

# Sneha Balakrishnan

Head of Legal and Company Secretary, Shippit

**Kate Mani**, Technology, Media & Telecommunications Lawyer at Corrs Chambers Westgarth, chats with **Sneha Balakrishnan**, Head of Legal and Company Secretary at Shippit, about promoting women in tech, taking career-rewarding risks and reprioritising algorithmic content removal. With experience working in both private practice and in-house, Sneha is an experienced commercial, corporate, technology and IP lawyer who currently enjoys wearing both legal and commercial hats in her role with Shippit's global e-commerce and technology platform.

**KATE MANI:** What led you to become Head of Legal and Company Secretary at Shippit?

**SNEHA BALAKRISHNAN:** I have oscillated between private practice, in-house (entertainment/media law at production company Global Creatures and commercial/corporate at tech company Digital Alchemy) and not-for-profits (IP at the Copyright Agency and commercial/corporate at the Australian Institute of Company Directors).

I arrived at Shippit by a bit of a process of elimination. After having my three children I was looking for a fairly specific combination of intellectually challenging work but also flexibility and a parent-friendly environment. I hear you can get the latter in some private practices these days but I didn't feel I could at the time I was there. The flip side is that those parent-friendly jobs, while the hours might be decent, are often just plain boring, with no prospect of meaningful progression. As a mum it's easy to be pigeonholed and wind up thinking you have to exchange decent work for decent hours, but I just refuse to accept that! I'm determined to have both, which is why I gravitated to Shippit. As Head of Legal and Company Secretary I'm involved in a huge variety of interesting matters, there is really never a dull day.

**KATE:** From your experience working in law firms and in-house, what changes have you observed about the role of women in law during your career?

**SNEHA:** I think workplaces are starting to acknowledge that traditional structures and processes were just not designed with women in mind and that change is needed at a pretty fundamental level. When I first started out there was really only one 'acceptable' way of working and guess what, it was the way that suited white men with stay-at-home wives.

The legal profession, with its traditional emphasis on long hours and dedication to clients at all costs has, I think, historically been quite hostile to women. As these old structures change, more female leaders are emerging who then hire and mentor young women who become leaders and so forth. The numbers for senior women in law are still not ideal, but I'm optimistic that they will creep up.

**KATE:** As head of legal for an e-commerce / tech business, what does a typical day look like for you? What sort of legal issues do you grapple with in your day-to-day?

**SNEHA:** My work tends to be divided across bigger projects and day-to-day support of the various business functions. I grapple with contract negotiation, corporate governance, IP, consumer law, privacy law, cyber security, risk and compliance. What I have always loved about being in-house are the opportunities to get involved with issues that are not strictly legal. Often you wind up being one of a group of people in a room helping to solve a problem, wearing both a legal and a commercial hat. Being Company Secretary has also added a whole other dimension to my role. I have to say, I don't love the ASIC forms and



the administrative side of it, but it's great to be in board meetings and be across broader business strategy of the company.

One of the projects I have really enjoyed working on was Shippit's Without Waste mission. Shippit has a three year plan to power two hundred million deliveries without waste (part of its vision to create a network that brings people and goods together in the leanest way possible). It is a broad project and my part to date has been working with our carbon neutral partner to offset greenhouse gas emissions, including researching renewable energy projects in China, India and Turkey across various international standards and working on our carbon credit methodology. The 'legal' side of it was negotiating the final agreement with our carbon neutral partner.

**KATE:** What is a part of your job you like that many people wouldn't like?

**SNEHA:** Drafting! There's something so pure about it – I like the ritual of sitting at my computer with a coffee in hand and drafting away. Many people, lawyers included, dislike it, but I have always enjoyed using words and language.

**KATE:** What law reforms do you think are most needed in the e-commerce / digital platforms space?

**SNEHA:** Uniform content codes coupled with an overhaul of algorithms detecting inappropriate/hateful content. Basically, whatever it takes to stop social media platforms prioritising the removal of phrases pairing the words “men” and “trash” or “men” and “dodgy” over the removal of anti-Black, anti-Semitic, anti-transgender slurs. As a general comment, I do think lawmakers need to get closer to their constituency on tech-related matters. There is often an interplay going on for multi-faceted businesses which needs to be properly understood before proceeding with any reform.

**KATE:** What's the greatest risk you've taken as a professional?

**SNEHA:** I quit a (private practice) job on the spot, with nothing lined up and as the main breadwinner in my family with a small child while I was pregnant with my second. It was a scary time but in retrospect I'm proud of myself for leaving an untenable and male-centric model of working. I hope my daughters never feel they have to “tough it out” (or to use that awful phrase beloved by private law firms in my day “be more resilient”) in a system designed to exclude them. Needless to say, it all worked out in the end. It's easy to forget lawyers have a broad range of skills and are very employable.

**KATE:** What advice would you give to young females who wish to pursue a career in law in the tech industry?

**SNEHA:** Actually, I think young females get enough advice! Any advice is probably more aptly given to the men who currently run things (because men do run things – check out the stats on how there are more CEOs called Andrew in Australia than there are women CEOs) to include and promote women, especially in the tech industry where female leaders are thin on the ground. Sometimes that means re-conceptualising what it means to be a ‘good’ leader because when

you think about it, the qualities we normally associate with leadership are quite biased towards white men.

**KATE:** Who is one woman in the legal or technology industry whom you really admire, and why?

**SNEHA:** I was just reading about Kate Quirke, CEO of the Alcidion Group. Being the only female CEO on Australia's All Tech Index is impressive enough but what really struck me is how the female representation on the executive management team grew to 50% under her leadership. Alcidion's board is also one of a very small minority of ASX-listed companies to be chaired by a woman. Funny how talented women start popping up everywhere once a door is opened for them!