

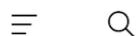


## Australian lawyers living and practising law in different parts of the world

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Australian Financial Review, Careers blog by [Ciara Seccombe](#)

*Published 12 Jul 2023 - 6 Feb 2024*



## 'It is much colder than I had realised it would be': Life as a lawyer in Canada

Ciara Seccombe

Young Australians going on sabbatical to work at ski resorts in Canada is basically a national cliché. Nothing quite says quarter-life crisis like upping sticks to a frozen American wonderland miles from the nearest city.

Although Canada is less known for attracting lawyers in crisis, many firms still cite it as a middlingly popular destination for Australians seeking good fortune overseas.



*Jordan Kong (pictured above in Vancouver) has been living in Canada for eight years.*

One such lawyer is Melbourne-expat Jordan Kong, although he took a circuitous route to get there. After graduating during the GFC and first working for the Victorian government, he crossed the

pond at 29 to work at Clifford Chance in London.

However, the intensity of the London legal culture made Kong start questioning whether practicing was the route he wanted to take.

### Leaving London

"There's a real push to decide if you want to be a partner, and by the time you're about 30, there are a lot of people beginning to enter the partnership," says Kong. "I

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guess, that sort of got me thinking *'is this what I want?'* And I thought, I'm actually not sure about that."

He decided to take a little break in Canada to sort his plans out. Friends had told him about the joys of Canadian life, and he decided to take a chance and bought a one-way ticket to Toronto.

Although Kong came to Canada with a strong education and magic circle experience, he didn't anticipate how tough the job market would be. He realised he was competing with Americans.

Many people in the legal industry move back and forth between Canada and the USA, and Canadian firms weigh experience in those markets much more heavily than Kong's work outside North America. The difficult hiring process made him ask further questions about the trajectory of his career.

"Speaking with recruiters, it became pretty clear to me that I would have to think quite carefully about what I would be interested in, and what I would actually be able to do," says Kong. In the end, he chose to take a more managerial track and now works as a legal project manager at Lenczner Slaght, a prominent Canadian law firm based in Toronto, keeping lawyers in line and cases on schedule.

### **The cultural differences**

Kong found it trickier than he expected to settle into life in Toronto.

"It is much colder than I had realised it would be," he says. "It's still a surprise every year when it gets to minus 20-something degrees, and you step outside, and you just can't believe that you have chosen to deal with this."

Culturally, Kong thinks people exaggerate the similarities between Australia and Canada.

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In particular, he found Canadians to be polite, but more distant than Americans, and it took him some time to form solid friendships with colleagues.

Kong has also observed a more prominent grind culture in Canadian law offices, and employees often work long hours and take after-hours calls for no guaranteed reward. He found this an odd adjustment coming from Australia, where workers are less likely to work extra hours chasing a phantom carrot on a stick.

### Legal salaries

On the other hand, salaries in Canada are not insubstantial. Kong says that you won't get the epic salaries lawyers find in the US, but as a financial hub, Toronto offers a decent pay packet. He sees first-year associates earning around \$150,000 CAD (\$171,047) and increases fairly quickly with experience. Law-adjacent work, like his, attracts a wider range of salaries. He says they often have a similar levelling but don't increase as much as full lawyers with experience.

The legal industry also has more perks than other sectors in Canada. Lawyers can expect four weeks of paid vacation, which is twice the legislated minimum of two. Kong also gets insurance benefits through his work.

"I have not paid for dental or vision for years," he says.

Kong came to Canada expecting to stay for a year and has now been there for nearly eight and has also become a Canadian citizen.

But there's one aspect of Canadian culture he just can't get acclimatised to.

"I'm going to be honest, I still don't really understand ice hockey."

10.43AM – Feb 6, 2024

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Source: Australian Financial Review, Careers blog by [Ciara Seccombe](#), published 12 July 2023 - 6 Feb 2024



## Wine with lunch and six weeks off: Life as an Aussie lawyer in Paris

Maxim Shanahan

Large American law firms are renowned for their unfriendly working hours and unfriendlier holiday allowances, but Nicolas Walker gets time for a serene lunchtime glass of wine and a sophisticated six-week summer break in between dealing with large global clients.

The Melbourne-raised lawyer practises in the Paris office of global US-based firm Reed Smith, as one of a mere handful of foreign lawyers who have taken on and passed the “brutal” French bar exam.



The public law specialist, who became a partner at the firm three years ago, got his first taste of France as a high-school exchange student in a small village near the Swiss border.

“You had to learn French or else you would have no friends,” he says. A subsequent exchange to Paris while studying law at

Melbourne University had Walker contemplating throwing in the legal towel to pursue Parisian life.

But the opportunity to put his French fluency to professional use drew Walker back to law school. After a couple of years as an associate at an environmental law firm, and with a Sorbonne law master’s under his belt, Walker was flooded with offers from

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international law firms in France, eager to translate his grasp of common law and French law into business.

### **Balance valued**

Work-life balance is a greater consideration in French law offices than in Australia or America, where lawyers often put in punishing hours.

“In [the US], they have 2000 hour-plus billable targets, and they’re lucky if they get two weeks’ holiday per year,” Walker says from San Francisco.

“We don’t do that in France. We have six weeks off and go away. Meanwhile, the American associates are waiting at their desks because that’s what is expected of them and that’s how you meet billable targets.

“In France, we’re still going for an hour lunch break with a glass of wine every day,” he says.

Working in the French office of an American firm, with their often contradictory work cultures, is “a strange meeting of cultures”, Walker says, “with a lot of French cultural values that are often quite different to the American leadership”.

But the marriage of cultures has significant benefits: “We get the best of both worlds: the French *c’est la vie*, but with the institutional support and big clients from the American business.

“It’s been a very successful compromise in my experience”.

One area in which French conditions don’t outstrip those of the American corporate lawyer is pay. Walker’s trans-Atlantic colleagues get paid more than what is on offer in France.



But free education, healthcare and the real prospect of work-life balance more than make up the difference.

## Travel

Like all Antipodean lawyers who make it to Europe, Walker says the ability to travel is what makes the biggest difference.

“I can be in Brussels on Tuesday, then in London for meetings, back to Paris for a week and then over to the US for professional development or our partners’ retreat.”

Walker says that with the UK out of the EU, France has become a significant hub for the global legal industry.

“It’s a really exciting time to be in Europe. And it’s very, very global. Far more so than if I was sitting in a partner’s chair back in Melbourne.”

**8.44AM** – Feb 1, 2024



## This Aussie lawyer went to Hong Kong for a holiday, then stayed there for 25 years.

Ciara Seccombe

When Darren FitzGerald graduated from a Master's of Laws at Cambridge, he took a celebratory trip with a friend to Hong Kong. He planned to head home afterwards to become a barrister in Australia, but things didn't go according to plan.

While in Hong Kong, a New Zealander he just met tapped him for a job at an American firm there. He thought he'd stay for a couple of years then return to Australia.



*Darren FitzGerald has been working in Hong Kong for more than 20 years.*

It was 1999 and the young graduate was thrown into the deep end of the fallout from the Asian financial crisis. His firm was working on the collapse of [Peregrine, Hong Kong's homegrown investment bank](#) – the chief executive at the centre of the crisis was

FitzGerald's client.

"It was interesting and thrilling and scary, at the same time," he says. "It was just a fascinating insight into what was going on at the time."

After the experience of working so intensely on such a high-profile regional case, FitzGerald didn't want to leave.

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Hong Kong provided no shortage of complex and challenging cases to keep him engaged for decades.

“It’s never just a regular dispute. You’re dealing with people from different countries and different legal systems.”

To pursue dispute resolution and appear in court, FitzGerald took the Overseas Lawyers Qualification Examination, which he says was “ridiculously hard”.

“Perfectly intelligent people underestimate the exam because they’re busy working hard at their firms.”

Although Hong Kong has a registered foreign lawyer system, FitzGerald says the governing bodies are becoming stricter in their requirements as the special administrative region becomes more inward-facing and protectionist.

### **Opening his own firm**

In 2012, FitzGerald chose to break from the big firms and open his own practice, FitzGerald Lawyers.

Opening a firm in Hong Kong highlighted the regulatory quirks of the system. For example, firms have to maintain a physical office in a commercial office zone (which is expensive in such a small place), and a solicitor with an unrestricted practising licence has to be present when open to the public. This “by the book” approach to the industry made it a challenging place to run a business.

The late 2010s and early 2020s were a difficult time to be running a Hong Kong firm. The widespread protests about extradition and national security laws in 2019 were difficult for many local businesses. Hot on their heels came COVID-19 lockdowns, which were especially harsh in China and Hong Kong. The turbulent times made FitzGerald reconsider how he wanted to work.



"I was initially in Sydney when COVID struck," he says, "But when I realised it was going to last longer, I just took advantage of things and sold my place down there [in Sydney]."

He had a team of more than 15 employees but started to wind things back during COVID-19. He now has a team of just three, all based in Australia. FitzGerald travels to Sydney or to Hong Kong when he needs to but lives in Coffs Harbour. He also teaches at the ANU in Canberra.

### How Hong Kong has changed

Since arriving in the late 1990s, FitzGerald has seen a period of extraordinary social and cultural change in Hong Kong.

The city is an international arbitration centre, and he thinks it is still a great place for Australians to gain experience in the field or learn about the social and political dynamics of the East Asian regional powers. On the other hand, it is trickier for Australians to find work if they don't speak Mandarin near-fluently, because of the change in industry trends towards mainland China.

"It's a very different vibe. Very different city to what it was. It's much less of an international city. It's much more of a mainland Chinese city."

Despite the change, he still has a deep affection for the city he called home for so long.

"It's loud. It's noisy. People are a bit in your face. It's a bit like an Asian New York."

**11.31AM** – Jan 23, 2024



## Private jets, tax-free salary: This Aussie is a lawyer for Saudi royalty

Maxim Shanahan

When Australian lawyer Cassandra Heilbronn moved to Saudi Arabia in 2019, she deliberately avoided researching what life was like there before taking up her first role. "I came with zero expectations, so I wouldn't be disappointed," she says.

The Bundaberg-raised fisherman's daughter is one of the scores of Western professionals that have headed to Saudi Arabia in recent years, drawn by lucrative pay packets and generous benefits to work and advise on the oil-rich kingdom's much-vaunted modernisation efforts.



Heilbronn heads up the family office of one branch of the Saudi Arabian royal family (which comprises some 15,000 members in total). Private jets, (which "we don't fly all the time"), a palace office and a substantial tax-free salary are among the benefits associated with the wide-ranging role, which Heilbronn describes as being primarily "to protect the family".

However, behind the luxuries afforded by Saudi employment – including, for example, international hair appointments – sits the Kingdom's poor human rights record, particularly in relation to the rights of women and LGBT people, intolerance of dissent and lack of religious freedom.

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While recent reforms have granted more rights to Saudi women, the 2022 Personal Status Law codifies unequal divorce rights and requires women to obey their husbands in a “reasonable manner”.

However, Heilbronn, who was president of Queensland Women Lawyers before moving to the Middle East, says that from her experience as an expat in Saudi Arabia, “perception is not reality” and “life as a woman is infinitely easier than any Western jurisdiction I have ever worked in”.

### Poached from Minters

Heilbronn was first poached from MinterEllison’s Brisbane office, where she had carved out a practice in sports law, to draft regulations for the Royal Commission of Al-Ula, founded by royal decree to attract tourists and foreign investment to the archaeological-cum-entertainment precinct.

“The way they were speaking about what the role was, it almost sounded too good to be true – kind of like a Nigerian prince scam,” Heilbronn says.

While at Al-Ula, the Queenslander says she struck up a friendship with a Saudi princess, who subsequently offered her a position running her father’s family office.



Heilbronn says there have been plenty of “amazing experiences” in the job, but she doesn’t “want to go around talking about all of them”.

The job requires, and indeed encourages, a peripatetic lifestyle, travelling regularly to “manage the interests” of adult children living abroad and to oversee the family’s global business interests.

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“Thankfully, with this family there’s no reputational or crisis management ... They’re not over the top, or going around demanding things of people. They don’t have a pompous nature, says Heilbronn.

In Riyadh, daily working life revolves around meetings with investment teams and palace management. Batting away the chancers seeking a slice of the family’s prodigious wealth with dubious “investment opportunities” also occupies a good deal of Heilbronn’s time. “My role as CEO is to protect the family ... if I sign off on a bad investment it doesn’t just impact me, it impacts a lot of people, especially the family,” she says.

“When people hear about a Saudi family office, they think money. Then they hear Saudi royal family office, and they think even more money. So I really have to weed out those that aren’t genuine.”

### Unusual work hours

Heilbronn turned down the opportunity to live on palace grounds, preferring to put distance between herself and work and live in a compound, like the vast majority of expats in Saudi Arabia. Villa visits, card games, pool days and gym classes make up the compound social circuit, while embassy events offer the opportunity for a drink in the otherwise dry country.

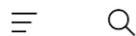
But the diplomatic circuit’s reputation for overindulgence is far from the truth, says Heilbronn: “it’s not like uni students at the pub for the first time. The embassy events are well catered, but it’s very respectful, so we don’t have any unruly behaviour.”

While the Western social circuit has its benefits, Heilbronn says most of her friends are Saudis. “I see my Saudi friends more than I see my expat friends.”

As for work culture: “it’s completely reversed”, says Heilbronn. “Some people don’t start work until two or three in the afternoon. There’s still peak hour traffic at midnight and coffee shops are packed at 1am.”

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The unusual hours are a change from Heilbronn's previous habit of starting work at 6.30am at Minters, but they have benefits beyond an extended sleep in: "it works well for the Australian time difference. I get to speak with my friends more because I'm awake when they are."

**11.54AM** – Jan 16, 2024



## Life in London at the second-biggest firm in the world

Ciara Seccombe

When the pandemic struck in 2020, Corrie Eames, then a lawyer at Gilbert + Tobin in Sydney, knew that his life was never going to be the same. It was during the lockdown that he began seriously contemplating his career path.

He was in his early thirties and Eames felt that he had missed his window of opportunity to work overseas – after all, that was something people in their twenties did, not married professionals with children on the way.



*Corrie Eames enjoys the huge scope of London's cultural life.*

Eames and his wife Alana sat down in Sydney and talked about radical change.

“We said, ‘Listen, our lifestyle is going to change massively whether it be because of the baby or the move to London, so why not just go all in and group it altogether and see

what the experience does for us?’” he says.

So at the start of 2023, Eames, then 34, moved to London to work as an associate for Latham & Watkins, a US multinational firm.



## Why London?

For Eames, London was the winning choice for several reasons.

The cultural similarities between Britain and Australia were key, as were the congruent legal systems. As a banking specialist, London also had the advantage of being a global finance hub that Sydney couldn't quite match.

Eames did not have to requalify to work as an associate in the UK, though he says most firms encourage expats to do so – and it often becomes necessary at a higher level. Since the Australian and British legal systems are so similar, the transition was very manageable, despite being a “step up in complexity”.

There were new experiences that came with working at the second-highest-grossing law firm in the world. He feels that the scale of the firm brings with it a more dynamic, entrepreneurial culture that sets it apart from the London Magic Circle.

Eames says Latham & Watkins works like a well-oiled machine. Upon arrival, Eames was met by a dedicated expat onboarding team who eased the transition for him.

“If there's something to be done, it's someone's job to do that. And solely their job,” says Eames. “There's just so much highly specific support to keep this machine turning.”

Latham & Watkins assisted him with elements of his move, such as sponsoring his visa and helping with transport and luggage as part of a relocation package.

The firm offers alluring salary packages, even by London standards. [Indeed, the UK puts the average salary for an associate at the firm at £176,338 \(\\$337,715\)](#) which it claims is 479 per cent over the national average.

The firm also offers a progressive work from home policy as well as parental leave for new parents, which was very helpful for Eames and his family. Though his schedule

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fluctuates depending on the deals he's working on, his typical week involves three days at home and two in the office.

Although some see working in London as unimaginative, Eames says the Aussies he knows have each got something different out of the experience. Some people come for a few years, and others love it and stick around for a lot longer.

### London lifestyle

London also offers a lot in terms of lifestyle and culture. Eames likes that there is something different to do every night of the week. He says the global significance of London made him realise that Sydney is "still just a big town".

The nightlife doesn't have the same restrictions as Sydney's does.

"There's no lockout laws," says Eames, "I don't want to make it a political thing, but it's just one of those cities that never sleeps.

"Whatever your thing is, you can get it in London, and you can get it the best."

That said, he now plans a lot of his life around the famous London drizzle, and misses some important things about Australia.

"I miss going to the beach. That is obviously not happening in London. But you can just go to Sicily and spend every day in the water there over August, so it's pretty good," Eames says.

**11.45AM** – Jan 8, 2024



## From big law to the UNHCR: Life as a lawyer in Johannesburg

Maxim Shanahan

DLA Piper senior associate Olivia Clark never expected to work in a commercial law firm.

"I was one of those really insufferable people who would say, whenever people were applying for grad jobs at big firms, 'how could you go and work at those places, they're reinforcing capitalist structures' ... Now I work at one."



*Olivia Clark says that clients increasingly expect firms to have a substantive pro bono team.*

But the London-based lawyer isn't quite wheeling and dealing in the mergers and acquisitions team. Instead, she is on secondment from her role in DLA Piper's pro bono team, currently working with the

UNHCR in South Africa, before heading to the organisation's headquarters in Geneva.

Clark arrived in October to spend nine months in the UNHCR's regional office in Pretoria, which covers 16 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Projects on the secondment range from using digital innovation to improve access to justice for stateless people, and designing projects on climate displacement.

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Clark, who spent time in the Attorney-General's Department after university, says that UNHCR work culture is similar to that of the public service, with more of an emphasis on hierarchy and respectable working hours, in contrast to the flat teams enhanced for billable targets seen in corporate firms.

### **Life in South Africa**

Daily life is a far cry from the routine of a London corporate lawyer. "The security situation is pretty intense in Johannesburg ... I'm living in a site with a very high fence and a lot of security. You can't walk anywhere, and if you're driving in a particular area at night you can't stop at traffic lights," Clarke says.

Despite the different circumstances – load shedding has caused many logistical difficulties – Johannesburg is "an amazing, thriving city", says Clark.

"It's one of the most culturally exciting cities I've lived in. It has an amazing food and art scene, so I'm really enjoying it."

"It's kind of felt like being back in Australia because the food is delicious and the weather is so good," Clark says.

### **Pro bono work**

Clarke says that DLA Piper, with its team of 30 full time pro bono lawyers, is an example of a firm that has invested in its pro bono practice, which, beyond its inherent worth, is becoming a commercial imperative for many firms.

"Commercial lawyers are seconded to [clients](#) all the time, and it's the same for us," says Clark, who joined DLA Piper after meeting practice head and pro bono "celebrity" Nicholas Patrick while completing a thesis on the inaccessibility of justice for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.



“All of our big clients, when we are pitching for work, one of their biggest questions is: what are your ESG and human rights commitments, and how can you engage your lawyers in that?”

“If firms don’t have that capacity, they are really missing out on working strategically with their clients ... [pro bono] is now a big value-add for clients,” says Clark.

**10.27PM** – Dec 18, 2023



## A quick trip to Paris ended in Naomi landing a job

Ciara Seccombe

When Naomi Creighton went to Paris for a company training session, she didn't expect to stay.

But that's exactly what happened. In 2017, the then 31-year-old in-house counsel travelled to France at the behest of her employer, waste and environmental management company Veolia.



*Naomi Creighton now lives in the heart of Paris.*

Creighton had planned to slip in a trip to the office and meet people who worked in the legal department whom she had never seen in person before. It was at that casual catch-up that she found out the French legal team were down a few lawyers.

"He sort of jokingly said, 'I don't suppose you'd be interested in a job, would you?' And I was like, actually, why not?" she says, referring to the man who is now her boss.

Now she reviews mergers and acquisitions and worldwide infrastructure projects from an office just outside the ring road that surrounds the inner city. It allows her to live in a flat in the very centre of Paris.



Creighton did not have to retrain in French law to work in-house, and [nor do other foreign legal consultants](#). However, anyone wishing to appear in court would need to pass French Bar exams and pay a registration fee.

Creighton found that in-house French salaries are lower on average than what Australians receive, but smart negotiations can land you a salary on par with Australia. Contract negotiation took her several months because she pressed hard. "There was an expectation that I needed to be worth it," she says.

She says that lawyers at a junior level would not notice too much of a salary difference, but the gap grows with seniority, unless you are a savvy negotiator.

The lower cost of living in France also makes any salary difference less noticeable. She and her colleagues don't pay more than €3.70 (\$6.05) per hour for crèche (daycare) and she describes the quality of childcare as "excellent". Local wines are also affordable and great quality.

But it is the French workplace and social culture that really sweetens the deal.

Creighton says that French offices are much more collaborative than anything she experienced in Australia. While Australians may work as part of a team, she found that the French industry culture includes more time for meetings and direct collaboration with colleagues.

One of the greatest perks of working in France is the hours. The standard workweek is 35 hours, and people working in France have a legal right to disconnect outside that time. There is also more time off. Creighton says it is normal to receive seven or eight weeks off a year with a "use it or lose it" policy.

"The country shuts down in August," says Creighton. "People take at least four weeks' leave and nothing gets done. So everyone just goes away and enjoys a really nice summer holiday."



Lunchtime is also sacred, and everyone takes at least a full hour to eat and socialise. The French also frequently conduct business during this time.

Though she practises in English, Creighton had to learn to speak French to have a social life in Paris. She came over with no knowledge of the language and says it was a steep learning curve. She is enthusiastic about her children growing up fully immersed in a bilingual environment.

Travel is also a huge part of the lifestyle for her. Due to the ease of travel in the European Union, she and her colleagues often take a weekend trip to Italy, Spain, or even the Faroe Islands, which are part of Denmark.

She also enjoys a staycation visiting the various wine regions of France.

**9.47AM** – Dec 12, 2023



## IP lawyer and artist: how this Aussie lawyer pursues his passion for painting

Maxim Shanahan

In the legal world, where billable targets and long hours are generally part of the job, working part-time for a prestigious law firm to pursue a passion for painting is certainly unconventional.

But, that's the life of London-based painter and IP lawyer George McCubbin.

"I mostly do pharmaceutical litigation, and a lot of my paintings have a strangely scientific leaning to them, so there's definitely crossover between the two," he says.



*George McCubbin says his art draws inspiration from his work as an IP lawyer.*

Australian artists, like lawyers, have established a well-trodden path to London in search of mid-career inspiration, travelling opportunities, and the lure of bigger markets.

But, for McCubbin, a senior associate at Herbert Smith Freehills, the reasoning was more prosaic: "A friend hit me up and said there was a position available ... I thought my chance to do the overseas thing had gone, but it was a good opportunity so I took it," he says.



McCubbin lives in Angel, in the inner-city borough of Islington, with a fellow Australian working in banking – not quite an artists' commune.

Working in Melbourne before the move, McCubbin was able to negotiate working part-time, while pursuing an art career on the side. He was able to do the same in London, without causing a fuss, working four days per week at Freehills.

"If you feel like you're missing something in your day-to-day work it's tough to find out what that is if you're working full time ... You need to give yourself time and space to figure out if there are other things you want to do," he says.

Despite the reputation of large firms for extreme hours and unsustainable billable targets, McCubbin says he has never had an issue with working part-time, despite moving between Ashurst, MinterEllison and Herbert Smith Freehills in the past decade, and he believes flexibility to pursue outside passions is becoming more accepted since the pandemic.



George McCubbin has been able to work part time as a corporate lawyer while pursuing an artistic career.

### Art and IP

McCubbin believes that corporate law and art are more similar than many people may think. "[Painting] is about focusing on a problem for a

really long time and trying to figure out a solution ... that kind of reminds me of what I do on a day to day as well," he says.



McCubbin sees art as an addition to his legal career, rather than an escape from its strictures, citing the inspiration of IP litigation, the inherent creativity of lawyers, and the support of his firm. Indeed, Freehills recently held an exhibition of the works of more than twenty in-house lawyers.

While the move to London may not have boosted McCubbin's bank account – pay is similar to Australia once the cost of living is factored in – it has paid off in artistic revelation, prompting an evolution from his Australian style.

“In Melbourne, we’ve got a really strong street art culture, so I did a lot of stencil work back home. But then in London, you have the influence of the old masters around, so I’ve found myself working on a bunch of landscapes recently, which I never thought I would do,” he says.

McCubbin's corporate background is by no means a disadvantage in London's art world. Indeed, the IP lawyer says that it's a more considerate locale for outsider artists.

“[Art] is big business in the UK, so it feels more corporate, whereas in Australia, sometimes being an artist-lawyer felt a bit more disparate. There is more of a connection between [art and law] in the UK because of that stronger corporate side.”

**10.29AM** – Dec 5, 2023



## Prestige, a pay bump, and bad coffee: Life as a lawyer in Germany

Ciara Seccombe

In 2011, then 26-year-old Siba Diqer was working as an associate in Brisbane, but dreaming of far-off lands.

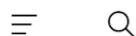
She was advised by a colleague to seek her overseas experience before she got promoted to senior associate.



*Siba Diqer enjoying some quintessential elements of German culture.*

The aftershocks of the GFC made it hard to find work overseas. One recruiter even told her not to bother. However, a helpful friend in Amsterdam connected her with colleagues at Allen & Overy in London, which kicked off a chain of referrals that culminated in an “intense” interview for a job in Frankfurt.

During the interview, a partner fired off a series of legal scenarios, one after the other, asking her to advise on them.



Diqer landed the job with Allen & Overy and moved to Germany, where she says the legal industry culture is vigorous, hours are long, and “nobody was going to hold her hand”.

“I asked my partner what my billable targets were, and he laughed and said, ‘It doesn’t matter, you’ll meet them.’”

However, the long hours and hard work translated into “quite the pay bump”.

Recruitment firm Marsden says German lawyers often receive between €90,000 and €125,000 (\$149,227 and \$207,260) with three to four years’ post-qualified experience, and 18 top firms even offer starting salaries of €150,000 or more (\$248,715).

Being a lawyer also comes with a high prestige factor in Germany, according to Diqer, which even made it easier for her to rent an apartment. She says Australians in particular also enjoy a reputation for being very hardworking in the industry.

There was an element of culture shock in her new workplace. Diqer initially found German directness off-putting, before she realised that straight translations from the German language omit most English niceties.

Now she appreciates it: “I love that you always know where you stand with Germans.”



*Siba Diqer (left) with a colleague in Frankfurt*

Diqer ended up acting as a cultural translator between her German colleagues and the London office. The polite formality of English communication often proved confusing for her candid colleagues.



“Germans would come into my office with a printed-out email, and they’re like, ‘Siba, what is this person saying?’” she says, “And I’d explain what they needed, and they’re like, ‘why didn’t they just say that?’”

### Lifelong impact

Diqer spent three years in Frankfurt. When she came back to Australia, the firm she worked at didn’t count her experience in Germany when calculating her seniority level, which surprised her. However, she still feels that her time overseas was well spent for both her personal and professional development, and set her up excellently for her present work managing litigation funding in Melbourne.

“It 100 per cent made me a better lawyer,” she says. “If I’d stayed [in Brisbane], I’d probably be a partner. But I still think I’d do it again.”

Her time overseas has given her a lifelong tie to German culture. She says she makes time every year to go to German Christmas markets and attends German film festivals whenever she can. She also brought home a passion for European soccer leagues and baking her own bread, and her husband brews his own beer to match the flavours of German ones.

Diqer says that her time abroad gave her a confidence she wouldn’t otherwise have.

“Now, whenever I get a challenge or an opportunity that is scary and I feel like I’m out of my depth, I just remind myself that I moved to a country where I didn’t know anyone or speak the language and worked in areas I’d never come across,” she says. “And if I can manage that, I can manage this.”

But the best part of coming home?

“Good coffee. They didn’t have good coffee.”

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