

Celebrating In-House Women *“An equal world is an enabled world”*

Michelle Smyth

Regional General Counsel | EY Oceania



What does International Women’s Day mean to you and is it important that we have one?

For me, it’s a celebration of how far some women have come socially, politically and economically, but it’s also a reminder of how far there is to go for some women in Australian society, and in many other places in the world where this journey is still to happen for them. When I think of women in Australia without access to proper housing, medical services, education, and the basic right to live their lives without fear, I know that we need to shine a light on days like IWD, so that we make sure all of us (men and women) never forget this is not a done deal.

What are some of the great things about being a woman in law?

For an in-house lawyer, the satisfaction of seeing the impact on the business of the advice we give and the work we do, it makes you proud: whether you are closing a transaction, guiding your business through litigation, navigating through a regulatory change or just picking up the phone to give a quick piece of advice to a stakeholder. It makes every day different and exciting. For me, I chose an in-house path for the reasons I have said here, but also, because of the ability to have the flexibility I needed, which was not there for me in private practice at the time, even though I loved my job, the partners and the firm I worked for. It felt a bit of a pity at the time, but I have never looked back. No regrets.

Based on your own experience, what advice would you give to women considering pursuing a career as an in-house lawyer?

My advice would be to always be curious and want to learn about the business you are working for. Be ready to handle a large volume of work and be very, very comfortable that

the work will never stop: at the end of the day, on a Friday afternoon or when you go on holidays: you will have to learn to juggle and compromise: some things need more attention, some things, less. It's a big challenge for many lawyers to do this, and it takes practice, and confidence. Also, don't silo yourself, and be open to and seek out new experiences, which will probably feel uncomfortable at first: in-house has lots of opportunities for this – for example, put your hand up to work on business projects, lead efficiency initiatives in the legal team, go sit with your business clients on day a week and answer all their quick questions on the spot, all examples of things I have done in my in house career. Finally, if you want something: a promotion, more flexible working, a new opportunity, never “ask” for it if you don't want the answer to be no, instead, put it to your boss as a business case, and tell them how it is going to work, for them, for the team and for the business.

What is the driving force behind everything you do...what keeps you motivated and driven on an everyday basis?

Let's start with the women in my family: my grandmother, born in 1915, who left school at 13 and always told my sister and I to make sure we were financially independent; my mum who retired at 71 after a career as a leader in the education sector, and who showed my sister and I the power of education. Also, my 2 kids (boy and girl) who I want to be a role model for. At work, I am motivated by the never-ending challenges of life as a general counsel: you never know what the day will bring. It helps to be flexible in your planning, and to seek not to be ruffled or flustered when things come from left field: something that takes time to master.

Who are your female icons?

I like the rebels: when I was a kid, I was obsessed with the Saturday afternoon black and white movies; I wanted to be Ingrid Bergman, an amazing actress, but not a conformist or traditional “Hollywood” . I also read all of Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographies as a teenager, and I still have them at home. The other one would be Michelle Obama who must be one of the most influential women of today, you just need to look at her prom dress initiative to get Americans voting to see the power of her influence at work. At the moment, my daughter is studying Ancient History for the HSC, so we are quite into Cleopatra.

How you define women empowerment?

Making space to lead the life you want to live: whatever that looks like for you. For me, as a leader, it's about setting a clear vision for my team, and giving space for people to succeed, and to support them where they don't. For my team to feel supported, and for me to listen to their ideas and perspectives even if they challenge or surprise. It's also about the out of work stuff: partner, kids, exercise, and living my life in a way that I want to. I am privileged to be able to do this. Many are not so fortunate, so we need days like IWD to remind ourselves of this, and to think and talk about ways that we might be able to make a difference to others.

What message would you like to leave for both men and women on International Women's Day?

I am going to quote Simone de Beauvoir: "One's life has value, so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation and compassion."