

Modern Lawyer

Ideas for Legal Leaders

Editor: Catherine McGregor
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Featured in this issue

*Navigating employee activism
in the new norm*

*Bridging the expectation
gap between law firms
and their clients*

*Life lessons – navigating
the workplace as
a woman*

A young boy in a white shirt and blue jeans stands on a wooden step ladder, painting a vibrant, abstract mural on a wall. The mural is composed of various colors like green, yellow, blue, red, and purple, with some black lines and splatters. The boy is seen from behind, reaching up with his right hand to paint. The floor is dark and appears to be concrete or stone.

**A blank
canvas –
re-creating
the law firm**

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A legal life



In this issue we speak to Sam Cottman who has worked for over 12 years in the litigation team at Travers Smith specialising in fraud and white-collar crime cases. He always had a strong interest in pro bono work, since his early days as a lawyer. In March 2020 he became the firm's first full-time Director of Pro Bono.

What are the most inspiring and challenging things about your role as Director of Pro Bono at Travers Smith?

I consider it an absolute privilege to be the Director of Pro Bono at Travers Smith. To be able to harness the skills of so many talented lawyers to maximise impact within the pillars of our pro bono programme is a great joy.

There are many things which are inspiring but I would select three:

The first is the enthusiasm and energy with which the firm is supporting the build out of our pro bono programme. From the most senior management to incoming trainees, the commitment is as real as the determination to play their part.

The second is the extraordinary array of organisations that I get to work with on a daily basis. On any given day I might be working on a domestic abuse case, attending a webinar on global refugee

integration or testing a new mechanism for social impact investing or accelerating the transition to a green economy. My counterparts in these meetings are almost always hugely passionate and knowledgeable about their area of focus and it is very inspiring to be working alongside people devoted to improving the lot of others.

Thirdly, but most importantly, the greatest inspiration comes from the people at the heart of the communities we serve. I work extensively in the domestic abuse and human trafficking space and to hear the stories of those individuals and get a sense of the hardships they have overcome, and determination they have shown, to rebuild their lives is both humbling and inspiring.

Of course, there are also challenges. To scale up the work we are doing, I am building internal infrastructure which includes pro bono committees within each of our departments. Once they are in

place, I need to deliver a steady feed of quality legal work and manage it and that all takes a lot of oversight and care. It is something I really enjoy about the job but it can be challenging nevertheless.

Another challenge is to guide the firm into new areas of law and ensure that we are using our skills as effectively as possible while not overstepping our expertise. This is particularly the case as we move on to ever more demanding cases with vulnerable clients but, again, it's a challenge I enjoy and I am well supported by the firm as we navigate these new spaces.

Did you always want to be a lawyer?

My first love was languages. I studied French and Spanish at UCL and lived and worked in France and Argentina. But even then, my underlying interest was in the study of words, how they are put down on paper and used by the author to manipulate the reader and convey certain messages. When I was in Argentina, I wrote my thesis on governmental corruption and was advised by my school French teacher long before that that I had a talent for arguing! The law seemed to be a natural fit for me and it's a choice I have never regretted.

You're the first full-time pro bono officer in the Travers Smith's 200+ year history, what did that mean for you personally?

Taking on this role was a big decision for me personally. I was moving out of a very large market-leading disputes practice on a steep upward trajectory (which I had been at the heart of for over 12 years) into a department of one with great aspirations but no set path. I loved being a litigator, the work we undertook, clients we acted for and the camaraderie of the team, so it was a very difficult decision to step away from that and out of a fee-earning role. However, my passion for pro bono began the moment I started my legal career and has only increased as the years rolled by and I took on ever more responsibilities. It was evident to me that the partnership had very serious ambitions for what we could do in the pro bono space and I thought the role could be a truly exceptional opportunity to build on the excellent pro bono work we were already doing and craft new and impactful projects.

How have you arranged the firm's focus on pro bono work and why those areas of focus?

Before coming into role, I spent many months assessing where we were already strong in our pro bono work, where I considered our skills could be best deployed and where I thought it was necessary we developed our presence (including by reference to the UN Sustainable Development Goals). I tested these thoughts with other pro bono leaders within and outside the firm and settled on the following four pillar structure:

- climate, environment and sustainability;
- diversity, inclusion and social mobility;
- vulnerable groups (refugees, domestic abuse, human trafficking); and
- rule of law.

These are the pillars on which I am building the practice and, largely, the parameters within which we work. However, opportunities to undertake impactful work do not always arise in a predictable way so I remain open to opportunities which may not fit perfectly within this structure.

My passion for pro bono began the moment I started my legal career and has only increased as the years rolled by and I took on ever more responsibilities.

What are the most compelling projects you are working on at the moment?

There are a number of great projects underway across the firm at present but if I were to select two that I'm working on then it would be the firm's Domestic Violence Advocacy Unit (DVAU) and our work as corporate partner to the JUSTICE investigation into the overrepresentation of BAME youth in the criminal youth justice system.

DVAU

I set up the Travers Smith Domestic Violence Advocacy Unit (DVAU) in 2019 before it was formally launched in May 2020. The DVAU takes instructions from the National Centre for Domestic Violence (NCDV) to act for victims of domestic abuse. Since launch, we have had a steady run of clients in need ranging in age from a teenager to a lady in her 60s who had been subject to very serious domestic abuse over a period of 40 years.

The DVAU provides end-to-end case work, taking the statements, drafting the court documents and conducting the advocacy throughout the process. Without us, all of these clients would have to face their abusers on their own and many would drop out long before the court process concluded. We have seen how life-changing the work can be with clients often reduced to tears when explaining what a relief it is to have lawyers from our firm represent them. I am extremely proud of this work and intend to build on it significantly.

JUSTICE

JUSTICE is an all-party law reform and human rights organisation working to strengthen the justice system in the United Kingdom. One of the ways it does this is by assembling expert panels to investigate and report back on issues critical to that system. Travers Smith is the Corporate partner for JUSTICE's expert panel investigation into the overrepresentation of BAME youth in the criminal youth justice system.

We have been 100% committed to this cause for over 17 months from start to the publication of the report on 25 February 2021. I have personally attended every single meeting of the full committee and each of the three specialist sub-committees during that time as we have clocked up over 600 hours supporting the work. We are now focusing on the implementation of the working party's recommendations and hope the report will lead to very real change in this space and be a significant step forward in the fight to end racial bias within the criminal youth justice system.

Looking ahead, aside from these two projects, I am very excited about the work we are doing in the climate, environment and sustainability space,

particularly as part of the Chancery Lane Project and alongside our client the Green Finance Institute.

What are your hobbies outside of work?

I have two children under five so they largely cater for any time I have which might ambitiously be described as 'spare'. I also started my own charity in 2017 (the Cottman Foundation) to tackle domestic violence, knife crime and human trafficking and fund clean water projects, homes for abandoned children and youth sports programmes. As you can imagine, that also keeps me very busy. Outside of that, my main hobby is boxing, I train every week at a spit-and-sawdust club under the arches in Hammersmith and love every minute of it. I also have a life-long passion for music and travel but that has been somewhat neglected of late.

What does the future look like for pro bono work in law firms in general and Travers Smith in particular?

It's clear to me that the importance of pro bono within law firms is on the rise. We are playing catch-up to the United States and Australia in terms of the recognition that the work gets but we are certainly on that same journey and I expect this decade to see very significant growth across the board.

At Travers Smith the future for pro bono is very bright. In less than a year in the role the size of the firm's practice has more than doubled and that growth is continuing at pace. Importantly, we are not taking on pro bono work just for the sake of it. Every client is a deliberate part of building the programme, complementing existing expertise and positioning ourselves to maximise the impact we can have. I could not be more energised about what we are doing and our direction of travel. It's great to be a part of and to see so many lawyers across the firm participating and, increasingly, leading their own projects.

How do you end your day?

I spend a fair amount of my evenings on webinars, panel events or listening to podcasts around the core areas of focus for our practice. This allows me to

keep a finger on the pulse of current issues, to communicate directly with the leaders in these areas and to identify potential new partners or clients.

If you had one piece of advice for your younger self, what would it be?

If you want something, then make it known. One of the best pieces of advice I received in my first seat at Travers Smith is that it's a firm full of opportunity and the greatest tragedy is to miss out on those opportunities because those making the decisions

did not know you were interested. So, there have been numerous occasions where I have put myself forward for opportunities, even ones somewhat above my pay grade, and taken on responsibility for delivering. In so doing, doors have opened and a certain level of trust has been placed in me to continue to deliver as the opportunities grew in breadth and significance. This approach has led to some of the most frank conversations I've had in the workplace and the most rewarding opportunities thereafter.



Sam Cottman is the Director of Pro Bono at Travers Smith and a Senior Counsel. Prior to his appointment, he spent 12 years in the firm's leading disputes practice. He has received multiple industry awards for both his commercial and pro bono work including, most recently, both the Wig & Pen Prize and LawWorks award for outstanding contribution to pro bono.

This article 'A legal life, an interview with Sam Cottman' is from the April 2021 issue of Modern Lawyer, published by Globe Law and Business. www.globelawandbusiness.com/journals/Modern-Lawyer-Journal

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