

Karen Andersen

Group Owner, Commercial & Contract at Telstra

McCullough Robertson's **Ellen Webb** sits down with Telstra's **Karen Andersen** to discuss International Women's Day and Karen's brilliant career in the telco industry. Karen is a senior in-house lawyer with over 20 years' legal and commercial experience in the IT, telecommunications and media industries. Karen has a proven track record in complex corporate and government contracting and key adviser to senior management on all legal and commercial aspects of supplying ICT services to Government and large enterprise customers. Karen currently leads Telstra's Senior Commercial Managers and Contract Managers, to help Telstra achieve its financial goals, minimise risk, and deliver for its customers.

ELLEN WEBB: Karen – on behalf of CAMLA's readers, thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me about your experiences in the Australian communications industry. In celebration of International Women's Day, in this edition we are putting a spotlight on some of the talented women in the telco industry. Could you please tell us about yourself, and the sorts of work you (and your team at Telstra) do?

KAREN ANDERSEN: Hi – I'm the Head of Telstra's Commercial & Contracts team in Telstra Enterprise. My team of talented Commercial Managers and Contract Managers help to negotiate and manage over \$6 billion worth of contracts for Telstra each year. We manage all of Telstra's customer contracts for corporate and government customers – from small businesses right through to the largest Government contracts, for a wide range of telecommunications, managed services and SaaS. Whilst Telstra's core offerings are mobiles and data, most of our large contracts now are for a much broader offering of ICT services, including IoT, managed services, network application services and security services. Part of the fun working at Telstra is the broad range of products and services we provide to our customers – there is always something new to learn about!

I've been at Telstra for the last 14 years. I started off in the Telstra Legal team, supporting NSW Government contracts and International, then progressed through as one of the leaders of the Customer Contracting legal team supporting Telstra Enterprise. In May last year, I decided to leave the Legal team and join Telstra Enterprise to head up the Commercial & Contracts team. I was interested to further develop my commercial skills, as well as driving transformation in the way Telstra contracts with its customers. Telstra Enterprise was also implementing Agile at Scale at the time, that gave me a new adventure to learn new ways of working.

ELLEN: Is your current role one you've always known you wanted? If so, what did you do to position yourself to get it? If not, how did your career path lead you here?

KAREN: I don't think anyone dreams of specialising in Government contracting, or heading up a Commercial & Contracts team. I've been a lawyer for over 20 years now, and was looking for a new challenge, that could leverage my existing skills and interest in legal operations and stretch me into new areas.

I started my career as a media lawyer at Blake Dawson Waldron, specialising in copyright law (you may have heard of "The Panel" tv show copyright case that I ran for Network Ten in the late 1990s/2000s). I really enjoyed working at Blakes, and had the support of a great media partner – Paul Mallam – whom I learnt a lot from. After 10 years there, a Telstra secondment came up, so I decided to take the plunge and try something new.

I realised on day 1 that I loved working in-house at Telstra. After 18 months on secondment in a variety of roles, I transferred permanently to Telstra and settled in the legal team supporting Telstra Enterprise. I discovered that I really like working with teams of people to get deals done – it's a good mix of drafting, project managing ("herding cats") and negotiating, to build something new. After 8 years as a government lawyer (and having 2 kids in the process), I then took on a legal leadership role, managing the government lawyers at Telstra, and helping to improve the way we provided legal support for this work using both processes and legal technology. Legal operations/automating contracts have become a new interest for me in the last few years, and so when this opportunity came up to really drive transformation in the way we both draft and manage contracts, I was interested to make the jump.

Now as the Group Owner for Commercial & Contracts, I am driving our push to standardise and automate more of our contracts. This program will take many years, and is not without its challenges when customers want to use their own contracts, but we have made a lot of progress this year.



ELLEN: Having extensive experience in the telco industry, what has been the biggest change you have seen? Are there particular changes you see on the horizon in the next few years which you're especially excited about / which you think will have real impact (either for individual Australians or particular industries)?

KAREN: I've seen huge changes in the telco industry in my 14 years at Telstra. When I started, our main product offerings were fixed voice, mobiles and data, and there were about 4 main players in the market. Now, Telstra adds new product offerings each year that supplement and enhance our connectivity offerings. We are pushing the boundaries in IOT with driverless cars, managed mobility and professional services, SaaS and security offerings. We compete against hundreds of suppliers in multiple markets. Increasingly, data and mobile connectivity have been commoditised – customers view it like electricity – they just expect it to work anywhere, regardless of the physical or geographical barriers to the technology. Telstra's growth over these last few years has been to package connectivity with a range of other services that it provides in-house or partners with S&MBs to provide.

ELLEN: The 2022 International Women's Day campaign theme is #BreakTheBias. What does this mean to you and how would you suggest this is implemented in our readers' work and personal lives?

KAREN: #BreakTheBias means to me to double check any biases at the door – even as women. We are all guilty of biases in some form or another – it's important to acknowledge them, and ensure we are giving everyone equal opportunities for each role that comes up – and encourage a wide array of applicants for each role. Whilst I'm not a fan of quotas, I want to ensure the best candidate is chosen for each role, regardless of gender, race, religion or preferences.

I work in what was once a very male dominated field. When I first started supporting Telstra Enterprise deals, I was often the only woman in the room. Now, I'm happy to say Telstra Enterprise has come a long way to promote women into a range of technical, solutioning, delivery and management roles that were traditionally all male. We still have a long way to go, but it is getting better. In my Commercial & Contract team, we are about 50:50 male and female. Many of our high performing senior commercial negotiators are now female. I'm proud of that.

ELLEN: What is the greatest challenge you've faced or risk you've taken in your professional career? What was the impact of the challenge (and are you glad you tackled it)?

KAREN: Probably joining the Telstra Enterprise Legal team, when my background was purely in media law advice work/litigation to that point. Yes, it took 4-6 months to get up to speed with Government contracting, but I came in

with an open mind and gave it a go. Whilst 1,000-page contracts can appear scary from the outside, the deals that they represent have given me a great sense of professional pride, which is the reason why I've stayed in this area ever since. I've worked on contracts that helped homeless people apply for social housing in 30 minutes through their mobile phone (rather than a 16 page paper application form that would take weeks to implement); a contract to build the "Fires Near Me" application for NSW Rural Fire Service, and the rollout of Telstra fibre broadband to every primary school and high school in NSW (the largest single customer fibre network in the Southern Hemisphere at the time). And so, yes, I'm extremely glad I challenged myself in that way, and took that risk.

Now the challenges I face are how to get the work done in the most efficient and cost-effective way. Cost pressures are everywhere, and automation will only go so far when you are dealing with complex solutions. The challenge today is finding the right mix of technology, process and human judgement.

ELLEN: What advice would you give to the next generation of female leaders in the telco industry?

KAREN: 1. Take opportunities as they are presented to you. I've had to persuade many female lawyers to apply for jobs that they were hesitant about, because they didn't meet all the criteria. 2. Let people know what you are interested in – they can help you find opportunities. 3. Seek out mentors – there are lots of leaders who are happy to meet up with junior staff to give them advice. If you don't have a mentor program at your workplace, just reach out to someone you admire and see if they'll have a coffee. I've had a few mentors in my career, and they have each provided me insights, support and guidance that have been invaluable. I'm now returning the favour.

ELLEN: Thank you once again for your time, Karen. On behalf of CAMLA's readers, we appreciate your insight and advice.

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