yes. But you were like, shall I say?.

Sally Penni:

I say it, shall I say? And I was really kind of thinking, oh, all these years. And so you are right. And I think sometimes the sort of cultural, the expectations, whatever the norms we think are we don't push back and perhaps we, we can be better at it. And when you were saying that, you know, setting out what you want precisely. I remember when I was interviewing Lady Hill and she said 'be strategic'. And I think it's the same word that, yeah. Yeah. Whether that's strategically in this line of success, as you were talking about whether there's five years that you get partnership or whatever, or more or less, it doesn't matter, but it's set out where you want to be and sometimes success doesn't mean you're always going up. I think sometimes success means, yeah, you are just kind of balanced for now.

Shelley McGivern:

But it's success. That's what I mean, success is your whole life. Don't judge, you know, you are only success by your position, in your job to my mind, if you've, you know, successes, if you find that position and it works for your whole life, then that's massively more successful. Yes. In my eyes than somebody's, you know, got to be partner after six, seven years. But you know, it's having a, you know, a breakdown and never sees their children, their children go home and that that's not success.

Sally Penni:

No, no. And I do, I do know somebody who that happened to anyone, the youngest, brightest partners. Yeah. Ever, but actually hasn't been sustainable.

Shelley McGivern:

So don't be drawn in, I think, have your own, have your own sort of idea of what success for you. Yes. And don't let sort of outside influences. And I do also think you have to be realistic. There are some days where you just think, 'oh my God, you know, what am I doing with my life? Like, you know, I really don't know which thing to turn to next'. And that, you know, it's a demanding job, isn't it? It's not, it's never gonna be a simple, easy job. Yeah. So I think there are periods where it's just really actually quite hard, but I think you need to, they are periods. And as long as they're sort of periods and you're like, well, that was a horrendous two weeks, but actually, you know, over the whole last six months on average, it's been fine then that's okay. Isn't it?

Sally Penni:

Yeah. It is. It is. Shelly, well, you and I met at a women in law, annual dinner, which I organized, and it was here in Manchester lady was guest speaker. And so I just wanted to ask you few things, we still need women's spaces or dinners or organizations because you know, apple shore here you've really increased

your appreciation of diversity, not just by having Harold Braco here, but in other ways you've really embraced, you know LGBTQ+ month pride of all of it. But I wonder on gender whether, you know, you think we still do need to have women's forum?

Shelley McGivern:

Yeah. I mean, I'm probably slightly, slightly on the fence about this. I think you, I think my view is that you, yes, you do. You do need things that sort of highlight the, the issues for women. Because I think they're still there. Yeah. But I think we need, and some of those just sort of chatting with women about your because you share issues. And I think this I've said the most cathartic things. You think it's just you, but it isn't, but I think we kind of now need to sort of move on and actually I think most of the education now around this is actually for the men, not for the women. You know, I think women actually, you know.

Sally Penni:

They need fixing!

Shelley McGivern:

Exactly. So actually, you know, maybe we shift the focus and instead of making them still the focuses around sort of, you know, successful women for instance. It has to involve the men have to be in on that conversation. And so they should be at the dinners and actually I

Sally Penni:

Think, well they often are

Shelley McGivern:

There lots there.

Sally Penni:

Oh yes. But it's interest- they often are. And I think your point is really also about allyship, you know, and people say to me why the many I'm like, we need them you know...

Shelley McGivern:

We need them even more because they're generally, you know, maybe that, you know, because they're not the ones talking about it. They're not always the ones understanding the barriers. So if it's just women in a room talking about that to themselves. Yes. How do they know and how to educate them. So that's, I think that's probably that just needs to be done. I think a little bit more. Yes. you know, I think our sort of gender diversity board member in the past has always been a woman, but actually we've now made a conscious decision that that's a male partner. Yes. And I think that's made a big difference as well, because as I say, you, you can sort of train women. You can give them all these skills, but actually you, you know, the men need to understand, you know, IE, that five o'clock appointment that you just put in someone's diary, who you knows, got young children, you know, you think about that before you put in not always upskilling the woman to be brave enough to say that doesn't work for me.

Sally Penni:

Yeah. Yeah.

Shelley McGivern:

We need to get to the point where they're already thinking, that's not a good idea to put that in my diary.

Sally Penni:

Yes. Yeah. No fantastic, fantastic point. But this podcast's about 150,000 listeners now <laugh> so, and I know a lot of them are men because they email me all the time. So I hope that those listening do not do that. Don't put those meetings in.

You are very wise and a lot of the points you've made of so interesting, but I wonder, you know, if you put any advice for sort of the 21 year old Shelly who maybe is starting out really, it's a question of any advice, your younger self?

Shelley McGivern:

I'm not gonna say that cause that wouldn't be true.

Sally Penni:

<Laugh> see real reversal. Yeah. That's your advice to dream, right.

Shelley McGivern:

Right. My advice probably would be yeah. Work a bit harder throughout the year and not leave it all till the end, just before the exam.

No, I think I, and I, you know, cause I have a, a 13 year old daughter, so you know, my advice to her would be just go for it. Just, you know, the world is absolutely your oyster life is very short, very unpredictable. You know, just take every opportunity that you possibly can mm-hmm <affirmative> and, and also, you know, be authentic to yourself.

Sally Penni:

Absolutely.

Shelley McGivern:

I think that's, that's really key. You don't feel like you need to sort of fit in or you know, conform to what people would expect or because actually the uniqueness of people is actually your, you know,

Sally Penni:

Your USP!

Shelley McGivern:

Absolutely. So, absolutely. So I think that would be, and don't be, I think I would say as well, don't be sort of afraid of making mistakes or trying something that, you know, and if it doesn't work out, doesn't matter. Yeah. You know, try something else until, until you find, you know, what, what does work for you. Yeah. And, and ultimately, you know, I think before you have children, you probably think all these things, but <laugh>, by the time you have them, I genuinely, all I actually want for host is to be happy.

Yeah. And that, and so it finds something that makes you happy. Yes. I think that's, that's probably would be, would be my advice.

Sally Penni:

That's how we started. <Laugh> your love of the law. Thank you so much, Shelly. And actually that's helped me because you said don't try and fit in. So I can't be a seven foot blonde woman ever. I'll stick to being a, I think I'm five foot now, short black woman. <Laugh>

Shelley McGivern:

You just, you know, that would be my advice to my younger self cause I've done all of those things. Yes. You know, but I think that's what you get with age isn't that it absolutely actually, this is who you are and you know as long as you are, you know, being nice to people, then you know the rest of it, I think. Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Sally Penni:

Wow. Shelly. Gosh, I feel like I need like another two hours with you. <Laugh> even though you're now running off. Thank you so much for Talking Law in this interview and I'm glad I pinned you down at last. Thank you, Shelly. Thank you.

A big thank you to Shelley McGivern for Talking Law with me, Dr Sally Penni MBE.

And thanks again to Addleshaw Goddard LLP for supporting this episode. Do visit addleshawgoddard.com.com to find out more about the work that they do across the world.

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.

Do make sure you catch up with previous episodes of Talking Law where you can hear my interviews with guests such as multi-medal winning Paralympian Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson and Managing Partner Alison Lobb

Before I go, just a reminder to get your tickets for the Women In The Law UK annual dinner and watch my Ted Talk at Ted.com

Thanks to our production team, Sam Walker and Michael Blades at What Goes On Media.

I'm Dr Sally Penni MBE, Bye for now.