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KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

*Kate Oldfield shares her philosophy on
how to stay steady in a storm*



Kate Oldfield joined legacy firm David Blank & Co in 1987 and specialised in personal injury and medical negligence. When the firm merged with Davis Hope Furniss in 1990, Oldfield moved across becoming a partner at newly formed Davis Blank Furniss in 1993.

She has stayed ever since, becoming the firm’s head of personal injury and clinical negligence and then managing partner in 2007.

Oldfield admits she had never envisaged a career in law as a young woman. She came to the profession via an abandoned stint of medical training after it turned out the sights and smells of everyday hospital life were not for her.

“In those days you got an idea into your head and there wasn’t really the room to learn more about it”, she recalls. “And after two years of medicine, I thought ‘really, this isn’t working out’. I knew I saw myself as someone people came to see for advice. That’s what I had in my head.”

So, she went to see the dean at Leeds University and asked to transfer to law. “He really kindly let me in, and from the word go I really enjoyed it”, she says. And with a medical background, her niche was already carved out.

More than 30 years on, she is at the helm of a thriving Manchester-based full-service firm. Davis Blank Furniss has around 60 staff across its two offices; one in Manchester and one in Glossop. Oldfield practises across both locations, but the firm has around a third of its number in Glossop, with the rest in Manchester.

The partnership consists of five equity partners and six salaried partners divided across the two offices and Oldfield has no immediate intentions of growing the firm, regardless of the pandemic.

“The basic premise is that we are dedicated to remaining the size we are and to being a mid-sized firm catering for anybody who requires our services in the north west”, she says.

“We have had many approaches over the years, which we have always looked at very seriously, but we’ve never had our head turned at all. It’s never seemed quite right really as it would dilute what we were going to do, rather than enhancing our offering.”

She says being the size the firm is enables it to stay “nimble”. She places a high value on providing clients with a personal service, which she believes is easier to achieve in a firm that hasn’t become so large it has started to render its staff anonymous.

“Lots of merger and acquisition agencies

have said that we would have to get larger to survive and we just always thought, ‘actually no’. There’s a place in the market for a firm of our size. And we’ve got a number of areas in which we practise, and it allows us to be flexible and diverse,” Oldfield explains.

“I’ve lived through two recessions now and covid. And because we’re the size we are we’ve been able to survive and been able to take steps to get through these awkward situations in which we find ourselves.”

On the whole, Oldfield appears unfazed by the pandemic. The firm updated its IT system at the end of 2019, which meant that moving to remote working was straightforward. She admits the firm had never had any remote working prior to the covid-19 lockdown, but with the infrastructure in place “it was really quite seamless”.

Oldfield has an inkling that surviving a crisis is in the DNA of lawyers. “I think we must be quite a cunning lot”, she says. “We’ve always managed to see a way out of it. But I think you do have to remain positive; you have to carry on doing what you do and do it to the best of your ability.”

That said, Davis Blank Furniss did have to make use of the government’s furlough scheme and Oldfield recalls a palpable “jitteriness” among clients at the start of the crisis. However, she says staff are now back in the office and clients are keen to get their lives and businesses back to some form of normality.

CLIENT FACING

Davis Blank Furniss is no exception to the desire to get back to business as usual and has just relocated to Manchester’s Deva City Office Park from 90 Deansgate where it had been based since 1965.

The firm has leased a 4,709 sq ft self-contained building on a six-year lease and Oldfield says the new premises offer a far brighter, airier and welcoming location for both staff and clients. “It’s still in the city centre and it’s close to public transport links. We’ve got onsite parking for the first time, which I’m very excited about”, she says. “It’s just been refurbished so it’s lovely.”

Part of Oldfield’s strategy to retain the size and culture of the firm is also to maintain its approachable reputation. She believes the new premises will help with that. She describes the old building in Manchester’s Deansgate as old with a very traditional layout. “We wanted to promote the ideas of teams, be a little bit more open-plan. Just to improve communication really.”



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She admits that things have changed slightly with the emergence of covid-19 and people do want more remote access to solicitors, but Oldfield is confident that as a traditional firm, people will still want to pop in and talk face-to-face with their advisers.

For Oldfield, the pandemic has just highlighted how many different ways there are to provide a personal service and, going forward, that will include Zoom calls and using the phone, as much as face-to-face.

“We’ve all had to change and having the opportunity to meet clients now by Zoom, and other tools, just promotes efficiency”, she says. “We buy from people, we like to see who we’re dealing with and we like to see the whites of their eyes. We need to see the person, especially for a solicitor and client, because you have a very personal relationship and it needs to be right”.

In terms of marketing the firm, Oldfield says that a lot of the firm’s reputation still relies on word of mouth. It has a lot of repeat business and the intention is to serve clients throughout their lives, literally from cradle to grave.

However, Oldfield has also invested in a good SEO-optimised website, which is kept up-to-date and is regularly populated with articles and blogs from the fee-earners. “We also rely on social media for putting stories and articles out there”, she says.

“Usually we run events, but that’s a little bit on the back burner at the moment. Usually, we have some lovely events for our clients. At our Glossop office we have a much more personal way in which we promote them. We support the local golf club. We support local radio. And then we have referrals from clients and from intermediaries who we’ve worked for for a long time”, she explains.

While Glossop may seem an odd location for a second office, the firm has had a base there since 1877. It turns out that being embedded in Glossop has been pretty useful as the area has recently seen an injection of investment, bringing new opportunities to the firm.

“It used to be quite an elderly population, but now it’s been very gentrified, and a lot of businesses are moving out that way. So it’s a really good, fruitful area”, Oldfield says.

“People used to go to Buxton and I don’t know why but that side of the high peak really seems to struggle, whereas Glossop is thriving, there’s huge delight in the Marks and Spencer’s that has opened”, she jokes.

PII CRUNCH

Oldfield is generally upbeat in the face of the

myriad pressures facing businesses in general, not to mention legal services and personal injury in particular. However, discussing this year’s professional indemnity renewal period provokes a more impassioned reaction.

She describes Davis Blank Furniss as having been “lucky” for a number of years due to its low claims record. As a result, its premiums have remained low and never placed undue pressure on the firm financially.

“Last year we were told to get ready for a shock”, Oldfield says. But nothing happened. Then this year, when the firm went to renew, the price had rocketed. “Sadly, there are now very few insurers in the marketplace. And they’ve realised that there’s little competition and they can charge what they like”, she says.

Despite the very large increase, Oldfield said the firm has managed to pay the premium. However, she admits it was far higher than anticipated and it came as a shock. “Luckily, we’ve been monitoring our finances and our performance very regularly since the pandemic occurred. We used to have an equity meeting once a month. But during the pandemic, initially, we met once a week. And then once a fortnight. And we just took really tight control on our finances and luckily, because of that, we’ve been able to pay”, she says.

She expects that other firms would have struggled with the soaring premiums and she certainly doesn’t anticipate many firms being able to weather a similar rise again in future.

“It was a significant increase and one that we really felt was undeserved and unrealistic because of our claims record, which is really very low. I think once this round has taken place that there will be a bit of a market revolt”, she adds.

“Obviously we’re dedicated to continuing and whatever it is [next year], we’ll just have to absorb the cost. But I think that with everything else that’s going on, it will have to be looked at. I would hope that as a profession we rally together to fight it”.

Despite Oldfield’s PI rallying cry, she remains pragmatic as far as the rest of this year has panned out. “Once a pandemic hit, we were very concerned. But actually, now we’ve had time to digest what’s happened, we’ve had to make changes which are very positive”, she says.

For her, moving to remotely working, using cloud technology and conference calling technology has all proven there are numerous ways to provide a great service. “You only need to open up your eyes to what’s available and how we can best service our clients.” 



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Hannah Gannagé-Stewart

Hannah Gannagé-Stewart is managing editor of Solicitors Journal