Q&A

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What would you tell a young woman looking at the long hours and intense pressure of M&A and thinking, "I don't know if I can do this"?

No one comes out of law school or business school able to run an M&A transaction, no matter how clever they are. Our work is technical, but it is also people- and context-oriented; and, where there are people, there is complexity, nuance and history.

From the outside, people often look much more certain than they feel. A lot of professional life, especially at the beginning, is a kind of controlled panic (or, at least, uncertainty). If you prepare as much as you can, listen carefully, and ask the questions you are worried may sound obvious, you will slowly begin to understand how the pieces fit together.

So yes, there is a bit of 'fake it 'til you make it', but not in the dishonest sense. It is more that you have to keep showing up confidently before you feel ready. The important thing is not to confuse this with carelessness. You must push through the discomfort, but you still have to check yourself, ask for help, and be honest about what you don't yet know.

In my experience, the long hours are not the thing that breaks you. If the work stimulates you, the hours become part of the rhythm. You do what needs to be done because the work matters. What is harder is the pressure: the pressure to deliver, to exercise judgment, and to hold your own in a demanding environment.

M&A is learned by doing. You build confidence deal by deal, difficult conversation by difficult conversation, problem by problem.

So, my advice is simple: don't decide too early what you can't do. Stay curious. Let yourself be taught. Give yourself enough time to surprise yourself.

What are the non-negotiable skills, beyond technical legal knowledge, that a young woman needs to cultivate to excel in M&A?

At the beginning, I think the non-negotiables are resilience, determination, clear communication and a sense of humour – and then there is judgment, which may take longer.

These things sound simple, but they are not 'soft skills'. In M&A, they are often the difference between someone who survives the work and someone who starts to become genuinely good at it.

Resilience matters because you do need to be tough. There are difficult clients, late nights, drafts that come back covered in comments, and negotiations that change shape just when you thought they were settling. You try to roll with it. You try to keep perspective. And, if you must cry in the office (as sometimes you must!), try to cry in front of allies.

Resilience goes hand-in-hand with determination. Resilience is what lets you take it on the chin; determination is what makes you show up again for the next bout. Not in a chest-beating way, but in the quieter, more useful sense: coming back to the work after a difficult day, a mistake, or a negotiation that has not gone your way. You have to be able to take a knock without making it the whole story. Learn from it, correct course and keep going, because that is where the growth happens.

A sense of humour helps. Sometimes humour is what lets a team breathe for a moment and then carry on. It reminds you that the work is important, but not every difficult moment is catastrophic.

It also makes you easier to work with under pressure. Transactions are long, intense and often repetitive. People remember who stayed calm, who remained kind, and who could still find a human moment in the middle of the pressure. You do not need to be entertaining, but a little lightness makes the work easier to bear.

Communication is also non-negotiable. You need to engage. You need to ask questions. You cannot "go to ground" or hide away when things become difficult. At the same time, you don't need to rush to prove that you already know everything. There is value in asking the question before the mistake becomes more difficult to fix. If you're struggling, say so early enough for someone to help you. That's not weakness; it is part of being reliable.

The balance is important. You can't be so cautious that you never form a view, but you also can't be so eager to look competent that you stop being teachable. Especially in the early years, the good lawyers are usually not the ones who never ask. They are the ones who ask better questions over time, who are not embarrassed to clarify something – but then take on board the answer.

As you become more senior, communication also becomes the ability to take a complicated issue, strip out the noise, and explain it clearly enough for someone else to make a decision. The most useful person in the room is often the person who can identify what matters and say it plainly.

And then there is judgment, which develops more slowly. It comes from seeing patterns, from understanding why something went wrong, from noticing what clients worry about, and from learning to trust the quiet instinct that tells you an issue is not quite right. You only develop that by paying attention, not by coasting on the answer in front of you.

How should young women handle microaggressions, or being spoken over in a boardroom setting? What is your personal strategy for reclaiming the floor?

I think it's important not to view every difficult interaction exclusively through a gender lens. Sometimes people interrupt because of hierarchy, ego, personality or poor meeting discipline; sometimes bias may be part of it.

Often the person interrupting you is probably behaving equally badly to other people. There are always "those people."

Either way, the response is largely the same: prepare properly, know your material, and make your contribution without shrinking from it.

Don't give away your authority in the moment. That does not mean becoming combative; it just means not disappearing.

If someone interrupts you, it is perfectly acceptable to say, calmly, "I would like to finish my point," and then continue. You do not need to be aggressive, apologetic or defensive. Calm confidence is usually far more effective.

There is a scene in *Ted Lasso* where Rebecca says that, before she walks **into** a difficult **room**, she makes herself physically big so she can **feel** her own **power.** There is something useful in that.

Sometimes you have to remind your body before your mind quite believes that you are entitled to be there.

Prepare well, know your material, and trust that, over time, substance becomes harder to interrupt.

When negotiating your own compensation, promotions or seat at the partnership table, what is your golden rule?

My golden rule is that advancement should be framed around contribution before promotion. Not as sacrifice or quiet endurance, and not as a plea to be rewarded for effort, but as a clear-eyed account of the value you are already creating.

It is worth keeping a record as you go, not only of the obvious successes, but of the difficult problems solved, relationships built, judgment exercised and responsibilities taken on. By the time the year-end conversation arrives, it is surprisingly easy to forget the evidence of your own growth.

Know your value and be able to demonstrate it. Be clear about what you have achieved, how you have contributed to the business, and where you are already operating at the next level. The strongest case for promotion is rarely, "I would like to be given the opportunity"; it is "I am already making the contribution, carrying the responsibility, and helping to move the business forward."

Many professionals assume that hard work alone will be noticed. Sometimes it is; often it's not. There is nothing inappropriate about advocating for yourself when you can point to the value you bring.

Let the facts carry the argument, but make sure you have those facts on hand.

How do you advise young M&A lawyers to build a visible personal brand in a profession that often prioritises behind-the-scenes execution?

For me, a personal brand starts with credibility.

Do the work well first.

Then find ways to make your expertise visible: write where you can, speak where it is useful, participate in professional organisations, engage with clients, and share insights that add something meaningful. Visibility without substance does not last.

People sometimes confuse personal brand with self-promotion. To me, it's much simpler than that. It is your professional reputation: what people trust you for when something important needs to be done properly.

The aim is not to be everywhere. It is to be known for excellence, judgment, integrity and usefulness.

The traditional 'rite of passage' involved long hours of due diligence, drafting, proofing documents, checking conditions precedent, and learning how a transaction actually fits together. If AI can now assist with some of that work, how should training and expectations evolve for young lawyers entering M&A right now?

AI is already changing the way M&A lawyers work, and there is real value in that. Some of the repetitive work that used to take up enormous amounts of junior time can now be done more efficiently. We should not be nostalgic about inefficiency.

But there is a danger in assuming that because technology can assist with the work, we no longer need to understand how the work is done. Even if you are flying a state-of-the-art Airbus, you still need to know how to land the plane when the technology fails.

The same is true of M&A. If you understand how a transaction is built, you can evaluate the output. You can see when an answer is neat but wrong, commercially off, legally incomplete, or built on a false assumption. If you have never gone through the discipline of constructing the analysis yourself, it becomes much harder to know whether the technology has produced something useful or merely something plausible.

I was trained the old way: reading source documents myself, marking up agreements, checking cross-references, tracing conditions precedent, reviewing disclosure schedules, and working through problems from first principles. It was often slow and painstaking, but it taught me how to interrogate an answer, what questions to ask, what assumptions to test, and where mistakes tend to hide.

So, while AI should make lawyers more productive, I do not think it removes the need for rigorous training. If anything, it makes critical thinking more important. The real task for firms is to ensure that people still learn the fundamentals: how to read source material, test assumptions, ask better questions, understand the commercial purpose of a clause, and recognise when something does not feel right.

At the same time, training will have to evolve, because the way we work, the way we think through problems, and the way our brains process information are changing. The future does not belong to lawyers who reject technology, or to lawyers who use it unthinkingly. It belongs to lawyers who understand the craft well enough to use technology intelligently, test what it produces, and combine its capabilities with their own judgment, experience and insight to reach the right answers for their clients.