

JOHN ATKINS: THE TEAM BUILDER

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When your natural inclination is to say yes to opportunities, it's remarkable how far you can go in life... to the chairs of boards, to the other side of the world and all the way to the Australia Day Honours List.

John Atkins is a man who laughs often and easily. It comes as no surprise to hear that he welcomes new challenges with open arms. "My approach throughout my career has been to not particularly plan to get to any position, but if something looks interesting and stimulating, and I think it may be a good thing to do, my default position is to say 'yes, let's have a crack'," he says.

Agreeing that he's also something of a 'pick and stick' man, John spent 30 years at Freehills (legacy), rising to Partner, while taking roles as International Partner and Head of Office in both Melbourne and Perth, despite his claim that, "I'm not sure if my legal career was all that stellar..."

Even so, he's glad he's not starting out in law today. He believes it's a much tougher profession now. "Starting in Perth, it was really a small town, most people in law knew each other. It wasn't a particularly big business. You worked hard from time to time, but the intensity of practice you have today was most certainly not there." Although reticent to give himself credit, he clearly has strong leadership skills, while arguing that young lawyers today face greater challenges than he did. "You can't be a partner in a major law firm these days without being a very, very good lawyer. To be really successful on top of that, you do need people skills. People will follow leaders that they can trust and that they believe in - mixing the talent with showing confidence in people and being reliable, so that people can take you at your word and trust that you'll do the right thing by them."

Even while he was deeply embedded in that career it was never the law itself that held his interest. “The bit I really enjoyed was the people management, building a team, going out and getting the work.”

This has become the mantra of his life – people, community and working with others. He hates working by himself, he says, and this, added to that in-built propensity to ‘have a crack’, explains the numerous boards and organisations he has joined and to which he has lent his expertise and commitment over the decades. They include everything from the Lions Eye Institute to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia.

But he says there are three in particular that have been the most rewarding – the Committee for Perth, Foodbank and Lotterywest. The latter he chaired and is proud of the significant impact it has. “It’s unique in the world,” he says. “We raise the money from lotto games and then the organisation itself decides where the money goes.”

On the other hand, he was involved with Foodbank from the outset, writing its charter and sitting on the first board. “It’s grown into a huge organisation in Western Australia, feeding thousands and thousands of people every day.”

His clear love of his home state and desire to give something back to it also led to one of his highest profile roles to date – Agent General of the Government of Western Australia, which saw him based in London from 2015 to 2018 and covering 27 countries. He says the position opened up both challenges and opportunities. “It’s a small office and you go into it cold. You don’t necessarily have a lot of experience as a diplomat or a trade and investment expert, so it took me about 18 months before I felt able to make a difference,” he says.

“Western Australia was not particularly well-known, so to speak in depth about it opened up opportunities. For example, it was the fourth largest exporter of LNG in the world last year, and people didn’t understand that, so being able to spruik it was great. I thoroughly enjoyed being able to speak positively about Western Australia.” It was also, of course, a time of political unrest, Brexit and a spate of terrorist attacks in the UK capital. He searches for the right words to describe what it was like to live in the UK during this period, settling for “stimulating, tumultuous and very, very interesting”, while admitting he’s “quite happy to be home now”.

Never one to rest on his laurels though, John’s latest role is chairman of Anglicare WA, a role that came up while he was still overseas, but seemed a natural fit, considering his background, he says. And there are still several other boards and roles to keep him busy.

“I think I do bore reasonably easily,” he says, unsurprisingly, “so if I’m not doing things, I’ll find something to do.” John’s passion and commitment led to official recognition earlier this year when he was made an AO (Officer of the Order of Australia) in the Australia Day Honours List. The citation was “for distinguished service to the business and financial sectors, to the legal profession and to the community”. Which is the most important to him? “Definitely the community. I’ve taken a great deal of personal pleasure from my various involvements in community organisations. That’s been very important to me.”

And how did it feel to have his achievements in these fields acknowledged in this way? “Some people describe it as humbling, but I don’t know if that’s the right word,” he replies. “It’s obviously a very nice thing to happen and it gave my family quite a bit of pleasure. My 89-year-old mother, in particular, is very proud of her son, so that was really nice.”