

Profile: Damian McGregor

Vice President Legal & Business Affairs NBCUniversal International (Distribution & Networks)

Katherine Sessions caught up with Damian McGregor, Vice President Legal & Business Affairs NBCUniversal International (Distribution & Networks), to discuss working in-house at a major international media organisation.



KATHERINE SESSIONS: Where do you work, and can you tell us a little bit about your role in the organisation?

DAMIAN MCGREGOR: I work with NBCUniversal International, as Vice President of Legal & Business Affairs. I manage legal and business affairs for our content services distributed in Australia and New Zealand – for our subscription television channels, including Universal Channel, Syfy and E!; for Hayu, a direct-to-consumer reality SVOD offer; and for our free-to-air channel Bravo, which we operate as joint-venture with MediaWorks in New Zealand. I am the Company Secretary for our New Zealand joint-venture company. I also oversee legal and business affairs for NBCUniversal’s licensing activities across Australia, New Zealand, India, and parts of South East Asia. NBCUniversal has a number of other divisions locally in Australia and New Zealand, and I provide ad hoc legal support to those divisions too, as and when it’s needed.

It’s a busy role, and legal support requirements are extremely varied – including complex deal negotiations and contracting, regulatory compliance, corporate governance and risk management, and general legal support and advice across financial, advertising, marketing, creative, program acquisitions and productions, IT and technical, HR, property and business strategy divisions. I’m supported by an impressively competent lawyer who joined us in September, and we draw on support from our various international legal teams to ensure that we’re able to deliver comprehensive legal support to our various teams.

SESSIONS: Where have you worked previously, and what led you to your current role?

MCGREGOR: I started my legal career with Allens in Melbourne (Arthur Robinson and Hedderwicks, as it was known then), completing my articles in the firm’s intellectual property/information technology group. I then worked for a stint with Davies Collison Cave, in Melbourne, with their very impressive

IP, patent and trade mark teams, before deciding to make a move in-house to La Trobe University. I stayed with their in-house team for a couple of years, covering a wide range of general commercial and intellectual property matters, before moving to London in 2005, which is where my career took a turn towards media. I worked with the BBC’s World News channel for a couple of years, and then took a role at NBCUniversal in London, initially with the “Scifi” channel, as it was known then, just prior to a round of large-scale mergers and acquisitions which saw NBCUniversal’s international business undergo a rapid period of growth and expansion. I oversaw legal affairs for NBCUniversal’s UK and Western Europe channels for a few years, before moving back to Australia in 2013 to take up my current role. I’ve been with NBCUniversal for well over ten years now, and I’ve been very lucky to be able to grow my career between divisions and regions during my time here.

SESSIONS: What do you wish you had known about the legal profession before becoming a lawyer?

MCGREGOR: In my experience, I’ve found that building a career as an in-house lawyer requires a strong set of general business and management skills. When I completed my training as a lawyer, those rather essential tools didn’t feature in formal legal education, nor in practical legal training, at all. I do think it would be helpful for lawyers starting out in the profession to have a much clearer sense of those skills requirements, and options to receive training in those areas.

SESSIONS: What is a typical day at the office like for you at NBCUniversal International?

MCGREGOR: Given the breadth of work and territories that we cover, there don’t tend to be many typical days at the office, which is a virtue of working in this role.

Most days will commence with triage – reprioritising work after receiving new overnight developments and instructions, and ensuring that we attend to most urgent business needs first. We’ll then spend a large part of the day working with commercial teams directly

to address high priority matters, and to help steer new business initiatives in the right direction, before hopefully finding some time to attend to bread-and-butter legal review, negotiating and drafting work.

Also, because we support multiple territories, the structure of our days tends to be dictated by the time zones we support – so, early mornings will begin with calls to U.S. colleagues, late mornings for local Sydney and Auckland matters, afternoons for Singapore and Mumbai, and evenings for London. Scheduling meetings has become rather a constant challenge, and the World Clock feature on my iPhone has become my most treasured resource!

SESSIONS: What do you consider to be some of the most interesting and challenging aspects of your role?

McGREGOR: The media industry is in a state of rapid change, and that makes it a fundamentally interesting and challenging space to work in right now. As a lawyer, supporting a business which is at the cutting edge of change, and which places extremely high value on robust compliance practices and risk management – as NBCUniversal does – really does stretch your skills, in a most rewarding way.

NBCUniversal has engaged in some really interesting and complex initiatives in recent times, and supporting those transactions has been hugely satisfying – our launch of Hayu in Australia last year, which was a significant international team effort, requiring very detailed local guidance and oversight, is one which springs to mind; and our quite complex joint-venture negotiation with MediaWorks is another, with our eventual launch of Bravo in New Zealand, and our development of a local version of Real Housewives with our colleagues at Matchbox, presenting some very unique challenges and rewards. We also work closely with our various content and distribution partners in local markets, and working with their legal teams to support their own businesses' requirements, ambitions and challenges is always rewarding.

Also working across Asia Pacific – and I'm thinking principally of India when I say that, due to some recent and rather complex work we've been engaged in out there – always presents challenges as a lawyer, as we will often need to develop a very thorough knowledge of unique local legal requirements and challenges in a very short space of time.

SESSIONS: Item on your desk or in your drawer you can't live without?

McGREGOR: It's rather a prosaic one actually – an adjustable desk pedestal, so that I can stand at my desk for the working day. I'm a relatively recent

convert to standing desks, but I've become totally evangelical about the physical and the psychological benefits of it now, and I can't imagine going back to a fully seated work arrangement. For any of your readers who haven't made the change yet – consider that a ringing endorsement!

SESSIONS: Favourite NBCUniversal show or character?

McGREGOR: NBCUniversal has been producing some really strong and diverse shows in recent years, so picking just one is difficult. I'll go for my three current TV obsessions – Mr Robot, by our USA Network (the third season, just underway, is a dark and thrilling watch); the Expanse, a Syfy U.S. space opera show, a slick production and utterly riveting story; and Glitch, by our local team at Matchbox, which really is world-class genre television. And for my all-time favourite TV character, I'd have to go with Hiro Nakamura from Heroes – I'm quite a fan of comic books, and the first season of Heroes, with Hiro as a down-beaten office administrator transformed into a time-travelling, katana-sword wielding planetary saviour, mixed with comic book references, Japanese subtitles and a rich sci-fi mythology, really can't be beaten.

SESSIONS: Biggest game changer for broadcasting in the future?

McGREGOR: We're in the midst of a technological revolution that is reshaping the broadcasting, film and television industry, and I think we've got quite some way to go yet before the dust settles. I think those technological changes will continue to drive major challenges, and present major opportunities, well into the next decade – challenging traditional models of television viewing and distribution, challenging traditional funding and financing models, reshaping consumer habits and expectations, and presenting a myriad of new possibilities and opportunities for consumers, and for the businesses that cater for them.

For lawyers working in our industry, I think it's fundamental that we're aware of potential challenges and developments well before they become market realities. We can be instrumental in helping our businesses to prepare for, and to navigate through, any such changes. We can also play a key role in helping to shape regulatory developments, and in encouraging broader legal and industry initiatives, to enable our markets to be better equipped to meet changes head-on, and to address potential risks (a really great and recent example of this is the introduction of Section 115A to the *Copyright Act 1968*, and the injunctions obtained against major content piracy sites under that provision, directly as a result of local industry action).

It is an oft-repeated cliché, but it's actually quite true that working in this industry is genuinely exciting, and immensely rewarding, due to the scale and pace of market and regulatory changes. It's one of my primary motivations for continuing to work in the industry.

SESSIONS: What are some tips for young lawyers looking to work in this area of law?

McGREGOR: The best piece of advice I was given as a junior lawyer, and which I'd encourage young lawyers to follow regardless of their specific ambitions, is to focus on building a solid foundation of core legal skills in your early years of legal training, and to be patient in building up those skills before looking to jump into a specialised role. Those skills will set you in good stead, wherever you choose to take your career.

And as a tip for finding a path into the media industry, if that's where you're headed, I'd

recommend looking for volunteer placements or internship opportunities as a starter, if those options are available to you – NBCUniversal do offer those roles from time-to-time, and I know of a number of other media organisations who regularly do the same. Good luck!



Katherine Sessions
Regulatory Affairs,
ACMA and CAMLA Young
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Communications and Media Law Association

CAMLA YOUNG LAWYERS

CALL FOR 2018 COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dear CAMLA Members,

The Communications and Media Law Association's (CAMLA) Young Lawyers committee is calling for expressions of interest to join them in 2018.

CAMLA Young Lawyers is an official sub-committee of CAMLA of up to 15 young lawyers who represent the interests of young lawyers working in, or who have an interest in, communications and media law in Australia. CAMLA Young Lawyers also assists the CAMLA Board with fulfilling its objectives.

The CAMLA Young Lawyers committee aims to be representative of all sectors of communications and media law including private practice, in-house, government/regulatory, academia and persons with a genuine interest in the area, including students.

The CAMLA Young Lawyers committee is 'hands-on' and voluntary and all members are called on to actively participate and contribute.

Committee members are asked to attend monthly meetings (in Sydney) and are required to participate in organising events and contribute to the *Communications Law Bulletin*.

If you would like to nominate to become a 2018 CAMLA Young Lawyers committee member, please send us a brief CV and explanation as to why you would like to be part of CAMLA Young Lawyers for 2018.

Please email your expression of interest to camla@tpg.com.au with your name and organisation in the subject line **by Friday 1st December 2017**.

You must be an existing member of CAMLA to apply (or arrange your membership through the CAMLA website: www.camla.org.au prior to submitting your application).

Successful applicants will be notified by email.