



# Diversity in action

Alumni Yearbook 2020

# Welcome to your 2020 Alumni Yearbook

When diversity and inclusion (D&I) was chosen as the theme of the 2020 Alumni Yearbook, no-one could foresee the additional challenges that lay ahead.

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Mahmood Lone and Boyan Wells, Co-Chairs, Alumni Network

2020 has been a year like no other: the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on society, businesses and individuals has been unprecedented and as extensive and damaging as it was unexpected. As we write, countries around the world, many of them home to our alumni, are working to keep both their citizens and their economies as healthy as possible. It's a time of immense uncertainty that underlines the value of personal and professional networks.

At A&O, we've had to adjust our whole way of working across our global network, becoming a virtual law firm almost overnight. In this, we were aided by a major upgrade of our IT systems, which we had the good fortune of completing just before the lockdown, and the superhuman efforts of our

people, and in particular our support staff, to make sure everyone could work remotely. It's been truly remarkable to observe such a seamless transition with A&O still able to provide top quality services to our clients.

The lockdown has, of course, had a huge impact on our Alumni Network programme activities. Regrettably, we had to cancel all our popular in-person events. In their place, we significantly stepped up our communications with members to ensure that the network lost none of its vigour. You would have seen the Positive News bulletin that we created to highlight the many inventive and imaginative ways alumni were coping in the lockdown. We also set up a Covid-19 support network to assist vulnerable alumni in local communities

and many of you logged into the webinars that we organised to hear the thoughts of senior A&O and alumni members on topical subjects.

We intend to continue developing online events that will be useful, productive and, above all, enable our network to keep in touch until the time when we can once again meet safely face to face.

The theme for the 2020 Alumni Yearbook is Diversity in action. Diversity and inclusion (D&I) has long been one of A&O's strategic priorities: Wim Dejonghe and Gareth Price speak more about this in their interview on pages 4-11.

In the summer A&O signed the Race Fairness Commitment, and you may have seen in the press that A&O is a founding signatory to the Charter for Black Talent in Finance and the Professions.

We have been recognised by the Investing in Ethnicity Awards as an Outstanding Employer for the strides we are taking to create a more inclusive environment for our ethnic minority

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colleagues. London Banking Partner, and Co-Chair of the Race and Ethnicity Committee, Paul Flanagan has also been named as a leading champion for change.

We're delighted that A&O has been recognised by the leading LGBT rights charity Stonewall as one of the Top Global Employers for the third year running. Stonewall has also awarded A&O the Global Ally Programme Award for its LGBTQ+ network, A&Out. A&O has performed well in the Social Mobility Index this year and Alumni Manager, Joanna Hughes, received an award at the UK Social Mobility Awards 2020.

In November, it was also announced that A&O's Return to Work Programme won the Gender Diversity Project of the Year award at the Women in Law Awards. Global Alumni Manager, Jenny Enever, was part of the A&O project team.

A&O's global charity partner, Hope and Homes for Children, is working to end the institutional care of children around the world. The charity partnership was due to conclude in September 2020,

but has been extended to July 2021 to provide further support during these difficult times. You can read more about the charity's recent projects and its long-term goals on pages 56-57.

D&I has been a key focus of the Alumni Network for some years. Judging by the personal stories of alumni we profile in this edition, it's high on the agendas of many individuals too. You can read about them on pages 20-23 and 32-35.

You'll also find more information on A&O's commitment to D&I and the various networks that are open to alumni on pages 40-41.

We were delighted with the results of our most recent alumni engagement survey which confirmed that the network continues to be well-liked and compares favourably with other programmes. The survey offered a number of helpful statistical findings and alumni comments.


We've listened to what you said and acted on it. For example, we've made

more of our online content public-facing to allow for easier reading. In terms of content, survey participants told us that they like a balance between the personal stories and profiles, professional development and thought leadership. We've introduced virtual events on thought leadership and professional development themes and aim to include more of this type of content in our newsletters.

Finally, the Alumni team is very sad to be losing our co-chair Mahmood who is stepping down in early 2021 after five years.

A personal message from Mahmood: "I've thoroughly enjoyed being co-chair of our fantastic network. It's been an absolute pleasure working with Boyan and our extraordinary Alumni team and playing a part in the growth and success of the Alumni Network. I will continue to follow the developments of the Alumni Network with keen interest."

We hope you enjoy this year's edition and a return to normality in 2021. &



“The combination of our people,  
their skills and experience is what  
makes us the law firm we are today.”

Wim Dejonghe, Senior Partner



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# Making headway in diversity and inclusion; managing through Covid-19



Wim Dejonghe and Gareth Price, our new senior leadership team, discuss the vital task of creating a more diverse and inclusive workplace, this year's exceptional challenges, and prospects for 2021.

**Q. 2020 saw a change in A&O's senior leadership at a time when the world was going into lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Has this impacted on your priorities?**

**WD.** Evidently Covid-19 has brought unprecedented challenges and the welfare of our people remains paramount. How Covid-19 will affect our business model has yet to be seen, but obviously our goal is to be as flexible as possible in order to maintain the safety of our people and to meet the evolving needs of our clients.

The danger in times of economic stress and social upheaval is that organisations become, unsurprisingly, so fixated on the business of survival that other very important issues drop down the list of priorities – or even fall off the agenda altogether. This could be a danger with the continuation of our diversity and inclusion (D&I) programme which is very much a strategic priority. Having made some real progress in D&I in recent years, we are determined to continue our work.

**Q. Gareth, you've had a baptism of fire. How have you coped with becoming managing partner in a time of crisis?**

**GP.** In the last week of February, the election results were announced and I was told that I was to be the next managing partner. The next morning, I was in the first Covid-19 planning meeting, which was a bit of a rude awakening. Then there was a handover period of about two months before I officially became the managing partner on 1 May. I've been working very closely with my predecessor, Andrew Ballheimer, and, of course, with Wim throughout this crisis, to ensure that we have a smooth transition and continuity. This has all been virtual: Wim and I have not been in the same country, let alone the same room, since January.

**WD.** We do miss the informal chat. Our offices are next to each other, so we would normally see each other for coffee in the morning, in the evening, in between meetings. Of course, none of that is happening now. We talk every day but it's a bit more formal, rather than the informal chat in the corridor. So, for Gareth, not the easiest circumstances to get going in this new role.

**Q. Gareth, do you see your appointment as signalling any change in strategy or emphasis?**

**GP.** It's a continuation. Our enterprise-level vision of being part of the global elite is determined by the partnership and hasn't changed. This vision is client-led; we believe in global and we believe in elite, because they are the attributes that our clients of the future will wish to see in their trusted advisers. It's the role of senior management to create and deliver a strategy that moves towards this vision while staying true to our values. In some respects, this strategy depends on market opportunities as not all growth can be organic and so Wim and I will need to continue to be flexible on the 'how'.

**Q. How has the economic recession affected A&O's financial results?**

**GP.** During the last financial year, ended 30 April 2020, our client revenue grew by GBP65 million (4%) to GBP1.69 billion, with strong performance across regions, especially the UK, the Middle East and large parts of Europe. Revenues grew in all practice areas, with Litigation, Tax and Real Estate having a particularly good year.



However, the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 did start to impact our business and our profit before tax for the year would've been flat on the previous year but, after taking additional provisions related to the market uncertainty, was down 2.5% to GBP690m.

Given those challenges, we moved quickly to adapt to the uncertain environment. For example, we reduced outgoings, while increasing partner capital levels and deferring certain investments. As a result, we can face the continuing market uncertainty from a strong position.

**Q. 2020 was the year in which racial injustice received wider publicity. As a leading professional firm, and major employer, how is A&O approaching this?**

**WD.** The tragic and senseless deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others have brought a heightened focus around the world this year to campaigns on the issue of systemic racism. Race and ethnicity is a big focus for us. I think we need to follow our successful approach to gender diversity, except that the challenge is probably bigger.

While the picture varies depending on the country – our regional D&I partners discuss this in more detail on pages 12-17 – in the UK and U.S. we're not where we want to be when it comes to the recruitment of black talent in particular, but our real challenge is inclusion because our retention rates for non-white people are worse than they are for white people with the trend, once again, even more pronounced when it comes to black talent. It's morally and economically right that we have to make everyone feel welcome

and that they can be themselves in the organisation. There's a lot of work to do; it's all about initiatives that dig deep to drive cultural change. It has to be a sustained effort and it takes a lot of time. But the progress we've made on gender diversity in the last three years proves you can make a difference.

More specifically, we're using data, focus groups and external research to help us understand how we can make our ethnic minority employees feel more included.

We're working to ensure minorities are better represented at senior levels and have implemented a successful mentoring scheme, as well as developing our networks and early career support for young colleagues from ethnic minorities. Also, we're reviewing our recruitment processes to ensure any unconscious bias is eradicated (*see sidebar on page 11*).



**Q. More generally, why does equality matter for A&O and how much progress are you making?**

**WD.** Our long-term success and our ambitions to lead our industry as an elite and progressive global firm depend on us continuing to push all aspects of our D&I agenda forward as strongly as we can.

We're a talent business and we need to make sure we can recruit from the entire population as talent knows no borders. This means we need to create a level playing field for diverse talent. We need to be able to recruit the best people and provide an inclusive environment in which people wish to work.

Only by doing this with real energy can we ensure that people of huge talent can thrive at A&O – regardless of their gender, ethnicity, disability, religious belief, social background or sexual orientation.

On gender, we've made good progress and 45% of our partner promotions were women in 2020, which is a significant improvement on just a few years ago. We've also embedded accountability for achieving our gender diversity goals during the year, refining our processes and supporting women from the earliest stages of their careers.

**GP.** Showing how our actions can make a difference, we're pleased that on the third strand of D&I – creating an inclusive working environment for our LGBTQ+ community – we've had some success. For the third year running, we were named by Stonewall – a leading LGBT equality charity – as one of only 14 Top Global Employers for the working environment that we provide for our colleagues. Additionally, in the U.S., Yale Law Women recognised A&O in its annual Top Firms Report for excellence in both hiring practices and LGBTQ+ representation.

This year we've improved our ranking in the Social Mobility Employer Index, for the second consecutive year, demonstrating the firm's commitment to social mobility. The index ranked A&O in the Top 30 employers in the UK, by looking at how we interact with young people through initiatives like Smart Start and A&O Accelerate, our attraction and recruitment process with programmes like Lawyer of the Future and by taking part in third party research by looking at how socio-economic backgrounds

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“Although 2020 has been a tough year on many levels, the response of our people has been amazing and carried us through.”

affect progression to partnership. For us, social mobility is not just about getting in but how our people get on, and that means evaluating our processes and understanding why these barriers exist.

**WD.** The important role that Gareth and I can play is talking about the intersectionality social mobility has with other areas of D&I such as race and how more than ever it's important to be able to bring your true self to the workplace.

**Q. Returning to Covid-19, how did the firm adjust so that you could continue to serve clients?**

**WD.** We had a Covid-19 working group which drove the initiatives in terms of being close to the client, understanding their needs and organising a coordinated client approach that was very successful. We've tried to play to our strengths by using technology and having an integrated offering between offices and practice groups, emphasising what Covid-19 means for the client. So that's been absolutely amazing.

**GP.** Although 2020 has been a tough year on many levels, the response of our people has been amazing and carried us through. Our incredible non-legal staff got the firm from a

traditional bricks-and-mortar firm to a virtual firm over a weekend. Our lawyers really stepped up too. This was not just about direct delivery for clients but also supporting each other in such difficult circumstances.

As a result, we were able to deepen relationships with and continue to serve our clients, which is ultimately our purpose.

**Q. What have you done to look after your people?**

**GP.** Throughout the crisis, the welfare of A&O's people has been our main priority. Most of our people worked from home and we've encouraged them to continue doing so for as long as possible, putting the emphasis on individual choice. The reopening of our offices has depended on the state of the pandemic locally. Looking forward, we intend to offer staff greater flexibility in how they use the office even after the Covid-19 crisis passes.

We've seen the impact of homeworking on the traditional breadwinner model. Even though it's an outdated model, it's one that's difficult to change.

It's still certainly the case that in a male/female nuclear family, women are generally shouldering more of the childcare burden, although this is changing and moving in the right direction. The limited availability of childcare during the pandemic has put more pressure on all our people. As a result, we're offering additional coaching to our staff who are parents, as well as our managers, so that they can understand and be more supportive of family time.

Of course, working from home and having very limited social interaction creates challenges for our people. A key objective was to overcome these challenges in terms of team spirit, mental health, training and making sure our people get opportunities to do interesting work.

As a partnership, we wish to do all we can to ensure that all our people are fit and healthy – both mentally and physically. Through our Minds Matter programme, we're fostering a culture where everyone can flourish and deliver sustainable performance. We've launched 'Mindful Leader' training for partners in 2020; it's designed to educate partners about how to support the mental health of their teams.



**WD.** Although all areas have performed well in these trying times, I'd like to give particular credit to our IT teams for making sure people were set up properly to work from home and to our HR teams in terms of caring and looking after our people, and making life as normal as possible given the challenges that we have around us.

**Q. How did working from home affect your ability to conclude complex transactions?**

**GP.** Even after lockdown, we continued to deliver transformational transactions. For instance, we advised Liberty Global on its GBP31bn deal with Telefónica, to merge Virgin Media and O2 to create a business serving 46 million video, broadband and mobile subscribers. More than 50 of our lawyers worked remotely to conclude this massively complex deal, which was finally announced in May.

This continuity of client service by our lawyers was made possible by the outstanding efforts of our non-legal staff – it's a real testament to our one team approach.

Our Advanced Delivery & Solutions teams are a key part of providing the innovative solutions these times require. For example, within three weeks of the UK lockdown in March, the aosphere team had devised an e-signature product to facilitate our clients' signing needs in a remote environment.

**Q. Has the pandemic influenced the firm's long-term strategy in any way?**

**WD.** During 2020, we made strategic hires in the U.S., especially in Litigation, while remaining open to the possibility of a merger. The U.S. continues to be a priority because there are two legal systems that are globally relevant – English law and U.S. law. We continued to invest in Asia, which will be the world's fastest-growing region in the next 15 years. From a sector perspective, we focused on building our capabilities in private equity, including infrastructure and debt funds, recognising its growing role in financing the global economy.

**Q. How about Advanced Delivery & Solutions, where you've led the market in developing innovative ways of working?**

**WD.** It was another year of growth for Advanced Delivery & Solutions, building on 2019's notable advances, with a revenue increase of 15%. This suite of key offerings across technology, insight and new ways of working will be in even greater demand over the next few years, as clients seek more value for money.

Our long-term perspective has given us a lead on our competitors and we're transforming the way legal services are delivered through new solutions, technology and resourcing.

**“Our Advanced Delivery & Solutions teams are a key part of providing the innovative solutions these times require.”**

“Just over 75% of our global electricity consumption was supplied from renewable sources in 2019.”

Illustrating how this makes a difference, we advised Santander on the first end-to-end blockchain bond. Santander was supported by Nivaura, a Fintech company on our Fuse tech innovation platform that digitises and automates key capital markets processes. The USD20m pilot transaction is settled on the public Ethereum blockchain.

In another notable success, the Markets Innovation Group launched IBORMatrix, an end-to-end solution that uses big data to help banks transition contracts away from the LIBOR rate to new interest rates.

**Q. With regard to environmental sustainability, what were the highlights of 2020?**

**GP.** A silver lining of the pandemic was that working from home without business travel helped to

cut the firm’s CO<sup>2</sup> footprint. Beyond this, we continued to demonstrate our commitment to environmental sustainability by seeking to reduce our most material sources of CO<sup>2</sup> emissions and supporting UN Sustainable Development Goal 13 – Climate Action.

Just over 75% of our global electricity consumption was supplied from renewable sources in 2019. Our global carbon footprint decreased by 5%, despite an increase in employee numbers and occupied floor space of 2% globally.

From now on, we plan to offset all our global residual CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, including aviation emissions. Additionally, our plans to retain flexible working practices and minimise flights will significantly reduce CO<sup>2</sup>.



**Q. Was the firm's pro bono and community investment work affected by the pandemic?**

**WD.** We adapted our programmes to respond to the needs of our pro bono and community investment clients, whether by taking projects online or developing new areas of work to provide more support throughout this period. Our lawyers delivered 120 hours of pro bono and community investment work every day last year, amounting to nearly 44,000 hours worldwide.

We extended our partnership with Hope and Homes for Children to July 2021, beyond the planned two-year time frame of September 2020, to support the charity at this challenging time (see the article on pages 56-57).

There has always been strong firm-wide engagement, and alumni engagement, with our global charity partners. It was great to get people involved in an A&O virtual 'Around the World Challenge' fundraiser during lockdown.

**Q. What role do you see the Alumni Network playing in these testing times?**

**WD.** We're delighted that our Alumni Network continues to grow – it's up almost a fifth to around 16,000 members at the end of 2020. That can only be good for A&O and our alumni. The value of relationships and networks is even more important at a

time like this, as some of our alumni coach our staff and some of them are clients. Our Alumni Network is actively progressing ways to reach out to bring people together and we'll offer whatever assistance we can during these times.

Naturally, the pandemic means we've had to cancel face-to-face events this year, but I hope they'll be re-established in 2021. However, the continuing virtual events on NED opportunities, mentoring, coaching and thought leadership show the network's huge value, and it's been fantastic to have the support of many of our alumni including Anne Baldock, Guy Beringer, David Morley, Nomita Nair and Philip Wood.

**Q. How do you see 2021?**

**WD.** 2021 will, undoubtedly, bring uncertainty. However, A&O is a financially conservative firm with a strong cash position and we'll continue to be committed to our long-term strategic vision. Being a global elite law firm, with diversification across both geography and practice area, gives us confidence in our resilience.

**GP.** 2020's incredible performance is a consequence of our vision and a testament to the contributions of all of our people who are collaborating to support our clients. With the way we've already adapted, we have reasons to feel positive about 2021 and beyond! &

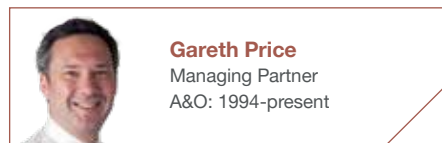
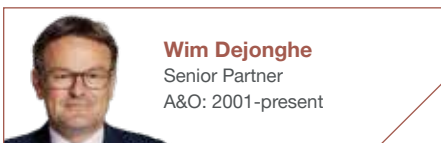
**Wiring objectivity into graduate recruitment**

The most effective way to enhance diversity results in recruiting graduates is to have a compelling brand that attracts a wide range of talent to apply, clarity around the qualities that our future talent needs to have, and an objective assessment approach that considers candidates for their potential, not just their past experience.

Over the past three years, A&O has introduced a new employer brand globally and a new 'scenario-based' interviewing and assessment approach for graduate recruitment, leveraging the latest assessment technology to support objective decision-making. As part of the new process, candidates may undergo an interactive video-based situational judgement test which assesses how they would react to realistic situations they could encounter in the workplace, allowing them to demonstrate qualities such as creative thinking and resilience.

Approximately 350 interviewers from 22 offices around the world have been trained in the new interviewing approach since 2018 and around 10,000 candidates have taken the test.

Interviewers have noted three key benefits: a more consistent process, more objective hiring decisions and more insight into a candidate's potential. As a consequence, the diversity of our graduate intake has risen in a number of locations.



# Charting a course for greater inclusion

A&O's five new Regional Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) partners reflect on their first year in the role and the impact events of 2020 have had on D&I at the firm.

Stepping into the new role of Regional Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) partner for A&O was always going to mean a busy first year for the five partners: Hendrik Jan Biemond in continental Europe, Fiona Cumming in Asia Pacific, Ian Field in the UK, Elizabeth Leckie in the U.S. and Kathleen Wong in the Middle East and Africa.

But with Covid-19 spreading across the world and the most widespread anti-racism protests for decades, 2020 has been a year of steep learning curves and accelerated change – a year that has brought significant challenges for D&I but also opportunities to speed up progress.

“It has certainly been a year of big events,” says Elizabeth Leckie, “both in the U.S. and globally. But I think that has galvanised us – internally as a firm but also as a profession.” The reality of systemic inequalities has come into focus more strongly, in particular with the greater impact Covid-19 is having on the most disadvantaged individuals, and the reality of racial inequality highlighted by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests.

“Thinking about diversity is not new for us in the U.S., or as a firm,” Elizabeth says, “but what’s different now is a stronger acknowledgement that we must address these issues more openly, be comfortable speaking about them and be prepared to be accountable for them – nobody can ignore this.”

Kathleen Wong has seen a similar consensus develop across her region. “I’d say the biggest progress we’ve made is increased awareness and acceptance that, no matter where you’re from or where you work, D&I is crucial to the success of our business.





“It has certainly been a year of big events. But I think that has galvanised us – internally as a firm but also as a profession.”

We’ve put a spotlight on these issues and are talking more about them: what’s going well, what isn’t working, how we can improve.”

### **The need to tackle racial inequalities**

While there are different priorities for different offices, achieving racial equality is top of the agenda in South Africa, Kathleen says. “The BLM demonstrations resonated deeply here. They prompted people of all backgrounds to set up a #BLM Discussion Group in our Johannesburg office to find ways of driving positive change in a South African context.”

As Kathleen points out, the issues are extremely relevant and certainly not new in South Africa. “Addressing racial inequalities is enshrined in law and touches everything we do, from increasing the proportion of black colleagues in senior roles to creating opportunities for local businesses in our supply chain.

“Our people have their own unique experiences and perspectives of overcoming racial injustice – they want to share them so that we can help to shape change both locally and within our network.”

Meanwhile, in Europe, Hendrik Jan Biemond says discussions around D&I had until recently for some still felt “quite abstract” in certain areas. “Now there is more urgency to them, particularly on race and ethnicity after the death of George Floyd.

“Anti-racism protests have taken place in all European capitals. I was in the Dam Square demonstration and really felt it was a turning point. The stories that have come out about racism in our society have made people more aware of the inequalities we must address, not least in looking at ethnicity alongside socio-economic disadvantage. That is the beginning of a process of improvement and we must keep the discussions alive.”

### **Invisible to the business world**

In Asia Pacific, there is a similar issue to understand, says Fiona Cumming. “In terms of ethnicity, in Hong Kong, for example, the population is 93% ethnically Chinese, so the percentage of ethnic minorities is relatively small.

“But those minority groups – Nepalese, Indonesian, Filipino – are concentrated in the lowest socio-economic groups and practically invisible to the business world. The same is true in Australia with the indigenous communities.

“There’s a lot to do simply to create better access to education in many parts of this region, so we’ve been working with partner NGOs to address that. We need to keep refreshing our learning about what the barriers are and what we can do to help bring them down.”

More broadly across Asia Pacific, offices are not starting from the same position across the different strands of D&I, Fiona says. “What I’ve taken from speaking to our people, though, is how engaged they are with this subject and how much more confident they’ve become in using their voices. From that, I’ve learned a huge amount about the different challenges and perspectives each country has, which means we can put together concrete action plans with full partner endorsement.”

For Ian Field in the UK, 2020 has brought an opportunity to speed up progress. “Race and ethnicity was always going to be a big area of focus this year, as we’d already completed a broad review of retention and progression in London to understand where more action was needed.

“At trainee level, we’re close to where we want to be with the proportion of ethnic minority lawyers – those who identify as ethnically not white – at around 31%, which reflects the percentage in UK higher education,” Ian says. “But black

## Can a global pandemic accelerate change?

One thing the partners have all witnessed in their regions is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the nature of working relationships.

“Lockdown has led us to question how we all interact in our work environment,” Elizabeth says. “Working from home, for example, has really shone a light on the difficulties working parents face.

“Generally we have a better sense of what’s going on in people’s lives than when we were all just commuting into the office. That, plus the international reaction to the death of George Floyd, has led to much soul-searching and self-education, which is all for the good.”

Hendrik Jan believes that reassessing how teams interact without the ease of communication in an office environment has made people think more about engaging with team members at all levels. “If we don’t, then remote working can break down very quickly for some people. We’ve had to think carefully, for example, about the experiences of our disabled colleagues to ensure we’re providing any specific help they need to work effectively from home.”

Being in lockdown has led to a lot of introspection, he says. “People are questioning, why am I here as a lawyer? What kind of firm is A&O exactly? I think that’s a strong platform for D&I discussions – they go hand in hand. I know there were concerns that attention would turn away from diversity as other business considerations took precedence, but actually I think it’s the other way around.”

South Africa, Kathleen explains, has experienced extreme challenges during lockdown, with many communities facing shortages in electricity and food. “We’ve connected far beyond work during this crisis,” she says, “exchanging tips on things like where to find food. We’ve seen into each other’s homes on video calls and been able to give support to team members cut off from family and friends. These experiences bind us, not just as co-workers but also as human beings.”

One area of concern more broadly across the legal profession, however, is that the trend seen during the global financial crisis repeats itself. As Ian says: “We know that women and ethnic minority lawyers disproportionately left the profession in that period, particularly when restructurings happened.

“We’re heading into another period of economic turbulence in 2021, but I believe these issues have taken on too much importance to roll back. In fact, we’ll need people who can think differently now more than ever to navigate the next few years.”

graduates are under-represented within that, and the numbers overall decline the higher up you get within A&O.”

The firm introduced a strategy and set of targets to improve racial diversity in London focused on recruitment, retention and culture. “We had begun talking this through with partners at the start of the year,” Ian says, “but the events that followed gave us a huge acceleration in getting buy-in for the strategy.”



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## Targets everybody can work towards

Introducing targets in any area of D&I is, Ian acknowledges, controversial. But, having introduced a 30% target for the proportion of women candidates in the partner promotion process nearly three years ago, the firm has made significant progress. In 2020, 45% of newly promoted partners globally were women.

“I think our progress with gender is attributed in large part to having something measurable to work towards that everybody can see,” says Ian. “Targets and accountability change

conversations around talent – they make us confront barriers to progression and consider people who, for many reasons, might have been overlooked in the past. That principle is central to improving our pipeline of ethnic minority lawyers as well.”

For Kathleen, gender equality, especially among the senior ranks, is a key priority in the Middle East. “There is a real call to action, both internally and from clients demanding change across the region. As a result, the work we’re doing has evolved from how to support women as mothers to how we increase women’s profile and visibility.”



**Hendrik Jan Biemond**  
Partner  
A&O: 2000-2001,  
2007-present



**Fiona Cumming**  
Partner  
A&O: 2003-present

The Dubai office recently ran a women’s development programme with several clients and A&O associates from Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Johannesburg. “It was a powerful platform to share experiences,” Kathleen says, “a common one being that you’re often the only woman in a meeting room, so how do you handle that?”

“We had a group of such smart, strong women on the programme that it hit home just how much of a disservice we’d be doing them – and A&O – if we don’t work hard to ensure they stay and progress here.”

Fiona points out that achieving 45% women in this year’s partner promotions does not mean the challenges for women have gone away. “We have to continue with what we can see is working: monitoring our pipeline, developing and sponsoring women effectively, encouraging flexible career paths and doing more to support working parents.

“But what it does show,” she says, “is that a sustained effort to think through the issues and impediments can change outcomes. Now we need to keep pushing forward so that this progress starts to impact the overall percentage of women partners we have globally.

“Targets and accountability change conversations around talent – they make us confront barriers to progression and consider people who might have been overlooked in the past.”



“In the current crisis, it’s important to continue to be active allies and show explicit support.”

“We’re currently at 20% and are aiming to get to 30% initially, as that’s been shown to be the threshold at which group-think and decision-making start to change. But 30% is not the final goal.”

### The importance of allies and networks

A key area of progress for Hendrik Jan in Europe has been the growth of A&Out, the firm’s LGBTQ+ network. “I’m seeing a much more visible LGBTQ+ community across our offices,” he says. “In the past year we’ve had A&Out launches and celebrations in Germany and Warsaw; Paris has signed its own Diversity Charter and put up an LGBTQ+ Allies Wall; and our associates in Prague have presented to Pride Business Forum members on equal rights for LGBTQ+ employees. Five years ago, this sort of support and activity just wasn’t there to the same extent.”

During Pride month in June, offices around the world replaced the usual marches and celebrations with virtual events. Partners and staff sent photos of themselves to create a collage of the Progress Pride Flag with black and brown stripes to show racial inclusion.

“For the LGBTQ+ community, visibility is key,” Hendrik Jan says, “so lockdown has been potentially very isolating for people who can’t be openly ‘out’ at home. In the current crisis, it’s important to continue to be active allies and show explicit support.”

Fiona says events in 2020 in many ways have educated people more about what it means to be a good ally. “I’ve heard colleagues from minority groups articulate so effectively what they need from an ally – for example to amplify their voices, not speak on behalf of them.

“The act of becoming an ally moves you away from thinking it’s always somebody else’s problem. Instead, you bring things back to yourself, your team, your profession, with a new level of self-scrutiny. You help to drive discussions which then build the momentum for change.”

Elizabeth says A&O’s networks and affinity groups in the U.S. – the Asian and Black and Latinx Affinity Groups, A&Out, the Women’s Committee and A&O Families – have been a great source of collegiality and inspiration.



“They create really vibrant conversations: internally across practice groups, teams and between our New York and Washington, D.C. offices; and externally in how we engage through them with alumni, clients, bar associations and students. Finding ways to talk about these topics and address change together is so important and something that I hope we see more of this year.”



**Ian Field**  
Partner  
A&O: 1989-present



**Elizabeth Leckie**  
Partner  
A&O: 2006-present



**Kathleen Wong**  
Partner  
A&O: 2002-present

## Culture is key

For Ian, the ultimate goal is inclusion. “What we are really trying to do is break down barriers, respect the differences we all have and allow people to be themselves,” he says, “not feel they have to assimilate into some historic vision of what an A&O lawyer is.

“The debates we’re having – on gender, race and ethnicity, disability, social

mobility, LGBTQ+ inclusion, trans rights – together produce a sort of virtuous circle. Each layer builds on another and that makes me hopeful that we will see faster progress.”

Elizabeth agrees. “We’ve come together as a group of five partners and we are genuinely challenging ourselves. It makes this feel like a firm-wide effort rather than something we each address locally.

“As well as the hard analysis around talent pipelines, development, distribution of opportunities and progression, what we’re talking about is much more wide-reaching. It’s about our future; what kind of business we want to be.”

Fiona believes it’s also crucial to engage with clients and peers. “We want to pool our knowledge and ideas so that we’re changing mindsets on diversity across our whole industry – it’s not a competition.

“I do feel that we engage more proactively now about our actions and intentions, both with our people and clients”, she says, “rather than waiting to be asked specifically about D&I in, say, a client relationship meeting. We’re more confident across the whole partnership on this.

“It’s a journey we’re still on but I can see that we’ve made progress even over the past few months. That’s really positive.”

Ian agrees. “If you ask me what I hope to achieve during my tenure as a D&I partner, it would be to succeed in achieving enough diversity across our business that we can move on to really focus on inclusion. We play a key role, as D&I partners, in driving engagement across the wider partner community.

“In that respect, what’s happened in 2020 has helped us to achieve traction at a pace far beyond anything we could have hoped for.” &

“It’s a journey we’re still on but I can see that we’ve made progress even over the past few months. That’s really positive.”

“We want to pool our knowledge and ideas so that we’re changing mindsets on diversity across our whole industry – it’s not a competition.”



# Breakthrough for visually impaired lawyers

Detailed document review is particularly challenging for visually impaired lawyers, but a start-up company working within A&O's tech innovation space, Fuse, has simplified the task by harnessing technology.

One of the most painstaking tasks faced by lawyers is the detailed review of lengthy legal documents. It is especially time-consuming for people with visual impairments – just ask Feargus MacDaeid, who is registered blind, and Nnamdi Emelifeonwu.

The two former lawyers, who met in 2013 at Freshfields, where Nnamdi was a trainee and Feargus an associate, having recently joined from A&O, found themselves over the years coming back to the issue of how to simplify this work.

They turned to technology for a solution, which they named Define. With seed funding, the support of Fuse and its first customers – including A&O – secured, their initiative is on the road to redefining the approach to document review.

Most lawyers search for information by using the 'Ctrl-F' function; scrolling up and down; flicking back and forth through a hard copy; or working on a split screen. It can be a difficult task, made more so by visual impairment.

"You notice the efficiency drag when you're visually impaired," Feargus says, "even with something as simple as accessing information within a document. That's the direction we tackled the problem from – if the information is in the document, why is accessing it so complicated?"

## Prototype proved the concept

Neither classed themselves as technology experts but they built a prototype. Though slow at first and full of bugs, it was enough to prove the concept had the potential for them to set up Define. Now with an international team of ten, the system has been successfully commercialised.

They describe Define as a 360° review and redrafting tool that plugs into Microsoft Word, allowing the reviewer to highlight defined terms and references and make amendments throughout the document without leaving the page they are working on. The terms and cross-references pop up in easy-to-read dialogue boxes, so the reviewer can make changes in real time without losing context.

In September 2020, Define closed a round of seed funding from high-profile investors, including Dan Cobley, the former MD of Google UK, and Dragons' Den panellist Nick Jenkins.

Ghazi AbuYounis, a visually impaired associate in A&O's London Banking practice, is using the new technology. He was excited about Feargus's involvement, given Feargus was instrumental in Ghazi's going into law, encouraging him at a time when others said the reading involved would be too difficult.

Ghazi had approached Feargus at an event organised by the charity Blind in Business. Feargus, then at A&O, was on the panel. "He told me to give it my best shot," Ghazi says. "Something I might perceive as a weakness could be seen by others as a strength. It encouraged me to look at things from a different perspective and to apply to A&O."

## Attitudes and old habits

As Ghazi says: "For anyone with a disability, having the right technology can make all the difference. We just need to be creative in how we use it."

Feargus agrees, but points out that while the technology is there, attitudes sometimes are not. "Old work practices often persist – some people still prefer to mark up documents by hand, even though a visually impaired lawyer can find it impossible to work in manuscript. That can mean people avoid working with you because they don't want to adapt the way they work."

**"For anyone with a disability, having the right technology can make all the difference. We just need to be creative in how we use it."**

“In the end, it’s about striking a balance between people shifting how they work slightly, and technology enabling more efficient working.”

Ghazi has experienced similar issues, so his approach is to be clear from the start. “I try to have open and honest conversations about my impairment. People are very supportive but sometimes they do forget.”

### Psychological pressures

Feargus, who describes himself as “someone of ability who happens to have a disability”, acknowledges that not everyone feels comfortable being open – in fact many of the challenges people with disabilities face are hidden.

“It’s almost like you’re doubly impaired,” he says. “You have the physical disability, and then you have the psychological pressures – the performance and status anxiety. You constantly ask yourself, ‘What if I don’t see something? What happens if I’m taking longer to complete a task than anyone else?’

“People don’t see what goes on in your head. I find the mental pressure of coping with disability a lot more difficult than the disability itself.”

Ghazi feels that pressure too, in a job where attention to detail is vital. “I do end up double and triple-checking

everything because I’m being assessed like everyone else.”

He has always enjoyed strong support within A&O, he says, and feels that processes should be clear and streamlined for all people with disabilities in the workplace. “Businesses must ensure systems are in place so that people know how to access what they need. Everyone should be supported to perform at their best.”

### Game-changer

Nnamdi believes that Define’s solution could turn out to be a real game-changer for all lawyers, not just for those with visual impairments or dyslexia. “It wasn’t until we created the prototype that I realised how much difference the technology would make to the legal industry as a whole,” he says.

Additionally, with many more people working from home, both during the Covid-19 crisis and beyond, the benefits of Define could be even greater in removing the need for printed documents and extra monitors.

As Ghazi says: “Define makes remote working easier by allowing me to review documents on screen without the need to print them in a large font size. A&O installed it remotely during lockdown and it’s given me the support I need to work from home.”

Feargus agrees: “It has hit home just how much this technology will help any lawyer,” he says. “So really, what was the answer to one person’s problem turned out to be everyone’s solution.” &

### Help where it is needed

Disability is an area in which A&O works closely with our people who have additional needs to understand their personal situation and to provide the specific support they require.

Much of this work is done in the background, in order not to draw attention to the support or adjustments people need, so that they can feel confident in pursuing their careers like everybody else.

We know that, as with other areas of diversity, it is the responsibility of us all to be conscious of the extra challenges some colleagues face so that we are fully supportive and enable people to be as open as they choose about their disabilities.

This is even more important in the context of the potential health risks from Covid-19 and the impact of increased social isolation during lockdowns. We have consulted with our disabled community to ensure everyone has necessary support while working from home and as we begin to return to our offices.

Across our network, we partner with disability experts to review our HR and recruitment processes and offer disability awareness training internally where needed. We also partner with organisations to promote ourselves to graduates and lawyers with disabilities, and we work with a number of charities focused on specific conditions, for example Blind in Business. We now include disability data in our UK Pay Gap Reporting.

We respect people’s wishes about how open they want to be, but also know that talking about issues improves our understanding and the support we can give as colleagues.



**Ghazi AbuYounis**  
Associate  
A&O: 2015-present



**Nnamdi Emelifeonwu**  
Co-Founder at Define



**Feargus MacDaeid**  
Co-Founder at Define  
A&O: 2010-2012

If you would like to feature on the Alumni Network website highlighting work you do to promote diversity in the law in initiatives with students or professionals who have disabilities, please contact [thealumniteam@allenoverly.com](mailto:thealumniteam@allenoverly.com).

Lai Lai Wong is no stranger to change. Born in China, educated in Macau, Portugal and Edinburgh, this London-based mother of two, former A&O senior associate and current Peerpoint consultant, has seized opportunities as they came along and revelled in the results.

That was how she first discovered law and A&O, and more recently how she found ways to harness her experience as a lawyer in the education system and the cultural arena.

Lai Lai had left A&O to join Peerpoint, A&O's legal consulting platform in 2017, when a move back to Asia looked imminent and stayed with Peerpoint when her family's relocation was put on hold. Her second assignment was coming to an end when Covid-19 brought down the shutters on the global economy.

In lockdown, dealing with the same challenges as many others, she saw sectors of society that were in desperate need as a result of the pandemic. "I realised I had to refocus my energy to help," she said. Fortunately, she was in a position to do so.

Through the A&O network, she had become a governor at Halley Primary School in 2018. It's a small school, located in Tower Hamlets, one of the poorest London boroughs.

"The challenges facing the school were overwhelming," she said, "especially following the outbreak of the pandemic and school closures." Getting children access to online learning was one; making sure free meal vouchers got to the families entitled to them was another.

### Law or art?

It might have been so different, had she decided on a different career when she was weighing her options. A year out of university, Lai Lai was torn between law and art school which, coming from a family of sculptors, seemed more logical. She had friends at A&O and liked what she heard about the firm, but her degree was in psychology and business, so she would need to do a conversion course.

Her father's advice helped her decide. "Dad gave me insight into art," she said. "He told me so many incredibly talented and hardworking people would not make it as an artist." Law, he felt, would offer someone with her skills more opportunities.

# The art of making a difference

When you have been immersed from an early age in different languages and cultures, diversity is the norm. Now alumna Lai Lai Wong is putting that experience to good use.

“It is critical now, more than ever,  
that we foster a greater understanding and  
appreciation of different cultures and races.”



“It’s great to have female role models and useful to see women in senior positions because it inspires you to get there. At the same time, it’s very important for you to know what you want your career to look like.”

And so it proved correct. She may have been “lucky to get a training contract”, as she put it, but it was her work ethic that helped her make the most of it.

“It was hard,” she recalled. “It was a high-achieving environment. You’re trying to learn as much as possible, jumping from deal to deal, but you’re working with the best lawyers in your field. I was happy to be there. It was great.”

The cultural diversity in her department in London, where she worked alongside Italians, South Africans, Austrians and Singaporeans, “always felt like home”.

“It was nice. You could see different cultures and genders represented; we were one of the few departments at the time with several female partners.

“It’s great to have female role models and useful to see women in senior positions because it inspires you to get there. At the same time, it’s very important for you to know what you want your career to look like.”

### A challenging environment

In time the demands of the job took their toll. No one should believe or pretend that working for an elite law firm and being part of a dynamic team, albeit intellectually fulfilling, is not challenging. As a full-time occupation, it may not be for everyone and back then there was possibly less awareness of the potential adverse consequences of working in this environment, particularly when combined with parenthood.

“People didn’t talk about it and didn’t deal with it,” she said. “A lot of lawyers join a firm, get onto the runway and find it hard to stop.”

She can now laugh at her naivety when, during her first pregnancy, she failed to plan “for what happens after the child comes”.

“Growing up, my mum worked. I didn’t think being a mother would hinder your work, so I just went back. I knew I had to slow down a bit but didn’t understand the demands of parenting.”

Fortunately, her partners were supportive. On her return from her first maternity leave, Lai Lai and a partner discussed her taking a secondment as a professional support lawyer (PSL) as this “know-how” role would be a great way to brush up on what she might have missed. She spent part of her time on a know-how migration project designed to create a central, easy-to-access, easy-to-update knowledge bank.

For Lai Lai, it was new, different – and a revelation. “I started thinking there are so many different things you can learn, roles you can do, leveraging off your experience.”

With that secondment complete, eventually she reached a point where she knew she had to decide what she wanted to get out of her efforts. Pregnant with her second son, she “had to reassess what I wanted to do. It was quite difficult.”

Pressure came from feeling she had to put in extra effort. “We know, as lawyers, part

of our value is our expertise. When you take time out, you’re not building expertise.”

### Work versus parenthood

Lai Lai understandably became frustrated with the daunting challenges of trying to pursue her career and raise a family. “Being female and a mother was challenging. I felt I had to put in 120% to prove I hadn’t lost it. Being able to work was feeling like a privilege and a burden. That was the quandary of work versus parenthood.

“Children also have their own unique way of making you feel guilty,” she said. Childcare was a trigger for her sons – now seven and four and a half years old – to ask why she did not pick them up as their friends’ mothers did.

It’s something she has talked about with teachers in her role as a governor. Lai Lai believes children should be able to see different ways a family can work. “I think the younger they see that, it will help change attitudes and benefit the next generation.”

Lai Lai feels that A&O is much better now at recognising and appreciating the demands of being a mother, wanting a fulfilling career and doing both successfully, although she does not feel this was always the case. In a top firm where clients demand constant high quality service, achieving this requires a tough juggling act where A&O and parents need to show flexibility and imagination. Lai Lai recognises A&O’s determination to address this issue, and Peerpoint is an excellent example of the new initiatives giving people more choice.

“Thankfully, perceptions of how women can raise a family and still have a career in the law have changed for the better. That’s something I really like about A&O.”





## Leaving law firm life

Through a secondment with a trade body, she became involved in advocacy. She found it enlightening: despite years of working on deals, she had never seen their impact up close. She decided she wanted to work on the strategic side of legislation development.

Around the same time, her husband, Ken, who is Malaysian, was feeling the pull to go back to Singapore. The partners with whom she discussed her options suggested she become a Peerpoint consultant, at least while planning the move.

“That’s when I left law firm life behind,” she said. She has no regrets now, although she does admit to pangs when a change in Ken’s job kept them in London. “It was probably the best outcome,” she said. “I’m now established as a consultant, I have time to be with the kids when I want and I’m in charge of my own direction.”

Her first involvement with schools was through the Smart Start e-mentoring initiative at A&O which matched volunteers with GCSE-level students who needed help with career planning, personal statements, interviewing and other life skills.

That led her to the Governors for Schools charity, through which she became one of ten governors at Halley

Primary School. It’s a small school in a poor area and “constrained” in terms of staff and resources. For the governors, it is a critical time as they seek novel ideas for generating income for the school in ways that are beneficial for the children and the community.

“I feel if we have the time and inclination to help out, we should: they need all the help we can give.” The satisfaction, she added, is “seeing kids being happy, learning, being supported – I love doing it.”

Lai Lai has recently returned to the world of art through Chinese Arts Now (CAN), a not-for-profit organisation funded by the Arts Council England that promotes Chinese culture through the arts. BCKR, an organisation co-founded by former senior partner Guy Beringer that helps lawyers find trustee and non-executive directorships to enhance a portfolio, helped her make the connection to become a trustee.

“How did I get into it? I just applied,” she said. “I’ve always been interested in art because my grandfather was a sculptor – a museum in Hangzhou was dedicated to his work – and my dad picked up his trade.” As a child, she lived in “a house that was like a museum – there were places where we couldn’t play.

“The understanding of Asian and Chinese culture in the West is weak,” she said. Even her own children

harbour cultural stereotypes rooted in history. “Times have changed,” she said. “There is so much more we can showcase.”

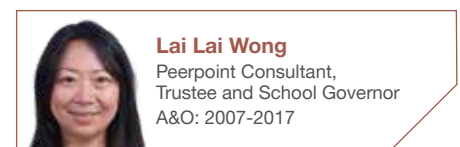
She hopes to provide opportunities for learning and understanding some of the new forms of Chinese art, including dance, music and paper arts – “everything”. She doesn’t see language as a barrier when so many of the themes are universal and inspire “commonality in diversity”. Children quickly get it, despite it being in a different language. “These are central themes we can all relate to. That’s important.

“With my experience of growing up in the West, I felt maybe we needed to provide a platform for ethnic minorities to showcase what they know and want to show.”

Alongside her consultant, trustee and governor work, Lai Lai is thinking of diversifying into more personal projects. One close to her heart is a business that would showcase different forms of Chinese art, but mainly sculptures.

Lockdown with its proliferation of virtual travel and exhibitions has made virtuality more relevant: collectors are always interested in the story of the artworks and the artists from which they buy: why not turn the information into a virtual visit? “I want to put that into a business so more people can appreciate who made the pieces they’re buying.”

As Lai Lai says: “It is critical now, more than ever, that we foster a greater understanding and appreciation of different cultures and races.” &



**Lai Lai Wong**

Peerpoint Consultant,  
Trustee and School Governor  
A&O: 2007-2017

Reconnect with Lai Lai Wong at [allenoverly.com/alumni](https://allenoverly.com/alumni).



**Rachel Lee**  
A&O associate



**Luvo Mnduzulwana**  
A&O counsel



**Neil Patel**  
A&O alumnus



**Douglass Sims**  
A&O alumnus



**Stephanie Vaughan**  
A&O alumna

# The road to racial equality

Demonstrations around the world in 2020 showed racism remains a troubling reality. Our panel of five alumni and A&O staff offers opinions, observations and roadmaps for the future, based on their own experiences.

The anti-racism demonstrations seen across the world in 2020 have sparked a more frank and honest discussion about racial equality in many countries. Through marches, protests and conversations online, more stories are being shared that shine a light on the inequalities still faced by people of colour every day.

So how can the momentum created by such events be translated into real progress on racial diversity across the legal profession and wider business world?

We brought together five people from A&O past and present in a virtual roundtable to share their stories and ideas for what individuals and organisations can do to drive change. Their conversation starts with introductions and a little personal history.

Rachel Lee says she has spent almost equal amounts of time in Asia and America. “When someone asks ‘Where are you from?’ I consider it an opportunity to share my experiences,” she says. “I emigrated from South

Korea to California, then moved to Washington, D.C. for my education and now work in New York.

“My experience has been one of constant learning and adaptation and, within that, I’ve found myself growing into a community builder wherever I go, in an effort to create a supportive environment for those with similar backgrounds – particularly for the Asian-American community, a historically under-represented group.”

# “You’re often taking a step back from yourself to consider how you’re going to be perceived.”

As he listens to Rachel, the first reaction of Douglass Sims is how much better younger generations are at articulating their experiences. “For me, growing up in New York in the 1980s and 1990s, with parents from the Southern U.S., it was harder to speak about these things. The structures you grow up within impact your identity a lot.

“Going to predominantly white institutions for education and work meant I always entered into situations wondering what role race would play in the interaction. Should I be worried about speaking in a certain way? Will somebody see me as inferior? You’re often taking a step back from yourself to consider how you’re going to be perceived.”

Stephanie Vaughan echoes Douglass’s awareness of perceptions. She was born in Jamaica and lived in both Norway and Bristol, UK, before moving to London. “When I first started work,” she says, “it became obvious very quickly that not many lawyers looked like me. It didn’t dramatically affect how I presented myself, but I was always conscious that the onus was on me to fit in and appear comfortable in my environment – more so than on the people around me.”

Neil Patel’s parents are of Indian heritage and he grew up in an area of London with a large Indian community. He says: “My first experience of feeling different because of my skin colour or race was at the boys’ senior school I went to, where I was one of the few Indian people in my year. I also

occasionally feel it when I travel to other parts of the UK – I suddenly become a lot more conscious of my colour – but if I’m completely honest, I don’t think it has played a role in my career, at least not negatively, nor has it impeded other aspects of my life.

“That won’t necessarily be true for everyone from my racial background,” he adds, “but that’s why these conversations are so important. We have to start breaking down the subject of race and ethnicity and try to understand people’s specific experiences.”

Luvo Mnduzulwana’s experiences in South Africa are certainly different. He grew up in a small rural town in the Eastern Cape, in one of the poorest provinces mainly constituted by two of the sub-states designated for black people. “I moved to a predominantly white school when I was 14 and the first barrier I encountered was language,” he says. “I was expecting to be taught in English (not even my first language) but when I arrived everything was in Afrikaans (mostly spoken by white people). When I raised this, I was told I could go to another school if I wished – referring to a school in the townships for black people.

“But bigger challenges come in the work environment. You’ve been through university, been accepted at one of the top firms in South Africa, you think you’re there on merit – but then you’re quickly reminded that you’re just making up the government quotas for black people.”

The barriers, as Luvo points out, can sometimes feel overwhelming.

## **What are the barriers and how can they be overcome?**

“In the firm I trained with,” Luvo says, “black trainees struggled to get the same exposure as our white counterparts. Our time was often filled with elementary work and, on the rare occasions we were taken to client meetings, we would be the only black person there and feel like an outsider.

“At lunchtimes, I would stand by myself not knowing who to speak to – the senior people all just went about their business not realising I was there. You feel you’re lagging behind from the start.”

As Rachel explains, the stereotypes about Asians – quiet, submissive and hardworking – are not necessarily bad qualities, “but the problems arise when people expect nothing more than those qualities, as you may not be considered for a client meeting or pitch, or be expected to speak.”

**“We have to start breaking down the subject of race and ethnicity and try to understand people’s specific experiences.”**

“We’re speaking more about our culture and identities, which is positive, but it sometimes results in people avoiding conversations because they’re worried about saying the wrong thing. That’s becoming a new barrier...”

“Businesses might say that social inequalities are something they cannot control... That doesn’t mean that you should act like they don’t exist. It’s naive.”

She adds: “I’ve also encountered assumptions that, because I speak English fluently, I must have been born in America and don’t have the experiences of being an immigrant. When confronted with these stereotypes, I take it upon myself to give the person the benefit of the doubt and use it as an educational opportunity, as well as to build personal connections. But it can be exhausting.”

Compounding that, Rachel believes some barriers are evolving over time: “We’re speaking more about our culture and identities, which is positive, but it sometimes results in people avoiding conversations because they’re worried about saying the wrong thing. That’s becoming a new barrier, but it can be overcome by asking questions based on respectful curiosity.”

Neil believes the emphasis should be on other people starting to challenge their own stereotypes. He says: “At school, I definitely downplayed my culture because it didn’t feel relevant to my friends – they didn’t seem interested. My parents would ask me, ‘Why are you so different in front of your friends than with us?’ But when I invited my friends to my wedding, it was the reverse – they couldn’t get enough of Indian culture!”

“So I think sometimes it’s not that attitudes are fundamentally racist, it’s more that ignorance can create barriers.”

Neil, though, has witnessed bigger challenges for some: “A friend of mine – a black woman – grew up in the same area as me, went to the same university, worked for a Magic Circle law firm and is now at BlackRock. But when we compare our experiences, hers are so different. Her teachers didn’t always support her, and she is exhausted by the number of times (as compared to her non-black counterparts) that she has had to clarify or justify why she has a seat at the table. For me, it hasn’t

been like that. In many cases, I think it’s down to race and possibly gender that our experiences are so different – because very little else distinguishes us. Not many would have been as resilient as she has been.”

Douglass says one of the principal barriers most black Americans face is a financial one: “Our education system in the U.S. means most of us have to borrow a lot of money. I owed a huge amount when I came out of law school. All my money went on paying down debt, not building wealth. The deposit on the apartment that others got from their parents, I didn’t have that.”

“Businesses might say that social inequalities are something they cannot control,” Douglass says, “but a lot of the traditional structures in law firms, for example, simply reinforce them. Just because these inequalities can’t be solved by businesses doesn’t mean that you should act like they don’t exist. It’s naive.”

Luvo offers a “classic example” of that: “When I started work,” he says, “most of my white counterparts were staying in apartments near the office and had cars, while the black trainees didn’t even have driver’s licences. I was living 20 miles from the office and relying on the public transport system, which in South Africa is very bad! That already put black trainees at a disadvantage.”

Stephanie feels that growing up in a privileged family in Jamaica has made it easier to brush off racial prejudice. “But it’s much harder for people to do that when there is an intersection of race and class.”

“I read an interesting exchange on LinkedIn recently,” she says. “One person was arguing that structural inequalities exist in society – therefore, the lack of senior black lawyers is simply a result of the lack of good black candidates.”

“But a young woman responded by saying that she was from a disadvantaged background and had become a successful lawyer because of one of A&O’s access programmes. She made the point that the legal profession should not only recognise the inequalities in society but what you can do to help people overcome them. Otherwise, we’re just perpetuating those inequalities.

“In terms of removing barriers,” says Stephanie, “we need concrete actions to change the picture at the top, because people care about seeing people who look like them.”

Neil agrees: “When I hear people ask why there aren’t enough black lawyers rising through the ranks, it’s partly because businesses group everyone together under this broad ‘BAME’ (black, Asian and minority ethnic) label – so they hit recruitment targets because the label includes anyone who is not white. But, within that, you might only have one black person out of 100, which is not representative. We need to look much more carefully at that.”

**“We need concrete actions to change the picture at the top, because people care about seeing people who look like them.”**

### **What have the events of the past year done to change conversations about race?**

Douglass notes the international reaction to the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor: “They seem like very American events,” he says, “but they’ve produced massive reactions all over the world. That makes me think people are interpreting them in the context of their own experiences.

“These issues go back centuries, of course. What changed the civil rights movement in the U.S. was the film footage of people getting dogs set on them or the use of water cannons during peaceful protests. That meant the public could no longer pretend these things weren’t happening.

“I think that’s why we’ve seen such a reaction to George Floyd – people around the world actually witnessed the brutality of it.”

These events may bring specific reforms, for example around law enforcement, Douglass believes, “but we also need to accelerate reform in the business world. We have to understand the underlying inequalities that allow these deaths to happen. Without that, we’re not going to achieve meaningful change.”





“We need strong KPIs to measure progress and, where not enough is being made, to identify the barriers and remove them.”

For Rachel, the events in the U.S. have revealed uncomfortable but unsurprising truths. “These injustices have been going on for a long time,” she says, “and for those affected it’s disheartening and exhausting.

“But they’re also generating more dialogue across racial groups and cultures – for instance, we’ve had a lot of discussions in the U.S. Diversity Committee and the Asian Affinity Network about how we can support our black colleagues and our local communities in a meaningful way.”

The danger, though, is that the momentum dies down, particularly with the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. Rachel adds: “Great ideas and initiatives need time to materialise, so it’s hugely important that we don’t let this opportunity for progress slip away. It’s our job as lawyers and as a global firm to be at the forefront of that.”

### **What actions should organisations focus on to drive real change?**

Our five panellists agree that the key to seeing real progress with racial diversity in business is targeted action and accountability.

Racial inequality, as Luvo says, won’t fix itself without interventions. “We’ve had 26 years of democracy in South Africa without much progress,” he says. “Black lawyers are not making it to the top in anywhere near representative numbers.

“It’s not enough to say that we’ll start focusing on the current juniors and nurture them all the way up. We need a two-pronged approach, to recruit at the top while also implementing measures to support the progress of those already in the system.

## “Objectives won’t be realised unless targets are set alongside them and people accept accountability.”

“Then we need strong KPIs to measure progress and, where not enough is being made, to identify the barriers and remove them.

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t work to rely on consensus and goodwill. Change will only happen if people are held accountable for their commitments,” he says, adding: “This all has to be an intrinsic element of a business plan.”

Luvo points to the South African Rugby World Cup winning team in 2019: “We had the first black captain and, because of the targets set in 2011 coming to fruition, seven of the 15 players that started the final were black, compared to the three who started the last Springboks game of the previous World Cup. And we won. It dispelled the claims that coaches used to make about not seeing colour, only talent. That myth of ‘meritocracy’ is usually just a way to close ranks – it entrenches privilege.”

Stephanie and Douglass agree, and also stress how crucial the effective use of data is.

Douglass says: “For any organisation to make significant progress, KPIs and data are really important: the hiring data, the client data, the management data. That’s the only way you can understand what is actually happening within a business.

“For example, when someone leaves an organisation, do you know why? That person’s team will know, but if the organisation isn’t asking whether race was a factor and capturing that data then they have a blind spot and can’t react to the information.

“We need to be moving initiatives towards the centre of a business and bringing in transparency and accountability, in the way we would for any other strategically important metric,” says Douglass. “That’s the only way change will happen.”

Stephanie says more emphasis is needed on data and insight, particularly around retention and progression, to drive better initiatives, processes and decision-making. “Then you can evaluate what’s working and what isn’t working,” she says. “But objectives won’t be realised unless targets are set alongside them and people accept accountability – at partner level, department level and firm-wide level. And for associates too, quite frankly.”

Setting targets to boost the representation of minority groups is a hotly debated subject. But, says Neil, to take Luvo’s rugby example, targets can work. He says: “The reason we haven’t seen enough movement on the progression of black and ethnic minority people in business is because action has always been a bit voluntary. It’s easy to claim you’re not racist as an organisation or an individual, but are you anti-racist? There’s a difference.”

### **With seniority comes influence, so what can you do to help others?**

Neil believes a proactive effort is needed from senior figures: “Leaders demonstrate their impact in every other area of business, so if organisations are serious about making progress, senior individuals should be demonstrating what they’re doing to promote diversity and inclusion too.

“On top of the bigger-picture measures, those of us now in a position of seniority can do things to help. I met a young colleague recently who had come to Britain as a refugee, done very well at school and university, but needed some guidance about his career. We only talked for an hour, but he still messages me on LinkedIn to give me updates and thank me for the advice. It made me

“It’s easy to claim you’re not racist as an organisation or an individual, but are you anti-racist? There’s a difference.”

“Leaders need to understand that what they say (or don’t say) day to day sets a tone. It’s a ripple for culture.”

realise the impact mentoring can have, so that’s something I want to do more of – and I will be held accountable for that!”

Rachel believes that, for those at the more junior level, having an advocate helping to shape your career plays a big part in retention. “Recognition from your team is also key,” she says. “When people put in the hard work, it’s important to see it reciprocated with a sense of investment from the team and clear opportunities for growth. That encourages people to stay and broaden the talent pool.”

### How important is the culture of a workplace?

Targets and accountability are important, says Rachel, but culture underpins everything.

“Leaders need to understand that what they say (or don’t say) day to day sets a tone,” she says. “It’s a ripple for culture.”

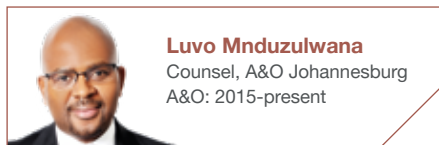
Answering those who question why we need to talk about sensitive issues like racism at work, she says: “It’s because our colleagues and their loved ones are affected by them in a very real way. So if leaders don’t talk about them, it signals that they don’t feel the issues matter. But if they do, it can go a long way.

“When we’re at work, sitting behind an email address and company title, there’s a ‘privilege shield,’” Rachel says. “But once we step out the door, minority attorneys still face discrimination. So we need a work culture in which people can be comfortable talking about real societal issues. It helps build true connections.”

Stephanie says culture “certainly” plays a big role in retention. “When people from minority backgrounds talk about career progression, I sometimes get the sense that when they reach a certain level, they feel grateful,” she says. “But the emphasis should be on the fact you’ve worked hard and you deserve to be there. For that, you need a culture – from leaders right the way through – that wants you to succeed.

“Networks and affinity groups are helping to build a stronger sense of community and to profile senior role models, which then encourage more talent to come through. Representation is crucial for culture.

“On a personal level,” Stephanie adds, “I love the culture at A&O – I married someone from my team and am still







good friends with most of the people in it, so it's been a big part of my life!"

Luvo feels the same about A&O: "I joined five years ago and I'm the happiest I've been – the opportunities are phenomenal," he says. "But I'm also mindful that for juniors coming from a similar background to mine, even having a job in Johannesburg is overwhelming, never mind starting to build a global perspective with A&O! So we must ensure that we don't shut people out.


"Part of that is about having strong values as an organisation – and A&O has those – but culture must also evolve to accommodate all the different people coming in. Everyone must feel like equally valued members of our group."

**Do you have any advice for your younger selves?**

"Stay in touch with your own culture and identity," Rachel says. "The world will constantly change and we will always be adapting, with or without knowing, so we need that anchor for ourselves and to guide others along the way. Also, everyone has something in common, so we all need to keep an open mind and a compassionate lens."

For Luvo: "There's a lesson to be learned from every experience, so make sure you learn it! To my black colleagues, I'd say that it's not always easy to transform the system, but neither is it impossible. To our allies, I say thank you for your desire to achieve equality for all." &

**"It's not always easy to transform the system, but neither is it impossible."**



**Douglass Sims**  
Senior Advisor, Natural Resources  
Defense Council  
A&O: 2001-2010



**Stephanie Vaughan**  
Global Legal Practice Director,  
iManage RAVN  
A&O: 2009-2019

Find out more information on the current D&I networks open to alumni at [allenoverly.com/alumni](http://allenoverly.com/alumni).

# A world of difference

Alumnus Tyler Kinder thought he might like a career in law but decided to take a good look first at his alternatives. He's glad he stuck with his original instinct.

Diversity comes in many dimensions. It's the ones you don't notice – that are so blindly obvious they no longer register – that can make the most impact.

When Tyler Kinder, a former International Capital Markets (ICM) associate in the New York office, was considering his options for a training contract, he was drawn to A&O by its international reputation. The work, the people, the culture – all were “strong selling points for me”, he said.

He also liked the idea of working in a good-sized office of a much larger

global institution – “an office that was small enough that everyone knew each other” but big enough to play its part on the larger stage.

He wasn't disappointed. As part of the Derivatives and Structured Finance team in the ICM department, he quickly found himself working with people “from all over the network; all over the world”. Communicating across time zones and geographies with colleagues of widely varying backgrounds, influences and orientations was a fact of life.

That geographic and cultural diversity was invigorating. In his view, “creating

opportunities for different kinds of people to work together” is key to sustaining diversity in the work environment, and it paid “huge dividends to A&O”.

## **Moving across the continent**

Tyler is blessed with a good sense of curiosity and adventure. Originally from Washington State on the U.S. West Coast, he moved across the continent to New York for college and, except for three years in the UK, a six-month stint in Beijing, and a year in Washington, D.C., hasn't left.

A man with a beard and short dark hair is smiling broadly. He is wearing a light blue button-down shirt under a grey zip-up sweater. He is standing outdoors at dusk or dawn, with a blurred cityscape in the background. The lighting is warm and golden. The background shows buildings and lights, some of which are out of focus, creating a bokeh effect. The overall mood is positive and professional.

“It was incredibly valuable, as a young lawyer, to have as role models members of the LGBTQ+ community working as partners in a prestigious law firm.”

“I could look out the office window at the World Trade Center and see steel being put in place as a result of a contract I’d worked on.”

A career in law was always in the back of his mind, but he took a circuitous route to get there.

“I always thought I might like being a lawyer,” he said. The qualities that make a good lawyer seemed to match what he considered his strengths. He never saw himself as a litigator. “That’s not me,” he said. Instead, he was drawn to the transactional side of law, focusing on language and detail, helping clients navigate through documents and processes.

But he was wary of going straight into it because law school is “expensive and a big-time commitment”. So he decided “to do a few things first”, starting with a post-graduate year working for the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, D.C.

He then headed to England, to study for an MPhil at Oxford, thinking that if there was another direction, he wanted to explore it. His three years in the UK were life-changing in more ways than one: as well as obtaining a degree in Modern Chinese Studies, he gained a partner – his husband, Peter, who is a book editor.

“It’s nice to be with someone who’s not a lawyer,” Tyler said. “It provides a window on another world and I benefit from that.”

Ultimately, he felt his career instinct had been right and enrolled in the New York University School of Law, graduating with a JD in 2013 and qualifying in 2014.

### Work from every practice group

Tyler had his first glimpse of A&O when he worked as a summer associate in the New York office in 2012. He liked what he saw: “The great thing about the summer programme is that summer associates are invited to take work from every practice group.

“I was given an opportunity as a summer associate to take pieces of client-facing work and live deals in ICM. In retrospect, it wasn’t particularly glamorous work but it made an impression on me to be handed real responsibility at such an early stage in my career. I really liked that.”

Joining A&O full-time, he did a rotation in project finance before settling on ICM. The Derivatives and Structured Finance team was “where I fit best”, he said.

As a gay man, Tyler has been pleasantly surprised at how welcoming the worlds of law and finance are. He considers himself lucky to have always worked for “open and supportive institutions” such as A&O. He said: “One of the great things about my time at A&O was having several LGBTQ+ partners as mentors and supervisors. It was incredibly valuable, as a young lawyer, to have as role models members of the LGBTQ+ community working as partners in a prestigious law firm.

“That type of visibility and representation at the partner level is very important, not just to LGBTQ+ people but for other young lawyers from marginalised backgrounds.” He’s also aware that as a white male, he’s “been privileged... it’s important to keep in mind that others from marginalised communities will see fewer leaders who look like them as we think about the work still to be done.”

It’s “amazing and heartening”, Tyler said, how much has changed in recent years in the perception of the key qualities of a good leader. “Even since I graduated, the importance – or lack of importance – of sexual orientation in terms of who is seen as qualified for a leadership role has changed dramatically.

“Obviously it’s complicated, because much will depend on the organisation and various other factors, such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, gender expression – you name it. All these things interact in different ways in different places.”

Hiring, promoting and retaining LGBTQ+ talent is “incredibly important”. It also “meant a lot” to Tyler and other gay colleagues that the Pride drinks reception hosted by A&O’s ICM department every summer attracted a strong cross-section of people from across the office.

### Public service and government

He left A&O as an associate after almost four years when an opportunity arose at the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, a bi-state governmental organisation that oversees much of the regional transportation infrastructure. Joining as an attorney in the Transactions Group

“Much of what I work on never ‘leaves the house’ because we’re working hand in glove with the business in thinking about different ideas that they have, things that they think might have client potential.”



ticked a personal box for Tyler: public service and government had been on his radar “from Day 1 of law school”.

The Port Authority is hugely important for the New York area, with responsibility for many matters that are critical to the regional economy. Tyler’s role was “incredibly broad”: from working on small transactions such as leases and permits to massive projects designed to redevelop the infrastructure of New York City.

The intergovernmental and legislative work was new to him, but in retrospect what he appreciated most in that job was the “clear connection” of his work to the physical world. “I could look out the office window at the World Trade Center and see steel being put in place as a result of a contract I’d worked on,” he said. “That was a very rewarding aspect of the job.”

In 2019, he moved to Citi to take up an opportunity to go “back to the realm of work I did at A&O”; much of what he does now is creative thinking with business colleagues grappling with the complexities of derivatives, structured products and loans, helping them to understand how new regulations, for example, might affect transactions they’re interested in.

“A lot of transactional areas are undergoing rapid transformation due to new technology,” he said. “I also work on the legal aspects of a number of interesting initiatives related to the growing importance of technology in trading.”

Working in-house has been a new experience. “Much of what I work on never ‘leaves the house’ because we’re working hand in glove with the business in thinking about different ideas that they have, things that they think might have client potential.”

Thinking through different regulatory questions “was something I enjoyed at A&O,” Tyler said. His time there provided an important foundation. “At Citi, it’s busy, varied and interesting work, with great people – including some old colleagues at A&O.”

### ‘Allies’ in the broader community

Tyler remains a member of A&Out, A&O’s LGBTQ+ network. One of its strengths, he said, has always been its reach to ‘allies’ in the broader community. “I think such groups are important for increasing a sense of belonging and inclusivity for employees, even those who aren’t actively engaged,” he said. It is also an important sign of an organisation’s commitment to inclusivity, representation and visibility.

“A&Out has organised some great events in New York. In 2019, my husband and I attended an event at the Museum of the City of New York, a photographic exhibition celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising. It was wonderful to learn more about an important period in LGBTQ+ history while catching up with old colleagues.”

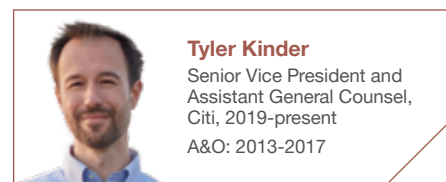
When the Covid-19 lockdown came to New York City in mid-March, Tyler and Peter moved to the Connecticut town of

Salisbury. In mid-August, after five months of isolation, Tyler was looking forward to getting back to New York City. Not that they didn’t enjoy the change in scenery and a summer in the country but, in his view, there’s “real value in being in the same place with colleagues” and the face-to-face conversations that enables.

Generally, he said, people had been “amazed at how well the transformation has gone”. Scattering a team used to working as a close unit “has presented challenges,” but he had found everyone prepared to make the extra effort to stay connected, to “find ways of replicating the important idea-sharing and check-ins that happen naturally when we’re on the same floor”.

From his perspective, the lockdown highlighted the benefits of flexibility in the workplace, the “huge amount” of time it created simply by eliminating the daily commute to the office, which in Tyler’s case is about 45 minutes each way from his home in the borough of Queens. “You can reprogramme that time for your own use or for work, depending on the day,” he said. “Having that additional flexibility is a plus.”

Indeed, a better understanding of flexible working may be an important legacy of the 2020 pandemic lockdown, he said. Where remote working has worked for organisations and their employees, the upshot may be “geographical diversity” – a more widely dispersed workforce whose choice of where to live is less constrained by a physical workplace location. &



Reconnect with Tyler Kinder at [allenoverly.com/alumni](https://allenoverly.com/alumni).

# A&O Consulting in tune with the times

With A&O Consulting in its second year, three of its executive directors explain the pressures stoking demand for the consultancy's advice and how, post-pandemic, that is likely to grow.

The launch of A&O Consulting (AOC) was timely. When it opened for business in April 2019, market demand was clearly there. Then, as now, businesses faced ever-greater scrutiny from regulators, consumers and the public to operate responsibly.

The pandemic has further accelerated the pace and scale of change; clients have to deal with a multitude of new challenges around efficiency, regulation and growth for which they seek guidance on best practice, internal processes, governance and corporate culture.

Cue AOC, the firm's strategic regulatory consulting arm, established at the behest of clients whose requests for top-tier regulatory guidance were going unmet. It's not a separate company; rather, AOC is an integrated part of A&O. When required, it works collaboratively with the firm's legal practice, but also operates as a standalone unit.

AOC has attracted people of considerable talent with extensive experience in regulation, consulting and/or in-house legal and compliance operations. The business operates

globally and currently comprises 24 consultants based in the UK, U.S. and Australia.

Although AOC on its own doesn't provide legal advice, several of AOC's consultants have studied law, and a few practised at law firms and in-house before joining A&O Consulting. Among them are Catie Butt, who joined the New York office in May 2019, and Kate Morris, who joined the Sydney office in January 2020, while Claire Haydon, who joined the London office in January 2020, has a regulatory background.

Catie, Claire and Kate all say that AOC offered a big opportunity for them for a number of reasons. Chiefly, they were attracted by the prospect of working for a new venture supported by the major resources of a global organisation. As Kate says: “It’s a fantastic combination: there is all the energy and enthusiasm of a start-up, underpinned by a globally established, top law firm.”

Catie was particularly intrigued by the notion of using her broad range of professional experiences to offer timely and relevant transformation-related offerings for clients. “After having been

on the client side for the majority of my career, I’m like a kid in a candy store being able to collaborate with legal practice groups, AOC colleagues and Advanced Delivery & Solutions teams to offer practical solutions to in-house challenges.”

For Claire, working for AOC meant an opportunity to join a leading global law firm. “I’d obviously instructed law firms over the years but I was really attracted by the idea of seeing one from the inside. Everything I’d heard about A&O before joining the consulting business is true – and more.”

A second draw for them all was the firm’s commitment to innovation, which is at the heart of its relentless drive to transform the way it delivers its services, encapsulated in the overarching concept of Advanced Delivery & Solutions. After starting, all three executive directors benefitted from a third core attribute supporting the consulting business: the culture of collaboration among the various practice groups, which has been vital in AOC’s growth.

Each of the three brings insights and experience from their former roles. In Claire’s case, that includes 16 years working for the Financial Conduct Authority and its predecessor, as well as for one of the major banks in the UK.

Kate began her career as a litigator in private practice before working for 12 years for global and Australian banks in business, legal and compliance roles.

Catie worked for 20 years as an in-house commercial lawyer, where one of the major projects she was involved in was outsourcing her company’s global in-house legal function, overseeing the transition and then supervising the outsourced legal function itself.

Each also brings their own specialism to the consultancy business. Claire concentrates on regulatory strategy, risk management and governance.

Kate is supporting businesses with the massive volume of change across the financial services sector in Australia; this has been, and will continue to be, significantly impacted by changing regulations following on from the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry, as well as the inquiry by the Australian Prudential Regulation Authority into governance, culture and accountability.

“Get D&I right and the whole business benefits.”



“It’s a fantastic combination: there is all the energy and enthusiasm of a start-up, underpinned by a globally established, top law firm.”

Catie’s focus is on legal and business function transformation. She has been working with Jonathan Brayne, Chair of Fuse (A&O’s tech innovation space), on the series of feature articles and benchmark surveys about the changing nature of the in-house legal world. “It’s great to be part of that conversation,” Catie says.

All of this plays well into the AOC offering, but the key question is: what can AOC offer that’s not already provided by established consulting firms such as the Big Four?

Claire, Kate and Catie believe AOC has two key differentiators: first, the fact that all consultants in AOC can advise from a position of real experience; and second, the tie-up with expert legal advice, as and when required. Catie puts it this way: “Our clients receive the best of A&O based on skill, not geography. We offer a complementary skillset to our lawyers which helps our clients consider their risks from different but equally important angles – as well as being able to implement the legal advice they receive, rather than employing a third-party consultancy firm to do it.

“Additionally, as several clients operate internationally, our global presence and experience in various jurisdictions means we’re able to assist them more efficiently.”

Claire adds: “Importantly, we’re not consulting as lawyers, although we do have some lawyers in the team.

Our main selling point is that we have practical industry experience. We can translate what we know into pragmatic, implementable and sustainable action.”

Kate sums it up: “Historically, large consultancy firms have dominated the regulatory market, but we’re offering something more integrated: we’re offering top-quality legal advice from our lawyers, combined with technical guidance and support from us on how to implement that advice. Our value is in our experience: what we can tell our clients is ‘We’ve done the job you’re trying to do.’”

In Catie’s case, it’s experience of a major exercise in business transformation. This was the outsourcing of the legal function of DXC Technology (which was born from a merger between CSC and Hewlett Packard’s Enterprise Services division) to UnitedLex. She then joined UnitedLex for almost two years to serve as global operations executive for the DXC project.

“Overseeing such a major project has put me in a very strong position to help companies with their own transformations, which are becoming increasingly common,” she notes. “I can apply my in-house and service provider experiences not just in the in-house legal function world but to business transformation more generally.”

With such a compelling business offering, it’s no surprise that AOC is winning its

own clients, and not just serving the firm’s clients in a different format.

Kate mentions a final point of distinction between AOC and the competition: “There are some established boutique firms that offer risk-focused advice, and I’ve been a customer of these firms. But A&O’s offering is of a different calibre. I wish it had been available when I was buy-side.”

### Diversity and inclusion

Increasingly, AOC is being asked to guide clients on their approach to diversity and inclusion (D&I), and the practical steps they can take to move forward. Catie sees D&I as integral to company transformation objectives. “D&I is now at the heart of a company’s business, impacting everything from recruitment and retention of people right through to corporate purpose,” she says. “Get D&I right and the whole business benefits.”

To date, the focus of D&I has to a greater extent been on gender diversity, but this is expanding to fairer representation of ethnic minorities and to sexual identity. Claire points out that AOC itself has been set up to be diverse and inclusive, taking on people from a broad range of backgrounds, experiences and cultures.

D&I advice can be a real test of the skills of the consultant in helping clients address what are perceived as failings, suggesting how problems can be addressed, developing policies and then guiding them to put those policies into practice. Advice needs to be both smart and sensitive.

Catie says how the advice is delivered is crucial in creating a bond between client and consultant: “It’s important to appeal to people’s desire to learn and get things to a better place over time. We have shown that we can be



sensitive to clients' challenges, without lecturing them, yet facilitating change.”

All three acknowledge that this requires consultants to have a range of skills, beyond the technical and functional.

The disruptive impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has obviously had a significant effect on the business, for example putting a temporary hold on recruitment. However, at the same time, it's presenting new challenges for businesses of all sizes in all sectors and therefore requiring guidance from expert consultants. Claire, Kate and Catie all report a continued – even increased – demand for their services.

With the lockdown resulting in high numbers of people working from home, there's been an acceleration of trends affecting how people work, including, inevitably, the issues around work-life balance.

Kate points out the link between working from home and D&I. “The essence of D&I is people bringing their whole selves to work,” she says. “What we've seen with video conferencing and remote working is that people have no choice but to be themselves in their home environment even as they're working. All of us see each other more completely in that way. My dog has been known to make a guest appearance in team meetings – that's something that wouldn't have happened before!” &

## The five pillars of A&O Consulting's business are:

**Governance:** Applying global best practice to increase the effectiveness of governance and drive sustainable business outcomes

**Corporate purpose and culture:** Unlocking people's full potential by embedding the right values – or, put another way, providing them with vision, purpose and strategy

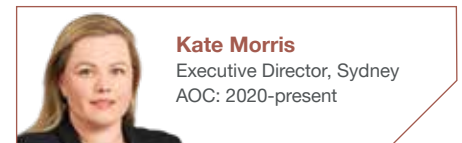
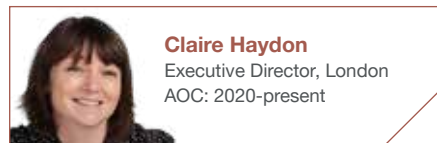
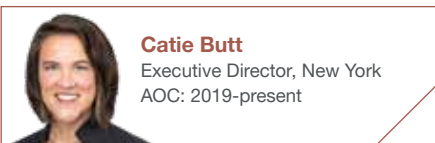
**Conduct, compliance and operational risk:** Developing innovative approaches to managing the evolving risk landscape

**Regulatory strategy and implementation:** Keeping pace with regulators wherever in the world businesses operate

**Business and legal function transformation:** Helping clients make their business and legal operations future-fit

Here are some examples of A&O Consulting's recent work for clients:

- Undertaking a culture health assessment for a large corporate, including a review of conduct risk framework and recommendations for improvement.
- Training the Board of an APAC asset manager on directors' duties and responsibilities, risk management, conduct and culture and changes to the regulatory environment.
- Transforming a legal service provider's strategy for legal solutions outsourcing transactions, including refresh of contract templates and the design of an effective governance framework.
- Conducting a Board and executive-level governance effectiveness review for a large UK FinTech against regulatory and governance code requirements.
- Training the Markets and Treasury functions of an Australian bank on their regulatory and ethical responsibilities (conducted by AOC), as well as providing independent endorsement of the training (carried out by A&O).



For more information on A&O Consulting, or A&O's Advanced Delivery and Solutions toolkit, visit [www.allenoverly.com/advanceddelivery](http://www.allenoverly.com/advanceddelivery).

# Celebrating diversity, embracing inclusion

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) are important to A&O's strategy and are increasingly becoming embedded in our culture.

Thanks in part to programmes and groups set up to address key issues and challenges, we are making progress. And while the rewards are welcome, the real and lasting wins come from the strength D&I gives us.

## Networks to connect our people, alumni and clients



### A&Out

As a global employer, we must provide a strong message that A&O is a safe and supportive place for our LGBTQ+ community. We've worked hard to increase the international reach of A&Out and now have more than 100 A&O and alumni members around the world, as well as 700 allies who play a key role in creating an inclusive work environment.

### Race and ethnicity

We have active networks and affinity groups in the UK and U.S., open to alumni, which hold high-profile events and promote the visibility of role models and mentors. Lots of activities also take place across other offices, for example around the Black Economic Empowerment agenda in South Africa and through our ethnicity working group in Amsterdam. We publish regular interviews – 'conversations about race' – with colleagues, as we know that dialogue promotes openness and understanding around these issues.

### Women

We have large women's networks in many of our major offices which host events and debates and provide networks of sponsors and mentors globally. All our offices and practice groups now monitor our pipeline of female talent and report twice a year on progress. We have also developed an Emerging Female Leaders programme that identifies high-potential women who are sponsored to take leadership positions and be active role models within A&O.

“At A&O we're determined to give everyone the chance to progress in their careers and achieve their full potential by giving them the freedom to be themselves.”

Jo Dooley,  
Head of Diversity & Inclusion.



# 700

A&Out allies who play a key role in creating an inclusive working environment.

## Listening and challenging ourselves



Many partners globally take part in our reverse mentoring programme in which women, ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ colleagues are among those mentoring more senior people to provide an insight into their experiences at A&O.

We have a long-running programme of unconscious bias training for partners and senior support professionals, and further training to ensure partners can provide effective sponsorship to everyone.

We conduct regular listening exercises with specific groups and use our networks and development programmes as channels to understand people's views and experiences.

A&O's Social Mobility Working Group brings together the D&I, graduate recruitment and pro bono and community investment teams – plus others with a personal interest in the subject – to join up the firm's thinking, generate ideas and track progress.

## Accountability and openness



We currently have 30% of leadership positions filled by women: our Board is 33% women; Executive Committee 30%; Risk Committee 50%; and People and Performance Board 42%.

We aim to see women making up at least 30% of the candidates considered for partnership each year. To achieve this, partners monitor and report on pipelines of talent, as well as the career development, sponsorship and mentoring being provided.

Alongside this, lateral hires, recruitment shortlists and succession plans are supporting our goal of reaching 30% women partners globally.

We also ensure effective mentoring and sponsorship are in place so that we can increase representation at senior levels. It's important to understand the points in our processes that may act as barriers to attraction, retention and progression so we can address them. &

## Awards

Euromoney LMG Asia Women in Business Law Awards 2019  
*Best International Firm in Asia for Women in Business Law*

Investing in Ethnicity Awards  
*A&O listed in the Top 100 Outstanding Employers category*

Stonewall Top Global Employer  
*Third year in a row*

Stonewall Global Ally Programme Award for A&Out

Times Top 50 Employer for Women

Women in Business Law  
*Best International Firm*

Women in Law Awards  
*Gender Diversity Project of the Year*

Yale Law Women Top Firms for Gender Equity and Family Friendliness Report  
*LGBTQ+ representation*

Yale Law Women Top Firms for Gender Equity and Family Friendliness Report  
*Top Firm for Hiring Practices*

Visit [allenoverly.com/alumni](https://www.allenoverly.com/alumni) to find out how to join our D&I networks.

# Real change to virtual working

The global onset of Covid-19 unlocked rapid momentum for change at Allen & Overy that looks set to transform the firm over the next decade.

There's nothing virtual about the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. At A&O, the crisis ushered in what is likely to be one of the most rapid periods of change since the firm was founded in 1930.

A crisis like no other, Covid-19 forced law firms to abruptly change how they worked if they intended to continue doing business.

Yet it also sowed the seeds of a longer-term shift in working practices for a profession that is reliant on collaboration between teams of lawyers working together in offices, hastening the adoption of essential enabling technologies and calling for a culture that fosters greater flexibility.

"This is about so much more than virtual meetings and being able to access systems remotely," says Jonathan Brayne, an A&O partner and chair of

Fuse, who specialises in innovation and business model change.

By an extraordinary and fortunate coincidence, A&O had reached the final stage of a large technology overhaul designed to enable staff to work remotely, accessing their documents securely on a laptop irrespective of where they were working.

"There are long-term trends that we were already actively pursuing in A&O that I think will gain momentum due to Covid-19," said Jonathan. "They will have a substantial effect on how lawyers work, not just in terms of working away from the office."

## Preparing for lockdown

Ahead of lockdown being announced in the UK on 16 March 2020, A&O's IT team had a frantic weekend implementing a new document

management system and a myriad of other changes. The culmination of more than two years' work, this technology overhaul fortuitously made it easier for staff to work from home for the foreseeable future.

To varying degrees, the firm's other offices, from Asia to Europe and the Americas, had similar experiences. With a determined effort, the IT team stretched a computer network spanning more than 40 offices to include the homes of about 5,500 staff around the world, turning a physical firm into a virtual one. People quickly adapted, finding new ways to collaborate while showing great empathy towards colleagues.

This bolt from the blue has raised three key questions: How will technology change how lawyers work in future? How much office space will be needed? What kind of culture and skills will the firm require?



### The inside story

When governments around the world locked down countries in the first months of 2020, the crisis was unlike anything that we'd planned for. Business continuity plans had to be ripped up. It was a race against time to get everyone equipped to work and speak to clients from home, while also continuing to deliver essential services such as processing voluminous legal documents.

In the words of John O'Donovan, Chief Technology Officer, it was "quite a determined effort".

"There was a lot of planning and a lot of thinking about how do we make sure that we can keep the capacity there for the people who need it the most," he said. "In the space of 48 hours, we turned a physical law firm into a virtual law firm. These are a couple of days of my life I would happily not live again."

The rollout was phased in across different regions. In London, it was scheduled for the weekend before lockdown. It went smoothly, providing the perfect technology infrastructure for working from home.

There were inevitably stop-gap measures to start with. While laptops had been provided to most lawyers, A&O's Technology board quickly agreed to provide laptops for all staff who did not already have one, ordering more than 2,000 globally.

However, sourcing so many laptops quickly was a logistical problem, especially as the spike in demand coincided with a cut in output from semiconductor chip fabrication plants because of the impact of Covid-19. To bridge the gap until suitable laptops could be found, the London office bought 500 Chromebooks, which could be linked up to desk computers in the office.

**"In the space of 48 hours, we turned a physical law firm into a virtual law firm."**

“There are long-term trends that we were already actively pursuing in A&O that I think will gain momentum due to Covid-19.”

“In Madrid, all IT office equipment was sent to people’s homes and across the rest of Europe we arranged for people to get their new home working equipment delivered by taxi or courier,” says Andrew Brammer, IT and Shared Services Director.

This all led to a swift transformation in how people communicated. In-person meetings and phone calls were replaced by video conference calls. However, the switch created some practical challenges. The surge in telecoms traffic globally – a ‘perfect storm’ of conference calls, home-schooling of children and other heightened home internet usage – led to broadband networks crashing.

In a profession like law being so dependent on teamwork, reproducing the collaborative nature of an office digitally was also a challenge. In the months following the initial lockdown, the firm adopted a range of cloud-based technologies, including Microsoft Teams, Zoom, DocuSign (electronic signatures) and OneDrive.

“There’s definitely been an acceleration in the technical literacy of the firm,” says Andrew. “We’ve definitely moved quickly to take products that otherwise would’ve taken a lot longer to push into the business. It’s been fascinating to watch how this event has made many things possible that would’ve taken much longer in normal circumstances.”

The IT department worked tirelessly to help people make the transition from the office to home working and, at the same time, learn to use new tools. Thousands of hours of virtual training, genius bars and one-to-one training were delivered; at times the team made classes available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The service desk dealt with more than 14,000 calls in just a few weeks.

The U.S. Research & Library departments converted print publications to online format, allowing staff access to materials 24/7, while also saving on paper and printing.

Additionally, the Document Services teams adapted quickly to providing their services remotely to support the lawyers working from home. That included logistical challenges such as how to move the huge printed documents that lawyers traditionally mark up between the print room and lawyers’ homes, how to get mark-ups back to document production, and how to deliver mail and packages to and from the lawyers. It required some of the Mailroom team to come into the office throughout lockdown.

Illustrating the size of the challenge, the UK firm alone was hiring 750 to 1,000 extra couriers a month to deliver printed documents to its lawyers and their clients. In Belgium, an additional 800 couriers were hired to deliver printed matters as well as IT equipment to people’s homes.

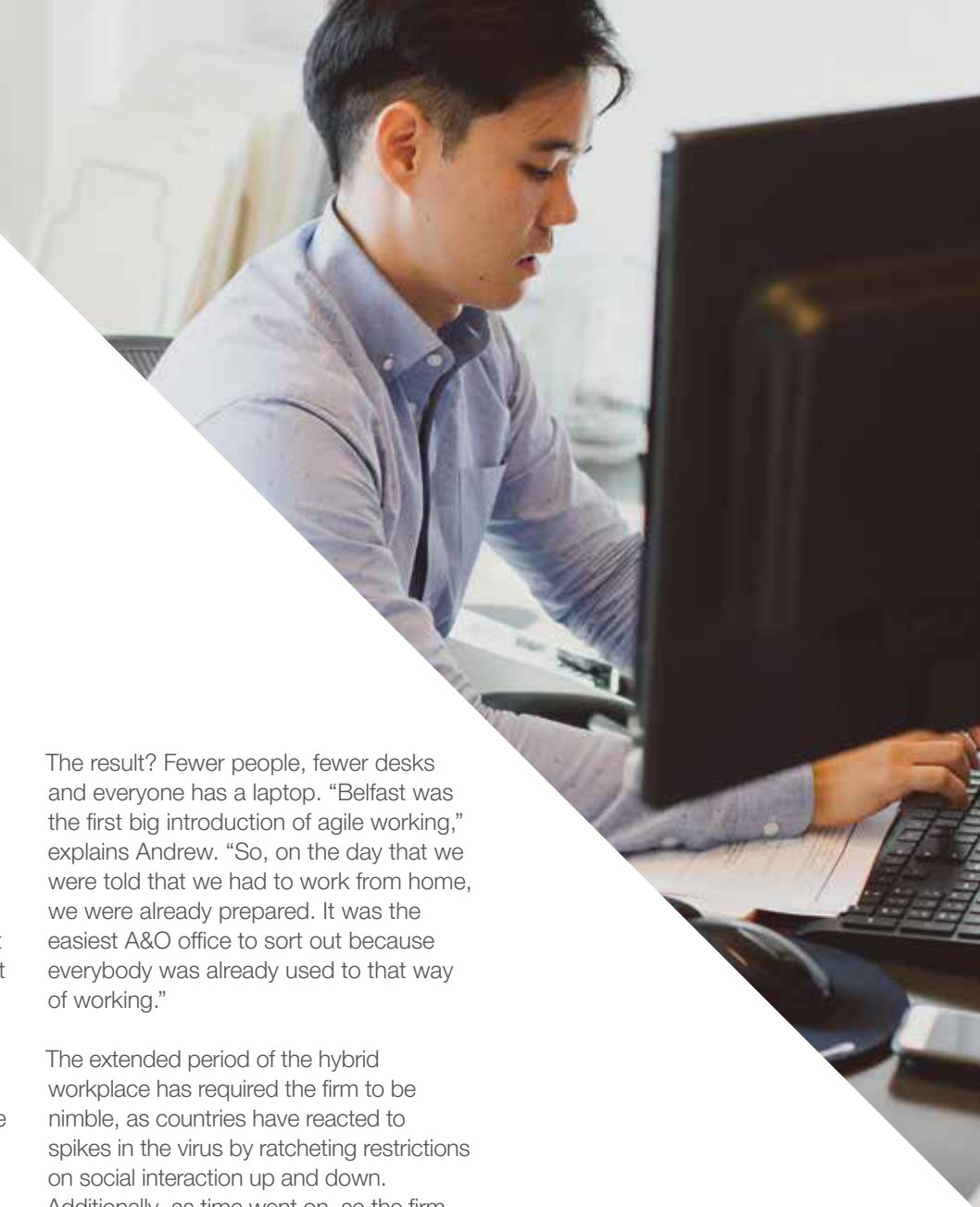
### Supporting our people

Beyond the immediate practical implications of the crisis, A&O moved quickly to help staff adjust to the personal difficulties of working from home. Once people were at home, HR focused on supporting both their general wellbeing and, more specifically, emotional welfare. The frequency of internal communications, including office updates, online resources and inspiring personal stories from colleagues, increased.

For trainees, the crisis was especially disappointing. In the London office, for instance, the March 2020 intake was in the office for only five days. These trainees subsequently received tailored remote training and development, although it remains hard to replicate the benefit of learning from working closely with more experienced lawyers.

Another obstacle was the staff for whom home was on the other side of the world. Moving them back was not as straightforward as buying a plane ticket. The Regulatory, Tax, HR and Travel teams joined forces by “rolling up their sleeves and finding solutions”, says Sasha Hardman, Global HR Director.

Perhaps one of the most impressive things, though, was how the crisis brought out the best of the A&O culture. “Our culture of being supportive of each other has come to the fore in terms of people being caring and mindful of their colleagues,” says Sasha. “There are



stories of people who knew somebody was in a flat on their own and so they have jogged past their homes just to wave through the window. There have been many virtual cups of tea, people calling each other and all sorts of things were going on to make people feel part of their A&O family, wherever that may be.”

### Managing a hybrid workplace

As the first wave of the pandemic ebbed, people returned to A&O’s offices to different degrees in different regions, depending on the local transport network, health situation and government guidance. London and New York were the last to reopen. Yet as a second wave developed in many countries, staff in some cities had to move back to their home offices, depending on the guidance in that location.

While the details differ between cities, the firm continues to take all necessary measures to ensure social distancing. In London, for instance, the firm is a Covid-19 secure location, with strict protocols about how different rooms such as the mailroom are used. Only one person is allowed to work in an office on any one day, and there are limits on the number of people allowed in communal areas. Additionally, offices continue to take steps to make sure that they maintain social distancing.

In Belfast, home to A&O’s second largest office, agile working was introduced in 2019 as part of the refit of the building, making it especially well prepared.

The result? Fewer people, fewer desks and everyone has a laptop. “Belfast was the first big introduction of agile working,” explains Andrew. “So, on the day that we were told that we had to work from home, we were already prepared. It was the easiest A&O office to sort out because everybody was already used to that way of working.”

The extended period of the hybrid workplace has required the firm to be nimble, as countries have reacted to spikes in the virus by ratcheting restrictions on social interaction up and down. Additionally, as time went on, so the firm became more mindful of the effect on staff morale, wellbeing and learning, supporting people who wanted to return to the office as restrictions began to ease.

“Our culture of being supportive of each other has come to the fore in terms of people being caring and mindful of their colleagues.”

“There’s definitely been an acceleration in the technical literacy of the firm... It’s been fascinating to watch how this event has made many things possible that would’ve taken much longer in normal circumstances.”

A lesson of the lockdown is that remote working can be successful, leading logically to a rethink of the purpose of the office. In fact, the early results of a recent survey indicate a large percentage of our people felt they were more productive, according to Edward Mackaness, Associate Director, Business Services. “With office utilisation set to be lower in the future, it begs the question whether we all need to have our dedicated desks in the future,” he said. “Instead, teams may have a dedicated area allocated to them and they can choose who they want to work with and how they want to use that space themselves.”

### The future of the office

Looking to the future, there is little doubt that Covid-19 has jolted A&O into accelerated transformation. As with other businesses, many of the changes were already under way, albeit at a slower pace. The challenge? Making sure that

the office of the future retains the best of the physical and remote worlds.

Turning first to the physical office, the firm’s leadership has stated that presenteeism is in the past. Individuals will be given more flexibility to decide how to split their time between working from home and the office.

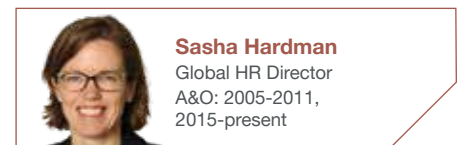
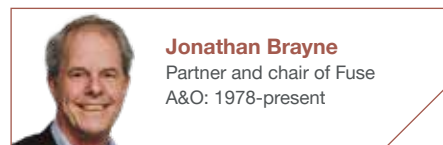
Wim Dejonghe, Senior Partner, says offices may well become meeting places for team activities such as opportunities to collaborate and generate new ideas rather than day-to-day workspaces. However, he cautions that young people in the early stages of their careers will need them more, as they seek to build professional networks and learn from their peers.

Ambitious targets have been set to reduce A&O’s office property portfolio over the next ten years. Even before Covid-19, the average office occupancy

was low. A recent study estimated that utilisation in the London office averaged about 55%. If people work from the office for only three days a week in future, then that might fall to about 35%. It’s not hard to see how great the potential is for savings across the portfolio.

There are other savings besides – both financial and environmental. For instance, in the four months from April to July, the UK offices saved about 51 tonnes of printing paper, and in the seven months from March to October, the New York and Washington D.C. offices reduced office supplies by 75% and 50% respectively. Additionally, business travel and in-person events – non-existent as 2020 ended – have been replaced with video conferences and webinars.

By demystifying technology, the events of 2020 have paved the way for a real conversation about how lawyers work. We are seeing an uptick in the







use of legal technology to extract data from documents, speed up the review process and automate content creation – all of which helps to increase speed and efficiency while reducing the cost to clients. In future, technology could be used to answer frequently asked questions, as well as to retrieve and push relevant precedents and knowledge to lawyers seamlessly as they work, so reducing research time, while streamlining deal and dispute processes.

“Any law firm that aspires to be global and also local around the world, which is what we aspire to be, will need these tools, in my view,” says Jonathan. “Even the high-end Wall Street M&A law firms may have to find a way to respond to this.”

Yet perhaps one of the biggest lessons of the pandemic for A&O is the importance of a culture that is open to change. Having a more diverse and inclusive workforce is essential for

building a flexible culture. Recruiting from a more diverse group of people may also help the firm to access the wider range of skills it will need, especially related to technology.

“Innovation requires skill sets that aren’t necessarily present in your organisation, and that may require recruiting from a wider pool of people,” explains Jonathan. “Also, in order to change you have to be open to change. Diversity encourages a mindset of being open to anything new. You find much less of a visceral ‘no’ coming out of a diverse group of people.”

It seems likely that 2020 will prove an historic year for A&O. Out of the disruption and tragedy of the pandemic has come a sense of optimism about a new momentum and appetite for change. What appears certain is that by the firm’s centenary, in 2030, its ways of working will be very different from how they were in 2019. &

“Teams may have a dedicated area allocated to them and they can choose who they want to work with and how they want to use that space themselves.”



**Edward Mackness**  
Associate Director,  
Business Services  
A&O: 2008-present



**John O'Donovan**  
Chief Technology Officer  
A&O: 2019-present

A full-page photograph of a young man, Justin Farrance, smiling broadly. He is wearing a dark blue blazer over a light pink or white button-down shirt. He is standing outdoors, with a blurred background of a modern building and a bright yellow flower bush in the foreground to his right. The text 'Lockdown uplift for diversity' is overlaid in white serif font on the lower left side of the image.

# Lockdown uplift for diversity

We're told there's a silver lining in every dark cloud. GROW, a novel mentoring platform for students from underrepresented communities, shines out from the storms caused by Covid-19.

A new initiative called GROW that took off during lockdown is making a huge impact in its efforts to advance diversity, inclusion and social mobility in the legal profession.

It's the brainchild of Justin Farrance, an A&O second-seat trainee in London, and it started with a simple message on LinkedIn. Justin wanted to put the enforced solitude to good use. So he posted a note asking if there were any students in his network who needed help with the law firm training contract application process from someone who had recently gone through it.

And there were. Overnight Justin got emails from 150 students from a variety of backgrounds, none of whom he knew, all wanting to be one of the four people he said he could support as a mentor. Eventually his message clocked up 75,000 views.

He'd struck a nerve, but it wasn't a complete surprise. In Justin's experience, there were not many openly LGBTQ+ individuals with the relevant experience of having recently gone through the application process. His interest in social mobility was also a draw for many students.

The endeavour was separate from his work as an A&O trainee and in addition to it, so Justin reached out to his trainee and student contacts to ask them if they were able to help. Those who could were paired with one or more students from a similar community or background.

A friend told him he was onto something and should formalise it, "and that's what I did," said Justin.

### **Built in a single weekend**

GROW was created over a single weekend in March, during which Justin designed a basic website and logo, and wrote a mentoring guide. As the scale of demand began to emerge, he automated the sign-up procedure. Soon prominent individuals were sharing details of GROW and it took on a life of its own.

The concept is simplicity itself: matching up mentees with mentors who "are similar to them" boosts a student's confidence and signals that there is a place for them in the profession. It's an idea in tune with the times; when minorities and marginalised communities are facing disproportionate problems and movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM) are mainstream news, removing barriers to the legal profession is a positive step.

While GROW is open to anyone, about half of recent pairings come from BAME communities and more than half are from non-Russell Group universities. By November 1,000 students had been paired with mentors, although the number of students who want mentoring "far exceeds" the lawyers available.

"It's important that we're highlighting an issue in the legal industry – a shortage

of minority representation,” said Justin. “The more diverse the talent coming into law firms, the better.” GROW is showing that “there’s still work to do, but we’re getting there.”

Justin’s message, which he spreads by “being openly myself”, is that students don’t need to have had a private education or an Oxbridge degree to join a top law firm. “I was state-school educated and the first of my family to go to university,” he said. “It’s not what’s perceived as the avenue to a Magic Circle law firm.

“It shows that as long as you work hard and are willing to learn, there’s a place for ambitious people at these firms.”

### A little help from his friends

As the initiative snowballed, Justin turned to his network for help. He found a willing partner in fellow A&O trainee Natasha Dutton, who he said has played “a pivotal role” in shaping GROW and meeting student demands.

It’s easy to see why Natasha came on board. “I love it!” she said. “I love the fact that we’ve created an opportunity for a group of people who historically are underrepresented in the legal industry to directly connect with someone who has either the life experience or experience as a lawyer, and is the visible image of what they want to become.

“We’re grateful to have been recognised as a pro bono client of the firm,” she said. “It’s also encouraging to know that GROW mentors – partners, senior in-house counsel, barristers and more – include a large cohort of A&O lawyers.”

One of Justin’s key supporters is Will Samengo-Turner, his supervising partner when he was a first-seat trainee in Corporate – and, since GROW was recognised as a pro bono client, Justin’s client relationship partner.

Justin said Will directed him to those in the firm who could provide advice in important areas for the initial set-up and development of GROW, such as data protection.

Another key influence was his own mentor, Joanna Hughes. Attracted by her “unwavering passion for uplifting others”, Justin approached Joanna a few months before he was to join A&O about becoming his mentor. Their mentoring relationship, developed before and during lockdown, inspired Justin to want to do the same for others.

Joanna has been mentoring students for more than 20 years “because I care about raising aspirations in young people.” She started mentoring adults like Justin both within the Alumni team-run A&O Mentoring Programme and outside it “because I’m aware of the good that networks can do.”

### Spread organically to the U.S.

Social media has no borders and GROW spread organically, crossing the Atlantic in one bound as lawyers and students in the U.S. heard about it and signed up. By September, mentors and mentees were meeting in New York and elsewhere.

New York partner Julian Moore was impressed. “Social media helped Justin propel the programme – it shows how much we’ve advanced” since his days as a mentee in Seizing Every Opportunity (SEO), a U.S. programme similar to GROW.

He noted that GROW’s broad reach recognises and caters to the “intersectionality” of underrepresented communities. “I identify with a lot of those communities and appreciate the work Justin is doing,” he said.

In Julian’s experience, most firms are working to increase diversity, but not all are succeeding. “What pleases me about A&O is that ‘allies’ – including white males – are willing to sit and listen to the issues to get a better understanding; and then affirmatively act,” he said. “They’re using their power and influence to be there for those who do not necessarily look like them or come from similar backgrounds.”

Interest among lawyers at firms such as Google, an A&O client, gives an indication of how the idea resonates. Within a week of hearing about GROW, 20 of its lawyers had signed up. Similarly, in-house lawyers at Barclays came on board.

### Bridging the gap with virtual events

In August, with Covid-19 hindering students’ physical access to law firms during application season, GROW sought to bridge the gap with a virtual event on the Zoom platform, in collaboration with the A&O Graduate

The GROW mentoring initiative has paired 1,000 aspiring lawyers with legal professionals so far.

Recruitment team. More than 400 students from diverse backgrounds tuned in to the event, which was introduced by David Stone, Global Head of IP. Justin and two members of the Graduate Recruitment team, Emma Barker and Charlie King, answered questions about the training contract application process, submitted through the Zoom chat function.

Pre-Covid-19, said Justin, such an event – held live – would likely have attracted 50-80 people, a vivid demonstration of how something like GROW “can make a difference.”

At the same time, GROW set up a weekly Breakfast Series on the popular Instagram platform where individuals answered questions in real time. Justin’s friends and contacts were only too pleased to help.

A&O trainee Tashan Dwyer readily accepted the opportunity to represent his community. On top of the typical queries about work-life balance and how to get into A&O, Tashan fielded more nuanced questions about his identity and “how I reconciled that with the image of the typical lawyer – how I fit in.

“Those questions are on the tip of people’s tongues but they don’t always feel comfortable talking about them,” he said.

What was different here – and what in his view helped make it work – was the ability of questioners to remain anonymous while getting “a bit of that person’s identity” as they answered questions.

After his Breakfast Session, 30 viewers reached out to Tashan for specific help. It led to more formal mentoring arrangements with three people, one of whom, at 26, is three years older than him.

Another Breakfast Series participant, trainee Eliza Asare Parbi, said the whole experience was “really positive”.

“We got so much engagement,” she said. Many questions were “very personal to me as well. It was what people really wanted to find out.” With different faces on the Instagram page, from first-seat trainees such as her to more experienced lawyers, it provided “a load of perspectives” in one place.

Eliza said mentoring helped her enormously when she was applying. She was keen to help through GROW because “without mentoring, I probably would not be where I am now.”

A&O partner Sarah Henchoz acts as one of the sponsors of GROW, but downplays her role. “None of us can pretend to have played any real part in its growth,” she said. “It’s phenomenal. Justin’s done so much on his own. He’s not needed much sponsorship – it would have been a huge success without any support.”

She said GROW is “such a simple concept – one of those things you can’t quite believe wasn’t there beforehand. With the lockdown period, a lot of people were conscious that people coming into the profession wouldn’t get the access to lawyers they otherwise would have had. This is a great way to get involved in the future.” &

**GROW Mentoring** is just one trainee initiative that seeks to promote diversity and inclusion. There are many others. Trainees are also active on the following A&O Committees and Working Groups:

**A&Out**



Elliott Glover



Kathryn Welsh

**Race & Ethnicity Committee and Society of East Asian Lawyers**



Godwin Tan

**Social Mobility Working Group**



Mateusz Maciejewski

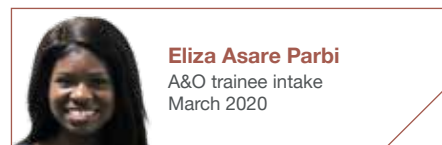
**Women’s Network (WiN)**



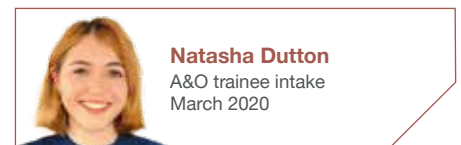
Senem Cilingiroglu



Sophie Larsen



**Eliza Asare Parbi**  
A&O trainee intake  
March 2020



**Natasha Dutton**  
A&O trainee intake  
March 2020



**Tashan Dwyer**  
A&O trainee intake  
March 2020



**Justin Farrance**  
A&O trainee intake  
March 2020

**To find out more** about GROW Mentoring’s platform and expansive use of social media to attract both students and lawyers, go to @grow.mentoring on Instagram and @GROW Mentoring on LinkedIn.



# Why a Smart Start worked for us – a legal career at A&O

It's an uncomfortable reality that, in many developed countries, the socio-economic background you are born into is still the biggest determining factor in your life chances.

Enabling young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds to break out of that cycle is a challenge every country faces. Education is crucial, but even academic success doesn't guarantee a better future. Accessing careers in many top professions – including law – is still harder for young

people from low-income households. As the UK's Social Mobility Commission put it in its June 2020 report: "The change from education into employment is a critical moment for social mobility. Choices made by individuals and employers at this point set the pattern for the rest of a person's life."

'Social mobility' – enabling people to improve on the socio-economic background they were born into – is a complex issue, but one that businesses can play an important role in by widening access and creating opportunities. A&O is pleased that for the last two years the firm has improved

“Accessing careers in many top professions – including law – is still harder for young people from low-income households.”

its position in the Social Mobility Employer Index, an important benchmarking initiative that ranks employers on the actions they are taking to ensure they are open to accessing and progressing talent from all backgrounds, but recognises that there is much more to do.

### Levelling the playing field

One of the actions that A&O took over a decade ago to level the playing field was to launch the Smart Start Experience in 2009 in London. Its aim was to rethink how work experience was offered to students and to introduce a high-quality programme that would equip young people from low socio-economic backgrounds with the skills and experience to compete for top careers.

Eleven years on, Smart Start, managed by Sue Wisbey in the Pro Bono and Community Investment team, has supported over 1,500 young people, driven up work experience standards across the legal sector and expanded to Hong Kong, India and South Africa. It is still the only work experience scheme in the UK legal sector to be formally accredited by City & Guilds, the vocational education business.

### The impact of mentoring

A key element is the follow-on mentoring programme, Smarter Futures, which provides students with one-to-one support from an A&O or client mentor, alongside online guidance and resources. Bursaries of GBP15,000 are awarded to three students each year to help with the costs of university. Emma Turnbull in the Pro Bono and Community Investment team manages Smarter Futures. As a social mobility lead at A&O, Emma feels that one of the most important elements is providing diverse role models. The more A&O partners and employees talk about their own backgrounds, the more young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds can see that there isn't one "type". We can all bring our authentic selves to work.

630 young people have now been through the Smarter Futures programme, with bursary recipients studying at top universities.

Overleaf, we speak to four Smarter Futures alumni – all of them the first in their families to go to university – who went on to receive training contracts with A&O. We also hear from one of their mentors.

630

young people have now been through the Smarter Futures programme, with bursary recipients studying at top universities.

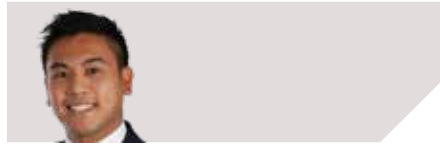


**Jaspreet Kaur** studied Spanish and Italian at Cambridge University and starts her training contract at A&O in 2021. She was mentored by Litigation & Investigations Associate Rachel Donelan.

“I actually enquired about Smart Start a year before I did it, but at that stage it was only for students in London. A year later, A&O emailed me to say I could take part – if it hadn’t been for Sue Wisbey remembering me, I don’t think I’d be where I am now!

I gained so much from Smart Start, but the main thing was confidence. It gave me a taste of how I would fit into an environment like A&O – without that I would’ve found the whole concept incredibly daunting. Instead, I started university with a real boost in self-esteem – being the first in my family to go made my mum very proud!

I felt my mentor Rachel genuinely cared about me. She read over my university applications and offered support throughout. I was unsure about applying for training contracts but Rachel encouraged me to go for it. I’m so glad she did. She got in touch again when I was offered a place at A&O – I nearly cried!”



**Quoc Tran** was a Banking associate at A&O for four years after completing his A&O training contract and a degree at the University of Southampton. He was mentored by Sarah Fahy, Global Head of A&O’s Research & Library.

“When I took part in Smart Start, I already had a strong desire to work in the legal industry, but it helped to build my confidence and confirmed my career choice – particularly after meeting people in the industry and being able to get an insight into what my career could be like. Smarter Futures enabled me to maintain my relationship with A&O, as well as open up an avenue to ask questions in confidence that you maybe wouldn’t ordinarily ask someone in the profession.

I completed a year-long secondment to the A&O New York office – it’s been fascinating to be involved in transactions from both sides of the Atlantic. Working in New York is a great example of the opportunities you get at an international firm.

I think the legal industry recognises there’s still some way to go in achieving real diversity and inclusion, so it’s important to embolden people to speak up on the topic. I’m glad the firm is taking an active role so that future generations don’t need to face the perceived barriers to entering the profession.”



**Anisa Khan** is studying Law at Oxford University and was mentored by HR Manager Charlotte Webb. She starts her training contract at A&O in 2022.

“I knew I wanted to become a lawyer, but the City seemed like a distant reality. Smart Start changed that – it gave me the courage to step out of my comfort zone and see where hard work and ambition could take me.

My parents didn’t go to university so having Charlotte as a mentor filled that gap. Working in HR, her insight and guidance through my choices, applications and interview process were invaluable! We actually went to the same school, which gave me confidence that A&O wasn’t out of reach for someone from my background.

A highlight was receiving the A&O bursary – I took comfort from that when struggling through the first months of university. I knew that, no matter what, I had already achieved something to be proud of.

Without Smart Start, I don’t think I would have applied to Oxford or for a training contract. I’ve overcome hurdles to access these opportunities and I think it’s vital that organisations continue to ensure people like me can realise their potential. The most difficult element of this is eradicating the hidden prejudice that people can face – and also understanding the interplay between gender, race and social background. I would love to work my way up at A&O and help to achieve that.”

“It is humbling to be part of a young person’s journey and watch them transition from sixth form, to university and then into the workplace.”

Emma Turnbull,  
Pro Bono & Community Affairs Officer





**Sabiah Khatun** is an associate in A&O's ICM practice in London. She was mentored by Sarah MacRae from Goldman Sachs International, studied Law at Queen Mary University of London and is now a Smarter Futures mentor.

"Growing up, I didn't know anyone who worked in the City so having a mentor made all the difference to me. It was someone I could talk to about making the right choices at school, which degree to do, which university to go to – basically everything I needed to help me pursue the career I wanted.

I actually qualified into the same practice area as my mentor so I've also had a good insight into what the next ten years could look like! It's been such a boost to have that perspective from someone senior within the industry. I've just completed a secondment at Goldman Sachs, so I have stayed in touch with Sarah throughout that too.

My career choice was definitely influenced by Smart Start. It also made me feel comfortable at A&O – when I was offered a place on a vacation scheme, I already knew the culture (and where the lifts were!). That made a difference to me.

I'm a hijab-wearing woman, from a low-income household and have a health condition classified as a disability – I worked hard to get here and I know the barriers that exist along the way.

As I start to look ahead, I feel a sense of responsibility to progress here because more diverse representation at senior levels has a big impact on culture – and while I haven't made long-term career decisions yet, I do know that by progressing I can help to create change."



**The mentor's perspective:**  
**Sarah MacRae** is an Executive Director in the Global Markets Division of Goldman Sachs International.

"Coming from a state school, far removed from anyone who worked in the professions, I know a career in the City can seem a world away. I've seen how much colleagues help their children in choosing courses, writing personal statements – it gives them a big advantage over children whose parents can't do that – so I became a mentor to help give other young people a chance. Mentoring also breaks down some of the perceptions about what people in certain professions may be like.

I joined the Smarter Futures programme because it's a good fit with the mentoring culture at Goldman Sachs, and I enjoy networking outside of work. It's so rewarding to see mentees' careers develop, but it also helps me continue to learn and develop.

I've certainly learned a lot from Sabiah – we've stayed in touch long past the formal mentoring relationship and it's been lovely to see her get on during her secondment at Goldman Sachs.

It means a lot to see young women succeed. I'm involved in the First 100 Years of Women in Law project, marking the progress women have made since we were first permitted to become lawyers in England – but we still have a way to go to see greater representation at senior levels. Social background and ethnicity bring additional challenges – there's still an expectation that people should change to fit in. We need more leaders from different backgrounds to break that cycle."

## Mentoring is important, but mentoring alone is not enough

For more information about mentoring and coaching programmes to support young people and opportunities to participate, please contact Emma Turnbull in the Pro-Bono & Community Investment team.

Emma is keen to stress though that while mentoring is important, mentoring alone is not enough. If you would like to know more about our social mobility work in general, please get in touch with Emma or Joanna Hughes in the Alumni team. Joanna, like Emma, is a member of A&O's Social Mobility Working Group.

A&O understands both the societal and economic benefits of improving social mobility and we are asking ourselves what we can do each and every day to ensure our workplace is as inclusive as it can be. Watch this space.

# Covid-19 crisis tests A&O's charity partnership

Our global charity partnership with Hope and Homes for Children has been extended for one extra year, until July 2021, to provide extra support during the Covid-19 crisis.

Allen & Overy's charity partner, Hope and Homes for Children, is working to end the institutional care of children around the world. Like many charities, its work has been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic which threatened to reverse much of the progress it had achieved for vulnerable families and children.

To support Hope and Homes for Children through this difficult period, we extended our charity partnership until July 2021, instead of concluding it in September 2020.

"The aim of our global charity partnerships is to make a sustainable impact on the charity and those it supports," says Kate Cavelle, A&O's Head of Pro Bono and Community Investment. "Extending the partnership also gives us the chance to complete some of the pro bono projects currently

on hold – for instance those linked to postponed international events such as the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Rwanda."

At the beginning of our partnership with Hope and Homes for Children, our target was to raise GBP1 million to tackle the root causes of orphanage confinement and family separation in India and Nepal – aiming to help 4,400 children either at risk of or already in confinement there – as well as to support the charity's broader global campaign of transitioning children from institutions back into family-based care.

At the two-year mark, we had raised GBP1.2m and delivered pro bono and professional skills support worth more than GBP400,000.

It is welcome support for the charity's frontline teams who "are working hard

to maintain communication with families and orphanage staff to find solutions to their biggest needs," says Kate Welsby from Hope and Homes for Children.

Covid-19 is much more than a health crisis for the vulnerable: the loss of livelihoods and homes is a catalyst for families to place children in institutions. For children already confined in orphanages, staff shortages increase the risk of harm and infection, especially for children living with disabilities and health conditions.

"We've been working around lockdown situations to provide food and healthcare supplies, as well as using mobile communications to offer vital counselling to children and parents," says Kate. "We're also responding to staff shortages in orphanages by developing training to reduce the risk of increased neglect and infection."

Covid-19 is much more than a health crisis for the vulnerable: the loss of livelihoods and homes is a catalyst for families to place children in institutions.



Valerie and her children, Rwanda PHOTO: OLIVIER UMUKJURA

In India and Nepal, where A&O is supporting a large programme of work, the pressure is on Hope and Homes for Children to ensure the progress being made there is not undone.

“Many children are already at high risk of separation because of poverty, child labour and trafficking,” says Kate, “and often end up in institutions because families believe they provide access to education and housing, without understanding their damaging effects.

“We’ve been working to reunite these children with their families or to find alternative care, as well as strengthening community services such as child protection committees and women’s groups to prevent separation in the first place,” she says. “But as the Covid-19 crisis escalated, we faced loss of safeguarding mechanisms and increased institutionalisation. Child protection became an even lower priority for the authorities.”

### **Progress towards broader global aims**

Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, Hope and Homes for Children is still making progress with its wider programme of deinstitutionalisation. In 2019, it closed three orphanages in Bulgaria, Romania and Rwanda and is working to close 30 more institutions. Progress is being made across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, South Africa, Sudan and Ukraine.

Between January 2019 and June 2020, it also provided training for 7,688 child protection professionals, supported 948 children to leave orphanages for a new life in a family or community-based care, and worked with families to prevent 115,736 children from being confined within an institution.

One key pro bono project that has been completed is research into implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child across South Asia – led by an A&O team in Singapore – which highlights areas where action is needed to translate laws into visible outcomes for children. This was published in April 2020 and forms part of a broader project to contribute to a conference on child protection in Nepal (scheduled for 2020 but now postponed), which will bring together influential policy and decision-makers in Asia to learn about family strengthening and alternative care.

### **Combatting the long-term impact of Covid-19**

Looking at the long term, Mark Waddington, CEO of Hope and Homes for Children, believes this is a humanitarian crisis like no other – and it is playing out in the homes of the most at-risk children.

“These are the families hit hardest by the lockdowns in their countries – prevented from working, with no money to buy food and medicine, pay rent or access online learning for their children,” Mark says. “We’re seeing too many cases of orphanage doors being locked and children incarcerated with no carers. Children are dying without support.

“But our connections to the most marginalised children means we are uniquely placed to tackle this, and by extending our charity partnership, A&O is enabling us to make a huge difference. By adapting our practices, we can support the wider humanitarian efforts that would otherwise fail to reach these families.” &

### **Frontline response in South Africa**

Like many developing countries, South Africa has suffered under the impact of Covid-19. A failing health system, struggling economy, and shortages of food and clean water mean the most vulnerable communities are becoming increasingly marginalised.

A&O’s Johannesburg office responded by stepping up support for Hope and Homes for Children with extra funding from the local A&O Foundation combined with support to get food parcels and personal protective equipment (PPE) to at-risk individuals. We also linked Hope and Homes for Children with the Barjume Trust, another of our closest charity partners, which mobilised community organisations and local officials to enable and protect the operations of Hope and Homes for Children.

The two organisations have worked together to develop an approach that ensures charitable relief reaches the most vulnerable. They have built a Community Assist Network in Gauteng Province to help provide PPE for the children and workers in institutions there, as well as supporting hundreds of families with essentials, airtime and data vouchers.

# The Alumni Network remembers A&O colleagues and friends who passed away in the last 12 months



## Atif Hanif

**A&O: 2007-2019**

Banking partner Atif Hanif, who was instrumental in setting up the A&O Muslim Network, passed away in December 2019 following a two-year illness with cancer. He was 41.

Joining A&O in October 2007 as a senior associate, Atif was made partner in 2012. He was universally admired and trusted by his clients and his team, as much for his humanity as for his qualities as a leading lawyer in his field. His colleagues remember him as always being patient and calm, and yet full of resolve and determination in his own modest and understated way.

These were the qualities that he displayed in confronting cancer. He was positive throughout his illness, full of quiet humour and always interested in the welfare of others, even in the hardest of times.

Atif was seen as a role model within his team, who miss his energy and optimism.



## Alison Griffin

**A&O: 1970-2012**

London alumna Alison Griffin, music lover, sports enthusiast and keen collector of bears, passed away peacefully at home in April 2020 following a long illness with cancer. She was 69.

Alison was 19 when she began working as a secretary on 14 December 1970. She was a Corporate legal PA when she retired in 2012 after almost 42 years with the firm.

Her time with A&O was certainly eventful. She met her future husband, Chris Griffin, in the Litigation team, but told her parents at the time that she was “working for some bloke who’s not really my type”. In recent years, the couple were regular attendees at the annual Retirees Summer Party in London.

Alison loved classical music, especially Beethoven, and was instrumental in the success of A&O’s musical performances. She helped with *The Magic Flute* at Glyndebourne in 2009 and *Carmen* at Sadler’s Wells in 2011, famously having a virtual folder for *Carmen* containing 3,000 emails.

Family was always important to Alison; she looked after her parents in their later years and was a popular aunt. Despite her long illness, Alison had been feeling quite well and had been working in her garden the day before she died.

In retirement, Alison kept in touch with her friends and former colleagues at the firm, who remember her bright personality and the sunny outlook that characterised her life.



## Mahpara Hussain

**A&O: 1997-2012**

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London alumna Mahpara Hussain, who passed away in April 2020 at the age of 49, is remembered in the IT Programme & Projects team for her dedication and the quiet confidence she brought to everything she did.

A popular and valued member of the team, Mahpara worked in the London office in various roles between 1997 and 2012, ending her A&O career as a Workflow/ Apps developer, a role in which she made an impression with both her technical knowledge and memorable personality. She was undaunted by deadlines or the complexity of a task, and could be relied on to be responsive and committed to getting the right results quickly.

She is remembered as a respectful and reserved person who took her work seriously and engaged well with the people she met. She was highly regarded by her colleagues, who miss her for her calmness, dedication and warm nature.



## Alan Rae Smith

**A&O: 1984-2010**

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Former London partner Alan Rae Smith, whose colleagues remember him as a person with a big heart – hard working, fun and energetic – passed away in October 2020 following a cycling accident in Majorca. He was 60.

Alan joined A&O as an articled clerk in 1984, becoming a partner in 1994. A keen sportsman and accomplished lawyer, he brought energy and humour to everything he did. Colleagues recall his fondness for walking around the office minus his shoes, and smile at the memory of the newly-qualified Alan ending his first week as a qualified solicitor in 1986 searching nearby pubs at lunchtime to find his secretary and discover where she had left the execution documents for that afternoon's deal completion meeting.

Alan played football, cricket and golf and officiated in the A&O Olympics in the early 90s. He took delight in his greyhound, named Mr Shifter, which he raced regularly at the London dog tracks.

He was known as a team player off the field as well. His trainees recall his wealth of legal knowledge and patience, and his way of giving them the opportunity to balance their own workloads, but also checking on them regularly to provide advice or support. He was twice named Project Finance Lawyer of the Year, in 2009 and 2010.

Alan's warmth, humour and love of life will be missed by all who knew him and worked with him.

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**Read** the personal tributes from A&O and alumni colleagues at [allenoverly.com/alumni](https://www.allenoverly.com/alumni).

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