

THE DATA MAN: SAM NICHOLSON

22 February 2021 | Alumni Profile

Sam Nicholson is Head of Data Privacy (Europe) at Samsung Electronics, a role he started during lockdown. He relishes the challenge of assisting the company take full advantage of innovative technology while ensuring that individuals can be assured that their data is not being abused.

Can you take us through your career with Herbert Smith Freehills?

I joined Freehills' Brisbane office in 2007, attracted by the firm's unparalleled reputation and the partners' down-to-earth and easy-going approach. I worked mostly on mining and resources deals. I moved to the Sydney office in 2010, and switched to working on healthcare deals. The following year, I joined Herbert Smith in London – this was before the merger – and worked on a range of corporate deals.

Why did you move in-house?

I had done a successful nine-month secondment for Santos to develop their gas plant in Central Queensland, and realised that I preferred working in-house to private practice. Why? I enjoy getting into the reeds of the business. I like being involved in the planning, execution and delivery of projects, rather than purely advising and sometimes never knowing where it ends up. When you specialise in-house you become the source of knowledge, integral and ingrained with the business teams and trying to solve problems before they occur.

When did you join Sky?

In 2012. Sky was, and still is, in front of the market with in-house innovative technology, not just consumer-facing but also in the way legal services are delivered, utilising technology, data analytics and outsourcing in order to empower the legal team to effectively prioritise their workload. What was also interesting was that I was taken on as a data lawyer, an area of law I knew nothing about but came to love.

What interests you about data law, then?

They say that big data is the new oil. All big business' decisions are now governed by insights

and analytics, which is only made available as a result of huge, and ever-growing, datasets and a growth in tech processing. Having these datasets is a commercial benefit to business. On the flip side, individuals have rights, particularly the right to privacy, which should be protected. Striking the balance between those two positions, to enable businesses to capitalise on the data they hold without infringing people's privacy, has become a key strategic priority for pretty much every business.

It is still an area of law which is largely unlitigated, has varying guidance by different regulators and on which experts constantly disagree. The industry is certainly evolving since the introduction of the GDPR in 2018, but there is still a lot of uncertainty in the market. But that uncertainty appeals to me. It is not black letter law, where the law is clear, you are interpreting it and applying it.

Why did you move to Samsung?

I was headhunted for a newly developed role to manage data privacy risks for existing and upcoming projects. I joined in June 2020, in the middle of lockdown, which made onboarding interesting!

I head up a team that sits within the Service Business Office, looking after the on-screen features of Samsung mobile and Smart TVs for Europe and Russia. These products are obviously very data-heavy, utilising data collected from the devices. We are also involved in Samsung apps, like weather, app store, news, Samsung pay, Samsung TV on mobile devices. We look at the monetisation of the features on the TV.

Tell us about the technology that Samsung is developing and how it is benefiting people?

Where to start! Samsung is a technology company and everything we do is aimed at making people's lives better, creating technology that is flexible, intelligently connected, and using AI to understand context to make daily life seamless. Here are some of the things we are doing: Samsung's new robotic household helper will wash dishes, do your laundry and bring you a glass of wine at the end of a hard day! SmartThings Cooking is an automatic planner that recommends meals for the whole week, makes shopping lists with the needed ingredients and connects to grocery retailers for one-stop shopping straight from the refrigerator your mobile screen. There will be more!

Can you elaborate on the company's ESG policy/approach?

We are building innovative products and technology with sustainability at the core to ensure that the next generation can enjoy a green planet. For example, our AI-powered washing machines optimise water, detergent and wash cycles, saving water and power. Bespoke refrigerators allow customers to update fridges to respond to lifestyle changes instead of buying a new one. Energy-saving memory solutions significantly reduce power consumption.

To minimise the environmental impact of our products, we continue our efforts in extending their life cycle and reducing electronic waste. We are upcycling our new boxes with a unique

dot design that helps consumers transform plain packaging into pet houses, end tables, and other useful household items. Our new remote is made from recycled plastic and can be charged using solar or indoor lighting.

As a global corporate citizen, Samsung Electronics will continue to create environmental and social values while achieving positive economic outcomes. We are also promoting ways to improve the Earth's environment through initiatives such as establishing the Samsung Particulate Matter Research Institute.

How have you adapted to working for a Korean company?

I went from a very English environment at Sky to one which is quite different. Samsung is a Korean chaebol, which was traditionally very hierarchical, where seniority was extremely important, but it has become very Westernised in its business practices. There are sensitivities and practices that I am still getting to grips with, but Samsung really helped bridge this gap by providing Korean cultural training as part of the induction process. There are certain things, however, that do stand out. For instance, the tone of advice where the audience is Korean needs to be more carefully thought-out, and they love it in PowerPoint. Working in a multinational corporation brings additional nuances, in addition to cultural differences. There are frequently language barriers, this is to be expected dealing with multiple European languages and Korean – luckily, English is still the default language.

There is a very cohesive culture, in which everyone pulls together. There are some amazing people working on incredible technology, which is very inspiring.

What is your favourite memory of your time with Herbert Smith Freehills?

On a social level, so many great times with a great group of people. One stands out. There was a Freehills sponsored-charity dinner for Yalari, a not-for-profit organisation that offers secondary education scholarships at leading Australian boarding schools for indigenous children. Kirsty Faichen, now a partner, in a fit of generosity outbid for what turned out to be a hugely expensive weekend away (for her) in a tiny town in NSW where we were to be billeted out to families' houses for the weekend. When we arrived after a six-hour drive, none of those we were staying with answered their phones. At 2.00am we woke someone up at the only motel in town and eight of us slept in the last available room. The rest of the trip was a once-of-a-lifetime experience: we were welcomed with a BBQ at the mayor's house, by local school kids, and then treated to real country hospitality.

What makes a good lawyer?

In my mind, you need to have three core skills: knowledge of the law and how to apply it in a commercial and risk-balanced manner; to understand the client and their needs; and to be able to effectively manage and lead your team.

What do you like to do outside work?

Normally, to travel. I am looking forward to visiting Korea as and when that becomes possible. The good part about life in-house is that everyone is keen to ensure that you take

your leave and hopefully be left alone whilst travelling.

Obviously this year has been slightly different, so now I am focusing on establishing better culinary skills. Before lockdown, we typically ate out.

How important is the alumni network for you?

Definitely important. It is always great catching up with old friends, but the networking is most valuable, discussing shared issues with former colleagues, even though we have all gone our separate ways.

Tell us a fun fact about yourself.

I once met the-then current Prime Minister of Australia outside the Gents at an event. We had a great chat, and he left combing his famous bushy eyebrows!

* *Reconnect with [Sam](#).*