

AN AMAZON ADVENTURER: ALEX ZOLOTARSKY

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Alex Zolotarsky is clearly a man who lives by the mantra of 'better to try and fail than regret never trying'. Although, so far, he hasn't regretted a thing. And his adventurous attitude has taken him from Melbourne to Moscow and now to Seattle to work for one of the most recognisable companies on the planet, Amazon.

Born in Ukraine but migrating to Melbourne when he was young, Alex had been working as an associate in Herbert Smith Freehills' Finance group for a couple of years when the opportunity arose to spend a year in Moscow.

This was immediately after the Herbert Smith and Freehills merger in 2012 and a range of overseas posts were on offer. He could have picked New York or London, but Alex wanted to leave his comfort zone. "Going to Russia at first was such a daunting experience," he says. "Different language, different culture, different personalities, different climate, everything was just different."

His background helped, however, as at least he could speak Russian. With characteristic brio, he threw himself into the experience and soon "fell in love with the town and the country".

In Melbourne he'd been working in the finance practice and continued in a similar role in Moscow, but soon became aware the Australian and Russian ways of doing things are poles apart. "The deals were bigger, they were glossier," he recalls. "It felt more like corporate deals at breakneck speeds, rather than banking deals. Something that would traditionally take a month or two in Melbourne could be done in a week or a matter of days over there."



Fortunately, Alex's grounding at Herbert Smith Freehills and his earlier role at ANZ as a paralegal assisting legal counsels gave him the tools to adapt, as well as an insight into the commercial perspectives of his job. "It helped me understand how clients worked, what was really important to them. Law is only one part of the job. Your advice should be pragmatic and relevant, but mostly you need to know your client and calibrate the risk profile to match your client's needs.

"Herbert Smith Freehills does a great job of nurturing their lawyers and helping them to learn the skills they need, but also encouraging them to step up beyond their level," he adds. "You have all these great resources around you, a wealth of knowledge that you can draw upon. When you're in deep water, they show you the right way to swim out of it."

This may explain Alex's most recent major plunge - over to the US to join global behemoth, Amazon. The tech giant contacted him at a fortuitous moment, just at the time he was contemplating an in-house role. It appealed to his "geeky side", says the man who gained double degrees at Melbourne University - in law and computer science. "Being able to use my legal know-how in a company that's very tech forward and on the cutting edge of technology was an opportunity I couldn't miss."

Again it meant learning a whole new way of working, as he was practising in a brand new jurisdiction and in a place where he didn't know the laws. "It was a challenge", he says, "but in a good way. It just proved to me that I could operate in any kind of legal field if I applied myself."

He is also enjoying the change in structure and the responsibility this gives him. "I am doing this in-house where I get more decision-making power, the autonomy to put it all together and where people look to me for answers." And the rewards are manifold, he believes, particularly the experience of seeing projects through from beginning to end, rather than simply advising on a specific part of a deal, as he was doing in finance practice.

There has been much speculation in the media recently about Amazon's expansion plans into Australia, with the revelation that a fulfilment centre will be built in Brisbane, Sydney or Melbourne. At the moment Alex is working in a different team and so can't confirm whether or not the company's plans will see him heading home to Melbourne. "Time will tell," is all he is able to say. In the meantime, though, he loves living right where he is. "Seattle is such an amazing place. Drive for 30 minutes and you end up in these lush green forests. Drive for 45 minutes more and you're in world-class ski resorts. I feel like I'm in a National Geographic publication. It's such raw, natural wilderness and it's only 30 minutes away."