

KATHERINE DOMMERSON: WIN-WIN SITUATION

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As Head of Employee Relations at Qantas, Katherine Dommerson is able to do something that she has enjoyed since she was young - and that is to get the best of both worlds.

Whilst she grew up in Sydney with her parents, she and her younger brother spent their long holidays at her grandparents' country farm, located a 90-minute drive north of Dubbo in New South Wales. It is a working farm of about 3000 acres where oats, wheat and barley are grown, and cattle and sheep raised. In his late eighties now, Katherine's grandfather still works on it. To this day, she relishes that luxury of dividing her time between the city and the country. "I try to get up there as often as I can," she says. "It's still my favourite place to be."

Another kind of balance Katherine has sought is between the legal and commercial worlds. After a number of years at Herbert Smith Freehills, she joined client Qantas in early 2018 as Head of Employee Relations. "It was a perfect opportunity to continue to use my legal skills whilst broadening my commercial skill set with an organisation and team I thoroughly enjoy working with".

In her role she is focused on group industrial issues, and projects that touch on multiple work groups. This means that where an issue crosses multiple work groups - such as the pilots, cabin crew, engineers and baggage handlers - this is where she becomes involved.

The desire to keep both legal and commercial paths open influenced her academic and early working life with Katherine commencing her university studies at the University of Sydney with a Bachelor of Economic and Social Sciences, majoring in politics and with an advanced major in industrial relations and strategic human resource management. After completing an Honours year in the latter, it made sense to add something else to the mix. "I had decided that a career in industrial relations was for me," she recalls, "and because there is such a strong connection between industrial relations and industrial law, I thought it would be a good idea to do my law degree."

Whilst studying law at the University of Sydney, she continued to work in her old discipline, undertaking research and tutoring in the Work and Organisational Studies department.

After completing her summer clerkship at Herbert Smith Freehills in the penultimate year of her studies, she took a year off to work as an Associate to Herbert Smith Freehills alumnus Graeme Watson at Fair Work Australia (now the Fair Work Commission). “It was an excellent year, where I learnt a lot and made some life-long friendships”.

She was drawn to Herbert Smith Freehills by its reputation for having the strongest industrial law practice and also because many people, including her lawyer husband, recommended the practice to her.

Confirming her passion for industrial relations, she did a double rotation with the industrial relations team as part of the Graduate program. She also spent six months in the corporate law team “After spending so much time focusing on industrial relations, I was surprised how much I enjoyed corporate law and I certainly gained skills there that I continue to use today”.

After returning to the industrial team, Katherine started working with Sonia Millen who had moved to Sydney from Herbert Smith Freehills in Melbourne. Qantas was one of the practice’s long-standing clients and, five years later, both Katherine and Sonia were approached by the airline to go in-house. They both accepted the offer, with Sonia now occupying an Executive Manager role. “It seemed like the right decision at the right time and I am really enjoying it,” says Katherine.

For Katherine, the experience and training she gained from Herbert Smith Freehills gave her the skills and confidence to take on a much broader role. “It really sets you up,” she says. “The critical analysis, attention to detail and the way you think about problems. I think sometimes you don’t really appreciate it until you’re outside of that space.”

She’s been in her current role at Qantas since January 2018 and has no plans to move. “I’m enjoying the challenges and the variety in my role,” she says. “I look forward to seeing where it takes me.” Wherever it does, it’s doubtless that she’ll be looking to enjoy the best of both worlds as she goes.