



Innovation, flexibility and diversity - Sophie Reguengo on life at Ogier

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A definite theme emerged over Working Lunch this week – one of equality based on knowledge and expertise.

It began with a debate about the recent controversy about banning school skirts, which would seem fairly off-topic during an interview which was ostensibly about life as an investment funds lawyer at Ogier but, then again, perhaps this was entirely the right conversation to be having.

After all, you can talk superficially about gender equality in the workplace or you can be genuinely passionate about what you are saying and have the life experience and intellect to articulate it confidently. What else would you expect of a lawyer with 14 years of experience?

Counsel at Ogier, Sophie Reguengo, is the investment funds lawyer in question. And, yes, we did talk a lot about how the working environment could be adjusted to better encourage a balancing of gender in the legal sector and, actually, any workplace.

It is a balancing act that she feels Ogier are ahead of the curve in perfecting. She has been with the firm for six months and has been impressed by their desire to embrace innovation in working practice and in technology which allows its staff to work more flexibly to the benefit of the company, its individual and clients.

“A former colleague bumped into my boss recently and, basically, asked why I looked so happy and the answer is that we treat people like human beings. I get the flexibility to do my job well and to be a parent,” she said.

By the standard of most industries, let alone law, the gender make-up of Sophie’s team is unusually weighted towards women and is led by two female partners. It shouldn’t be an unusual balance – or even provoke comment – but it is and it does.

“I qualified 10 years ago and I suppose I didn’t know how hard it would be. Doing the job wasn’t the issue, that was the easy part. I think you have to really fight to keep in the game. As an associate, I used to look around and wonder what happens to us [women] all because when you qualify it is about 50-50 men and women and so you have to ask why that doesn’t transition into making partner and senior partner.”

It is clear that Sophie not only believes in equality in the workplace, she has reflected it in her own life and her partnership with her husband, Rui, when their son, Raphael (now five) was born. “We had what I suppose was a reverse of the traditional perceived roles. For us it was very normal and natural and made financial sense. We didn’t think it would be an issue but my husband found that he often had to justify his role in going part-time. He didn’t have to justify it to me but he struggled a lot more than I realised.”

That’s because the traditional view of employer ‘flexibility’ is based almost exclusively on women working part-time and trying to shoe-horn as much in as possible so that they can also make the school run, the end of a football match or whatever other activity doesn’t fit into the working day.

The march of innovative technology, however, means that the way we work and where we work is only really limited by a firm’s own internal rules and chin-scratching.

“I have an incredible bit of kit that comes home with me which works seamlessly so that I can do my job wherever I am. If I get a completion call at 9 o’clock at night, at home, I can take it. I don’t need to be in the office. At the same time, if I need to pick up Raphy from school or an activity, I can undock and do that too.

“Accepting different working arrangements is going to help with diversity across a firm and if you can accept that people all have arrangements which suit them you can work it into quite a good gig. I love that flexibility and it has taken the stress out of it completely. They trust me to do my job and charge my hours.

“The fact is that I can now work wherever I need to and Ogier is the first firm I have worked at which is not nervous about allowing people to work remotely,” she said.

It is not just Ogier staff who are starting to notice the emphasis the firm is putting on culture and innovation. The company won the international category in The Legal Week Innovation Awards in May. The entry was based on a firm-wide programme of innovation, efficiency and consistency. It is this type of collaborative effort coupled with a determination to listen to staff and clients that attracted Sophie.

“We have an interactive social community and our management board wants to listen. Imagine that! A board that wants to hear what its people think.

“We were delighted to be considered for the award, first of all, and then to win. Law firms are quite traditional in their models and you do wonder if what you are doing is still relevant and right for the

market, so it is quite something to work for a company that is embracing innovation, technology and efficiencies in the way that Ogier does.

“Ogier has also got growth across the board and that shows in the way that the firm promotes itself as a place to work, through the packages that are on offer and the calibre of the people who are joining. That’s how Ogier first popped onto my radar – when I saw a rush of high profile hires.

The firm appointed new partners in Hong Kong and Guernsey in July and has promoted four partners this year and has more new faces arriving as the offices expand in Jersey and elsewhere in its global network.

Sophie has first-hand knowledge of the Hong Kong market having worked out there herself. “It was an exciting adventure for our family and I was looking for something different in my career.”

She explained that the growth in Ogier’s Hong Kong office was rooted in growth and wealth creation in China. “If you look at projections for wealth accumulation in China, it is incredible. There is real social class mobility, which is quite different from some other emerging markets, such as India. In China there is a lot more interest in Jersey from high net worths and more interest in setting up funds.”

No matter who is providing the service or where, the most important thing is that Sophie and her team and wider colleagues at Ogier provide the service that each client wants and expects, being clear and candid about fees and time.

And so we return to Ogier’s drive for diversity and the attraction this provides for both staff and clients. “Any board has to ask itself whether it represents its average customer because if they are not represented you cannot possibly know what they actually want and need. A male dominated workplace doesn’t bring diversity to a firm, so they will find it difficult to adapt and survive, which is consequently not good for our wider society.”

As for those troublesome school skirts, well, it’s not actually the skirt – or the length of it – that is the problem. Is banning skirts and removing a choice really going to address the wider problem of how young men and women perceive each other and behave towards each other? That’s a ‘no’ from the investment funds lawyer.

About Ogier

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