

TL Sarah Foster - First Edit

Sarah: [00:00:00] I did modern history and history of art at university, and then I graduated and went to Japan for a year. And whilst I was there, I was trying to work out what I could do for a career with that degree. I came back from Japan and did a bit more research and looked at the skills that I used in history and, and art history, actually essay writing, et cetera, and argument forming and those skills and thought, well, Could I apply those to a career and what would that be?

And looked at law and thought, that might work. So yeah, I went to a careers fair and I met someone there from Adelstall Goddard actually, chatting to them and decided, yeah, give that a go. But that involved doing a conversion course and the

Sally: LPC and yes, and all of that. That's great because that's often the path for people, aren't they?

And one [00:01:00] often wonders. About what, you know, should you convert or shouldn't you? Um, and for you, obviously you did and it's worked out rather, rather well. And then what about your area of specialism? Firstly, are there many women in restructuring? They're,

Sarah: um,

Sally: I've got to you and I are women and I founded, you know, a women's

Sarah: organization. There are, there are women in restructuring. There are more women now in restructuring than there were. Yeah, it's, it's, um, rebalancing, let's say, I think when I started, it was more male dominated. Yes. There is still occasions and many dinners that we go to where it is predominantly male, but it's developing and changing.

Yes. And in our team, there is about an equal spread, if not a tiny bit more women. Well, that's

Sally: very good to know, actually. So what would an average day look like, um, for you? Imagine I know nothing about you and nothing about. Your [00:02:00] area, what would an average day look like for you in restructuring? Uh, is there a specific thing as an average day?

Sarah: Well, not, well, no, not really. So we, we tend to divide ourselves up. So in our team we have transactional research, there's a transactional researching team, a contentious. The real estate disputes team and then, um, a real estate insolvency team as well. Yes. So there's three areas I tend to concentrate on the transactional side, day to day tends to be a mixture of lender bank led work, reviewing security, and looking at facilities.

I'm looking at the bank side, lending side of things. Yeah. Um, also talking to accountants. So solvency practitioners. Yes. And. Discussing businesses in trouble, also talking to directors who are worried about their predicament or the company's predicament and distress slash [00:03:00] stress in the business and how they deal with that.

And then every day, of course, got team of people. So you've got people to talk to and their development and their training and business development. So talking to all our clients. Yes. Um, and restructuring slightly unusual in that we clients. So for the last 20 years, I've got sometimes the same clients that I met 20 years ago, and we've still got now, um, because it's the businesses we deal with that are new, but the accountants remain the same.

The lenders remain the same. All the people at those places remain the same. So we have quite a strong network in restructuring, um, in the community up here in Manchester and, you know, wider. You know, meeting those people and firm stuff so as well, yeah, touch on that interest from mentoring people and ladies in the firm to just generally [00:04:00] helping out with various initiatives that we're running.

We're running at ad

Sally: well, I'm gonna come to that because I'm quite keen on some of the stuff you've been doing, particularly in diversity here. And what that looks like. But before I come to that, I wanted to ask you really, why have you stayed here for 20 years? It's for a specific reason.

Sarah: Uh, comfort. Yeah.

Yeah. I love that. There hasn't been anything better than where I wanted to go, but, you know, primarily I've been very happy here. I'm still very happy here. The people are great, I have two children so I think probably there is an element of truth in the comfort part. You know what you know, you learn where everything is, you're trusted, you have your team in that support network and I haven't ever seen any reason to change that.

Sally: Which, which is really important when one manages career and family life. Um, actually, um, I love you saying, um, I [00:05:00] haven't done anything better, which I think actually is great because sometimes I think success elsewhere can seem attractive, but is it, you know, if you've got a good workplace, this is probably with my employment law head on, why, why would you go anywhere else?

Yeah. Why would one contemplate it? So, which is great. I want to kind of. ask you at this juncture really about inspiring others and that aspiring others who might want to come into the law particularly given your route. If you've got any advice and tips for people who want to come into law, perhaps I've not done a straight law degree as I did or Jurisprudence or whatever, but have done a different, a degree and then converted, um, about how they might get on, uh, entrance.

And then I'll ask you a bit later about perhaps partnership and those later on in their, in their career, but if you've got maybe three tips or at least one. About how, uh, those aspiring to be in the law can get on, whether it's advice and [00:06:00] guidance or skills or, or, or whatever. It's

Sarah: not just applicable to law, but being driven, dedicated, and having a, a willingness to work hard is important.

To really try and... Not just read the careers guidance to try and, you know, speak to people to be proactive and to understand what is involved in a career in law and then apply it to yourself. I think overriding bleak, you have to have a willingness to work hard because it's not an easy job. Yeah. And you need to.

Understand what's required or what is needed and part of that is working, is working hard and the challenges that we face if you come in with your eyes open. Would make it much easier. Yes. Um, and I think, you know, getting really under the [00:07:00] skin of what's involved with our jobs. I don't think that law is particularly well explained.

It's a bit ethereal. It's a bit hidden. Yes. You know, criminal law on television and what people perceive law to be and often people Or associate law with barristers because of books and because of, um, well, and the interesting parts of law, like sitting in an office, looking at your computer, or as my children describe what my job is, is talking on the telephone and looking at a computer, um, that isn't particularly interesting from the outside.

So I'm really understanding by talking to people, talking to. Um, solicitors that understand what's involved. Yes. Um, and being proactive about that and not worry, you know, the younger, younger people are concerned about what people will think of them, you know, being brave and, and, you know, making contact with people.

Say, what do you do? How, what's involved in your job? Who do [00:08:00] you see, you know, what's, what is a day like for you? Yes. How does that apply to me? What can I do? To apply to what I'm doing now and try and get as much experience as possible. Because,

Sally: um, which is great and leads nicely to two things I want to ask you.

One is, I noticed that Anna Shores have been doing lots of work on the access program and I've been an advocate of having some sort of law day or going into schools, which I do a lot of. And you're launching a similar. program, aren't you? Soon about, um, schools. Yes. Tell me a bit about that because... Um, it's actually started much younger than the question I asked you about, those aspiring, which I suppose maybe I was thinking about undergraduates, but actually starting in schools, um, is even better the younger the possible.

What is that program? How will it work?

Sarah: Well, I think it's fundamental for law actually, generally, and also for [00:09:00] diversity, because I think there is a misconception. That law is only for certain people or when you ask a teacher, if you're thinking, I'm thinking of being a lawyer, they will often dismiss it or not be fully cognizant of everything that's required to be a good lawyer.

So there's an education piece with teachers, but there's also getting it as early as possible to explain the skills that are required to be a lawyer. And yes, we've run legal access week for. Sixth formers for a number of years, and then this year adult shows have decided to extend that over a year, a school year and provide mentors to, I think it's 16, 17 year olds to understand what we do in more detail and, you know, allow them to speak to their parents and to their teachers and to their peers about what [00:10:00] they learn about what we do, which hopefully will be helpful.

will remove some of the shroud that kind of covers law and dispel some of the myths that are perpetuated through television.

Sally: Ha ha Some of us are not accurate. I can't say I've been a consultant on any of those inaccurate ones, but you're absolutely spot on. You've talked a lot about skills. that are required and how you transfer the skills from your degree or to what they were applicable.

I've got like three skills you think are crucial to a career in law at any

Sarah: stage. I think care and attention to detail is important. More, you know, broader skills are potentially Persistence and tenacity in terms of either what you think or what you believe is the right answer. Yeah. Or pursuing something to the [00:11:00] point where you understand it's the right answer or you've persuaded yourself or colleagues that it's not by researching it to the maximum extent.

Sally: Yes. Because it's important, isn't it? I put you on the spot that I indeed, you know, I've written a whole book on the subject. So, it's really wonderful just to hear that for, especially for those aspiring, because sometimes I think we think we know, but actually, if you don't know anybody at all, and you're just thinking about it, you know, and nobody ever tells you, it's quite important to just think, you know, What are the skills maybe or some of the skills and what, what, what do I have?

Um, can I ask you the question, which I said I'll return to, which is that you're a partner here and very senior solicitor in your expertise. But, um, for those who may be our junior associates or so senior associates as they are now, in my day, if I was just a solicitor. Or that they were a partner. Now there's a lot more layers, but what about those who want to progress, men or women, [00:12:00] all genders, what should they be thinking about in terms of progression, partnership, direction, that type of thing?

If, you know, somebody is at about 10, 15 years school or qualified, as it may be, what way in your mind would, should they be thinking about in terms of progression? What, what to be thinking about, ways of progressing. Should they be doing lots of BD? Should they be thinking on big transactions? I don't know.

Have you got any perhaps guidance

Sarah: on that? I think they should be talking to people. So that's when I say people, they should be in their particular field or specialty. They need to be talking to their colleagues. About what is required, both, both within the firm and for that department. So kind of small scale, but also much broader.

So what, what is required for that job, for that role and, and what plays into that are things like [00:13:00] our business developments are, what are the key? Who are the key clients? Where are we looking to go? What is our strategy? What, how can I form a part of that? Where am I missing? You know, what do I need to work on to do things?

So it's, you know, becomes more client focused. So client related, people related, what do I have to do within the team? What do I have to do to be part of the business, to be the custodian of the business, what do I need to understand in terms of teamwork and care and management of people, and then what do I need to understand about the business?

It's quite easy to put your head down and do the law, but do you understand the business of it? Can you talk to your clients? Can you talk to them about money? Can you talk to them about the fees? Are you happy? You're comfortable talking about scope and billing and what it's going to cost and the business side of it, recovery of it, all [00:14:00] of those elements.

And if you have a good mentor or a good sponsor or a good colleague or, you know, a friend within the business, and I would say that's more than one person, but if you can identify those and start talking about it, that is the best advice. I think probably the other thing is they're not going to tap you on the shoulder.

Don't expect to work really hard and do those things. And just be kind of, Oh yes, you're, you're doing very well. You need to speak up and say, this is what I want. And this is why I want to do it. And what do I need to do to get

Sally: there? It's interesting, isn't it? Because actually sometimes people can be real for an awfully long time and they haven't had a conversation.

They haven't worked out what's required. So it's just quite good to try and find those tips. Um, did you have a mentor? What do you think about mentorship and sponsorship on this journey? Is it a good idea or is it a bit overrated?

Sarah: I think it's important, it's probably just a label because I think [00:15:00] you should be able to find colleagues of different levels and be able to talk about those things.

I appreciate that some people can't, you know, can't do that or aren't comfortable with that. So we do have formal AD mentorships, sponsorship programs. I would say in my case, I probably had more, I have had formal ones, but the more successful ones have been informal ones. I mean, I've benefited from the

fact that I've been here for so long, but you can sound out lots of people in different departments and different areas and, and ask those sorts of questions.

Yes. But I don't think we shouldn't have them, but I do think people should embrace them, but also seek to find trustworthy people. That would effectively fill that role, but to have the label.

Sally: Yes. I want to ask you about diversity because, uh, in fact, it was raised in an answer to a question that I asked you earlier, and I'm very keen on finding out [00:16:00] what you've been doing at AG because previously when I interviewed Harold Breaker some time ago, The percentage of, uh, black partners went up by a hundred percent by his recruitment.

And so I'm always keen to see what the big city firms are doing. You know, AG is a global law firm. It's not a small high street firm on Deansgate in Manchester. We know that. And so I'm quite keen on seeing some of the stuff that you've been doing because you've been doing quite a lot. And so what have you been doing to recruit more diverse?

Candidates, because it's actually much more than one would think, or maybe you're just publishing. Or publicizing what you're doing now than before, because you've got various networks and you've got some other interesting things going on where you're going to be, um, launching a network for kind of diverse owned businesses and so on.

But on the recruitment side, I just wondered if you could share with me, you know, I'm not the ombudsman, but I'm just quite, quite [00:17:00] interested in that. Cause it does feel like there's a bit more of a momentum going on.

Sarah: I think there is definitely, I think there's more awareness, there's more consciousness about making sure that it's, that well that it matters and that we are aware, really aware of it, and that we're day-to-day cognizant of, of making sure that we are as open to as many.

Different types of human beings as possible. So it's well known that cognizant or, and, and diversity generally. Creates the most productive firms. So it's imperative. Well, it's

Sally: profitable. Yeah. Um, even if it's not a moral argument and productivity, but it's also profitable. Yeah. Yeah.

Sarah: And so I do think that we are quite diverse.

The issue is the freedom and the culture to, to be [00:18:00] open as, as yourself. And so I think by encouraging that culture of being more open about how you came to law, about your background. about your training means that people feel more accepted. You're able to talk about where they've come from, what they did, how they got here, there's less closed.

I've just, you know, I, I do my job and, um, and this is who I am. People can be a lot more open and therefore. Diversity is more prevalent or is more open and obvious than it has been before. Um, in terms of specific things, I think we have be, we don't, all our applications are blind now, so we don't have any idea who the.

Yeah. It's all on what they've written and, and, um, what they've said. We've got TST. We've been forerunners with our transitional services team. So the paralegals that we have for, for years and years, [00:19:00] the benefit of that is that. Whilst, you know, from a social mobility perspective, you know, they can come in perhaps not with the grades that they would have been to apply for a training contract, but can work here and actually show all their skills, learn in a, in a working environment and succeed through that route.

Yes. And then in a similar vein, we've got our apprenticeships. That also take people straight from school and they're doing their law degree and working in the firm at the same time, um, and progressing that way again, more from a social mobility perspective, but it opens it out to those people that from whatever background, the opportunities it's opening that to them.

It's not closed because it's too expensive or it's too far away or, you know, too difficult. That opening up is something we're pushing along with the legal access and the legal explorer program that we were talking about before in terms of sixth [00:20:00] form. Yes. All of that increases our diversity. And then we've got our long running, you know, 10 years of flourish internally, which is for our women solicitors.

As well as all our other networks,

Sally: of which there are many, many, it is just seeing the impact. And the outcomes from all of these, isn't it, you know, one can have all these networks, but actually still have 1 percent of partnerships, as was reported in the intense program being black, you know, uh, uh, and so on.

So it's actually great to see that you're pushing these. I want to move on and talk about wellbeing because we need to be honest about care and LawCare have

done a brilliant job. In our sector, um, who with legal charity offering support for firms and, and bar judges, the works. And, um, and I wondered what you did for your wellbeing, because I [00:21:00] know that you're a quite accomplished painter and your degree also obviously wasn't in law.

And so you've obviously got a love of the art. And I wondered if that plays perhaps in what you do for your wellbeing. So the question is. What do you do for your wellbeing or what would you like to do and is art part of it? Remain part of it. Um, it's

Sarah: a, it's a big question. I don't know how you, how you found that out.

Uh, I know everything. The, uh, yeah, so I suppose. Fundamentally, when wellbeing, when you're, when you're busy doing this job and you have a family and lots of other commitments, it comes down to time. So for real wellbeing, I do exercise and I do love swimming. So that's probably good for just mental.

Relaxation. Pool swimming. Pool swimming. No, not wild water swimming, although I have done that, but no, pool swimming. The monotony of [00:22:00] length seems to, uh, seems to help, um, but also running and exercise that way, um, is, is good for well being. Yeah. Um. Um, and cooking, so to counteract the wellbeing of exercise, um, eating and cooking.

I really enjoy that, but that's creative in itself. And then yes, I, um, art generally, practical art, so painting and drawing and things like that. I do when I have time, but it is one of those things that you have to be in the right frame of mind. And when you don't have a lot of time, that doesn't always come to pass.

So, um, but yeah, I do like art.

Sally: Yes, well I think the art has replaced you, I was trying to see if you were a legal fan, whether you're an Ally McBeal or a Suits or, you know, Killer Mockingbird, but I wondered if there was any kind of books which have influenced you in your legal career at all, or whether you are literally a true, a true art.

Sarah: Well, it's [00:23:00] interesting you say Ally McBeal and...

I know I haven't, I have watched episodes, let's say episodes. I've certainly not watched the whole series of it. They irritate me more than in any way inspire me because Suits is just, well, my husband watches it. I just sit and laugh at it. It's just so not realistic. With all their fancy high heels. And I was just going to say,

walking around the office, and so I was like, there's not enough paper in that office for it to be an law firm in any way shape.

Or they've all got these fancy iPads that sit on their desks and you know, there's, there's no, no hairs kind of out of place or anything. Interesting. This is absolute nonsense. So it's more of an irritation than anything else. love, I love that from a legal

Sally: perspective. I love that. I love that. Well, we have a book club.

Women in law have a book club, so there's always. theater club and book club, and they're always vying for TV programs as well. We're kind of approaching the end of our, uh, [00:24:00] interview together. And one of the things I'm very keen to ask those who are successes and leaders in, in our sector is really looking back on your career now.

What advice would you give to the, your younger self?

Sarah: I think I would say be braver. Why I think there is a, and I think this is commented, many ladies, or it seems to be, uh, you know, kind of reported as such that you, you don't like failing, don't like not being the best that you can. You can be. And in order to do that, you try and tick as many boxes as possible.

Yes. And if you haven't ticked them, then you self criticize or you, you know, query or, I'm not ready to do that yet because, I've still got to be able to do this, this and this, um, or they're so much better at that than me. So I, you know, I won't, we're trying, I'll stay where I am. And, [00:25:00] um, I think looking back, having more confidence and being braver.

To just try, rather than, you know, try and succeed at the idea of it, to push myself a bit more and just give it a go, not worry about the perfect.

Sally: Yes, the thing is called Perfectionism Syndrome, where you're waiting for 10 skills before you apply for the job, albeit you've got 7, it's quite a well known study, whereas often our, you know, our male colleagues have got 3 skills, and they'll go for it, uh, and Concerned about it.

So I really recognize, and I think that's actually a really great advice. So what next, Sarah, are you going to become managing partner? Oh, of a g I think you've discussed .

Sarah: No. Oh. Although our current managing partner, uh, was my first supervisor when I was a trainee and uh, and is a restructuring lawyer, so yes.

They, I think they'd make [00:26:00] good managing partners, but, uh, no, no, definitely not. Yeah. Yeah. Uh,

Sally: so no, no plans to take over AG

Sarah: and... No, definitely not. I think being, um, being a, a good cog and a, an excellent wheel in the machinery of AG is, uh, is sufficient for me. Um... In terms of, you know, being more settled in that and, and being the best that I can be, being a partner in our restructuring team is, you know, kind of where I want to be and what, what next to be stronger and better at that.

Sally: Yes, yes. Well, if I may ask you, um, finishing a book or talking law and leadership and, um, who are the leaders? What skills have the leaders who really impacted you, what the skills that they've had? 'cause sometimes. You know, people become leaders in law firms that don't have the skills and they kind of pushed it.

They've got to kind of learn on the job or, you know, management that they've kind of been [00:27:00] scrambling around for management and skills on the job. But I just wondered, have there been people, leaders, um, whose skills you've really admired and what might their skills be?

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely, which is probably why I'm still here, um, fairness, so absolute fairness and to be seen to be fair.

And also doing, doing the job, so doing, being there with you at the call phase, not above you, so leading, but still doing the job. So not being afraid to roll the sleeves up and, and help and then let you fly. A bit, but always being there. So I knew from being very junior all the way up that whenever I was left to do a deal or anything, you know, what I felt like was on my own, they were always there, always, always there.

Not as I [00:28:00] mean, not in the office or not, but they always, I always knew like a phone, like a phone at three o'clock in the morning. When I was in the middle of a deal and I thought if I was worried, I knew that they were there and I'm not talking about one person talking about the team, senior people above me, they had that approach to work and culture, um, that I grew up with, that they were always there and that's what I want to, would like to recreate that people aren't scared or worried that I'll always be there to support them and lead

that way and also this kind of Knuckle down and join the, join the team, that camaraderie, that kind of, you know, in the trenches together.

Not that up in the office, you do this, you do that, I'm doing this, you're all working there and I'm not part of it. Yeah. That side of things, because then that's your admiration that they do that. And also all the rest of the, you know, [00:29:00] run the

Sally: team and do everything else. Brilliant. And so, yeah, the ability to build a team is obviously then.

Sarah, thank you so much for talking law with me. You've been wonderful. I know you've avoided me all this time. Thank you. But it's been a wonderful, wonderful interview. Thank you so much for talking law with me.