

Women in Law: Harriet West Q&A

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Harriet West is a Private Credit partner and member of the Global Finance practice and Private Capital Team. Known professionally and personally to be a highly knowledgeable problem solver, reliable and technical, Harriet works in a wide range of UK, European, and cross-border private credit transactions, from the lower-middle market to the large-cap market. Harriet is a strong advocate for the next generation of lawyers and believes in fostering connections and camaraderie among women. To provide women with the opportunity to share knowledge and build relationships in the private credit industry, she established the Proskauer Women in Private Credit initiative.

Read below for excerpts transcribed from our in-person interview with Harriet West.

What is the most powerful advice you've ever been given?

Harriet West: The best advice I received was to “put yourself in the client’s shoes” and “remember that the client really does want their counsel to advise them.” This allows us to focus on advising them directly, rather than overwhelming them with every minor legal nuance. When a client reaches out to us, they want us to focus on the matters that are important to them and their businesses. That’s why it’s crucial to understand the client’s business and the markets they operate in to provide valuable advice. They want to know what we would advise them to do — that is the add-value. This approach transforms our role from merely “legal experts” to “trusted advisors.”

What do you love most about your career?

Harriet West: This is made up of a variety of things, but one thing that has been a key motivating factor for me is the dynamic growth of private credit in the European market. I’ve been lucky enough to see private credit and direct lending expand exponentially into a dominant practice area within the finance world. It’s the process of growth and development, both within the industry and our team, that I find most fulfilling. I’ve loved watching the Proskauer London office and private credit team grow and develop. It’s been a unique blend of ambition and collaboration. More generally I enjoy the excitement of working with clients as they grow and develop new strategies and into different jurisdictions and areas of the market.

How would you advise the next generation about entering Big Law?

Harriet West: I would emphasize that there's no one size fits all approach and stress the importance of staying open-minded. The landscape of "Big Law" is vast, encompassing various practice areas and roles. Flexibility and adaptability are key, as careers can take unexpected turns due to personal decisions or unforeseen economic factors. It is so important not to operate with tunnel vision when it comes to the exact area of law; the title that you have or the timing to achieve various milestones. It's definitely a marathon not a sprint, so really take that time to work out what parts of the job that you like, and that should guide your overall career in big law.

In what ways do you mentor and pay it forward?

Harriet West: Mentoring, for me, includes formal programs like the ones we have at Proskauer, as well as informal, organic relationships. It's about developing those relationships to ensure that the trust is there to have open dialogue. That swings both ways — I try to be honest about how I felt when I was at a similar stage in my career and the challenges I struggled with. The more open that relationship, often the more appropriate the advice you can give and the more value that mentoring can have. I have been lucky enough to have had some amazing mentors in my career, especially during my track to partnership, that were invaluable to me.

In terms of paying it forward, there is no point reaching a certain point in your career and pulling up the ladder. I actively try to encourage associates to be involved within my relationships or initiatives, whether it's taking them along to business development, suggesting junior clients that might be good for them to cultivate a relationship with or getting them involved in wider programs, such as for female associates the Women in Private Credit network I established.

What advice would you give your younger self?

Harriet West: Be authentic to yourself. Early in my career, I thought I needed to emulate others to succeed. Instead, this was really underestimating the fact that a successful team is built from unique individuals with a myriad of skills, backgrounds and experience.

Having strong self-awareness of what skills you have and what values matter to you most will help shape what type of lawyer you are and what your business will look like. Ultimately, this becomes your brand. The more authentic you are, the more consistency, longevity and ultimately probable success that brand is likely to have.

What are the key aspects of business development?

Harriet West: It's important to build depth to relationships and working out how the best way to do that for a specific client. There isn't a one-stop approach to marketing and business development that can be rolled out across all existing and prospective clients. In a competitive world, this underestimates the nuances of clients and the tailored service that they require. While how you build that relationship is personal to you and that client, really take the time to understand your client's business, their drivers and goals to give yourself the best chance of being that client's long-term provider.

Business development also covers the need to capitalize on inter-department and inter-office relationships, such as meeting with and getting to know your colleagues, so that if a client comes to us with a legal issue that is beyond a specific team's remit, they can still get the advice they require. This cross-selling is an important element of business development to ensure we become the go-to trusted adviser for all of a client's legal needs.

Finally, the product that you turn out on a transaction is the ultimate business development. There is no point being the top pitcher or sales person if you don't deliver an exceptional service once you've won that mandate.

What advice would you give about developing client relationships to a more junior person?

Harriet West: Focus on building meaningful relationships with peers at client institutions as they could be future decisionmakers. Let these relationships develop organically — you don't have to be pitching to every client you talk to. Simply becoming that "friendly lawyer" the client can pick up the phone to can be a great start.

Finding business development that you enjoy and fits into your routine can help make the process less daunting and more manageable. Whether that's short coffee-catch ups, more leisurely business lunches, offering training or teach-ins to showcase your skills or doing something that fits with your interests, such as attending a sports match or show. What you enjoy and feel confident doing will shine through, and you will find cultivating those relationships more natural.

Also, don't underestimate the power of your existing network, including peers, non-direct clients and internal contacts. A successful career often relies on a broad range of institutional relationships.

How do you encourage a collaborative environment that enables your team to share and build upon each other's ideas?

Harriet West: Fostering an open dialogue across all team members is crucial for collaboration and for sharing knowledge, experience and ideas. I think that collaboration is driven, ultimately, by communication. One of the things that originally attracted me to the area of law that I work in, was working together as a team on a transaction — without communication and collaborating, to make sure that all the parts of the transaction are aligned, the individual tasks ultimately won't be as successful. This approach ensures we're leveraging the collective intelligence of our team and the broader Proskauer network to address clients' needs effectively.

What steps do you take to anticipate potential future trends that could impact your clients? And how do you prepare for them?

Harriet West: Understanding our clients' businesses is fundamental to anticipating market trends that could affect them. One strength we have lies in our global network here at Proskauer, particularly the regular insights from our U.S. partners in private credit — often we see trends start in the US and then make traction in the European private credit markets. We are constantly in the market meeting with our clients, our counterparts, other advisors and players in the private capital space. This means we are having regular discussions with key players in the market so we become aware of key trends. Keeping our finger on the pulse is essential.

We actively discuss these trends to strategize how best to serve our clients, whether through direct advice or more formal educational efforts. Being proactive and responsive to these trends is crucial for providing timely and relevant advice to our clients.

Related Professionals

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Partner