

THE LAWYER

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Black History Month In-house In-house interviews

Black History Month: Leah Brown on growing in adversity

Leah Brown talks about her journey from private practice to in-house, how she overcame adversity and started her own consulting business as a ‘fixer’ and general counsel.

I started out studying philosophy at university and chose law after I graduated because I was compelled to a career to solve problems. I had the privilege of working in commercial business before I qualified, and long term I knew I wanted to be business side – I just didn’t know how true that would be so quickly.



My aim was actually to be an advocate – not a solicitor. I worked for a commercial food group company and then a hotel chain as a legal assistant while I was studying for the law conversion course and the bar exams, while applying for pupillage. It was only a result of immigration issues and getting down to the final two for a number of pupillage interviews but never actually gaining pupillage that made me decide to try a different approach.

So, I went to work for Freshfields and was encouraged to apply for a training contract there. At the time I didn’t think I wanted to do a training contract – but they won me over and offered me a job. I took it and made the decision never to look back! I had the full training contract experience and really threw myself into things. I was on six different sports teams, the book club, did all kinds of pro bono including work with the Stephen Lawrence charitable trust (now Blueprint For All), and was involved in mentorship for future and aspiring lawyers. I lived for those two years.

I ended up moving into private equity and going to work as an associate at STB, and while I was there I went on secondment to Melrose. My day to day experience for six months was being bought the most expensive bottle of Don Perignon by them over and over...!

After four years I realised I had worked really hard but wasn't happy with where I was and didn't know what I was looking for next. I specifically remember doing crazy things like taking an iPad in a canoe for my best friends 30th birthday party so that I could respond to incoming due diligence questions. I spent a lot of time trying to look at what to do next – in fact I ended up doing 33 interviews for different things, around half of which were private practice roles at other firms. The rest of my time was spent looking to find the right in-house role. I ended up going for a boutique hedge fund job on Savile Row, where my general counsel was also a partner of the fund – that ended up being key as it meant I was privy to everything.

It was a really pivotal role for me because I felt I had a lot more to add than I had in private practice, and I learned I had been under-valuing myself for a long time. I think it's important not to look over how our backgrounds can contribute to who we are; I had trauma going on in the background of my career, which I've since written about in a book, due to growing up with my mum being sectioned under the Mental Health Act. Going to trauma counselling and focusing on developing myself, I found I was able to un-work things that were holding me back in my career, and discover a lot about self-awareness, leadership and responsibility – critical things that enable you to progress in your career.

I ended up having more confidence than ever, and a career trajectory I couldn't have imagined. I left the hedge fund to take up a role at the Kuwait Investment Office, after which I ended up at Trussle as its head of legal. We went from a series B start up to a successful exit in 18 months in the midst of the pandemic, with just me and a paralegal as the legal team. I committed to stay until the sale completed, and then was head hunted for a role at Mintus. It looked like it satisfied all the things I was after, but by this point I joined them, I felt I wanted to be able to take on the more transformational and problem-solving situations for companies. It was a real conflict for me because while I had worked really hard to be a GC, I wanted to be able to do more of the 'fixing' side in other ways too.

I ended up taking a part time role at Elwood until I could figure it all out. In the background I built two businesses from scratch – one as a consultant general counsel, self-employed, providing outsourced GC services to early stage fintechs. One of the things I love about advising early-stage businesses is that they often

don't know what they don't know. I can explain why things work out a certain way, what potential trajectories for doing things a certain way are. Problem solving is reverse engineered into the consultant GC approach.

The second side is a professional fixer business dealing with any issues that may arise within companies. After getting a number of referrals, I left Elwood to pursue my businesses full time. It's been a real juggling experience, but I've been lucky that my reputation has preceded me which means I've got a steady amount of work. In fact, I'm currently getting more referrals than I can take on! At its peak over the summer I had six different consultancy arrangements, but they were all tapered, so while there were busy points I knew it wouldn't last forever.

My tips for others like me going into law would be that self-belief is so important. My journey to believing in myself was like climbing Everest. But, I found that a good mentor will take you half way up! They are out there and I think everybody needs one, some people may need even more than one! I also think it's important to remember that we all have a purpose in life, and dreams, and not to forget that. If you're not grounded it can be easy to make decisions that are for other people.

Don't be afraid of difficulty, experiences tell us so much and shape who we are. If I ran from the difficult experiences in my life, I wouldn't be where I am today.

Leah Brown CV

Jun 2022-present: Consultant GC

Nov 2021-22: Senior legal counsel, Elwood Technologies

Oct – Nov 2021: General counsel, Mintus

2020-21: General counsel and company secretary, Trussle

Apr – Sep 2020: Head of legal, Trussle

2019-20: Legal advisor, Kuwait Investment Office

2018-19: Deputy legal counsel, Tyndaris

2015-17: Corporate associate, Simpson Thacher & Bartlett