

WINNING WORK & MITIGATING RISK – ALUMNI INTERVIEW: SUSAN OWEN

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Alumna of our firm, Susan Owen, was an associate in the maritime team in London from 1982 to 1989, working with Alastair Farley, Martin Watson, David Warder, David Osborne and Frank Dunne. After leaving the firm, Susan joined Wilde Sapte (as it was then called), working in their asset finance and leasing group, before leaving for a year off in Australia and New Zealand. The pull of the law was too strong though and Susan returned to private practice in 1995 to work on PFI projects. In 2003 Susan joined KBR, a global engineering, procurement and construction company serving the Hydrocarbons and Government Services Sectors, where she is Director of Legal Services for Government Services.

Susan's role within the Government Services business unit of KBR involves providing advice and support for all legal matters in which the business is involved. Internal legal review is required before the company enters into any contracts with clients, so much of the team's work concerns the application of internal governance policies, obtaining any necessary approvals and ensuring the company is aware of and is able to mitigate any risk it wishes to take on.

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The work is incredibly varied. "We deal with any and every enquiry that comes across the desk, many in one day," says Susan. There is a broad range of work and the issues are diverse due to the global nature of the business. Compared to working in private practice, Susan regards herself more as a GP than a specialist consultant due to the sheer breadth of the work. "I enjoy that no two days are the same but the form filling and admin can be a chore! I get enormous satisfaction from seeing the company win work whilst helping to reduce contractual and legal risk to an acceptable level. I also work with a great team."

Susan wanted to be a lawyer for as long as she can remember, largely influenced, she says, "by TV legal dramas at the time rather than any real idea of what was actually involved!" Something "involving languages" was the back-up plan.

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Having herself forged a successful career, Susan nonetheless recognises that there is still work to do to achieve absolute equality and diversity in the workplace. "We are all perhaps guilty of unconscious bias and need to guard against choosing people in our own image. That's why diversity in recruitment is needed." Her advice to women building their careers? "Take yourself seriously, self-promote and attach yourself to a good mentor."

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Susan thinks her best decision career-wise was to do ship financing followed by projects work. Her worst? “Deciding to leave WFW, then finding out I would have been offered a posting to Paris!”

Susan values the skills she developed at our firm, especially the ability to coordinate a multi-party, multi-document transaction. “It doesn’t faze me,” she says. “In my current role I have many things going on at once and am involved in several large PFI transactions; being able to prioritise and having the confidence to know that we will get there in the end really helps.”

“Work hard, play hard, and we’re all in this together!” is how Susan recalls the culture of the firm. She has kept in touch with a few former colleagues, including Deborah Clark and Elizabeth Harris. “It was a formative part of my career and I enjoy having that continuity.”

Despite her demanding role, Susan makes time for a variety of interests outside of work, including cinema, theatre, live music (both classical and other), walking, yoga and dogs and cats. The culture of WFW has obviously stuck!