

Trials and Tribulations

Interview: Nigel Lo

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Nigel Lo was admitted to practice in 2016 and now practices as a commercial and property lawyer at Perth-based firm, Robertson Hayles Lawyers. His energy and vision have set him down a long and enterprising road, which has taken him through some interesting twists and turns. In this interview with the Law Society's Young Lawyers Committee, he shares his take on the art of networking, deal-making and persevering through set-backs.

What's interesting to me is that you're a junior lawyer, but yet, you have some very unique experiences in dealing with large commercial developments and high net-worth individuals. Can you tell us a bit about yourself and what you do?

I have always been a people person.

If you were to ask how I spend my free time – it would probably be having coffee catch-ups with my friends, meeting new people and sharing ideas. I've always had a keen interest in community leadership. When I was 14, my mother made me join the Youth Division of Red Cross in my home town. That really helped me grow my confidence as I was a total introvert in primary school.

Over time I found myself involved in various non-profit organisations in Malaysia and I got to meet many lawmakers and prominent business leaders who themselves were part of those charities. I've always adopted the 'curious student' mindset by seeking advice and mentorship from those more experienced than I was. My mentors have helped me a great deal by introducing me to their network and a lot of opportunities have come from those connections.

What made you decide to do law?

I have always looked up to my father who has enjoyed a stellar career in the legal profession in Malaysia. While I was very young, I remember him turning down a personal offer from the current Chief Justice of Malaysia to be appointed to the bench of the High Court of Sarawak

in east Malaysia. As I grew older, I wanted to emulate him and so I decided to follow his footsteps.

Can you take me through some of your highs and lows? What are some particularly difficult moments in your professional life – and how did you overcome them?

I was diagnosed with ADHD when I was in primary school. ADHD is “under-diagnosed” in Malaysia and my teachers struggled to find the best way to help me get through my studies. My parents on the other hand refused to put me on medication and so I learnt to cope with ADHD without medication. Until today, I remain un-medicated.

Professionally, a particularly difficult deal that I was involved with was a large commercial development in Perth. I assisted a developer in securing private funding from my

contacts in Asia for the project. The relationship soured because the developer failed to deliver on what they had promised to our investors. Fortunately, we found other developers with the proper expertise to complete the project which is now under construction in the northern suburbs of Perth. One of the developers who offered to assist us happened to be the seller of another major project that our investor had previously acquired.

I guess one of the highs would be helping to run the digital campaign of a local Malaysian political party shortly after graduating. It was a challenge balancing a heavy study workload at the College of Law and running a significant part of an election campaign over three thousand miles away. We were very blessed that our candidates ended up winning five out of seven legislative assembly seats that the party contested in 2016.

These experiences of yours put you in situations where you deal with high-net-worth individuals. Can you share how you communicate with high-net-worth people and how you network with purpose?

The easiest way to connect with high-net-worth individuals or people of influence is to find a mutual friend you may have and ask for a connection. You must assure your mutual friend about your intentions. Be frank with them. Honesty is the best policy. Ask yourself, why do you want to connect with this particular person? Remember that you are leveraging someone else’s network. Because of that, this mutual friend or “connector” as I would call them would have to vouch for you. Their own reputation is on the stake so empathise with them. Assure the “connector” that you will not waste his or her friend’s time.

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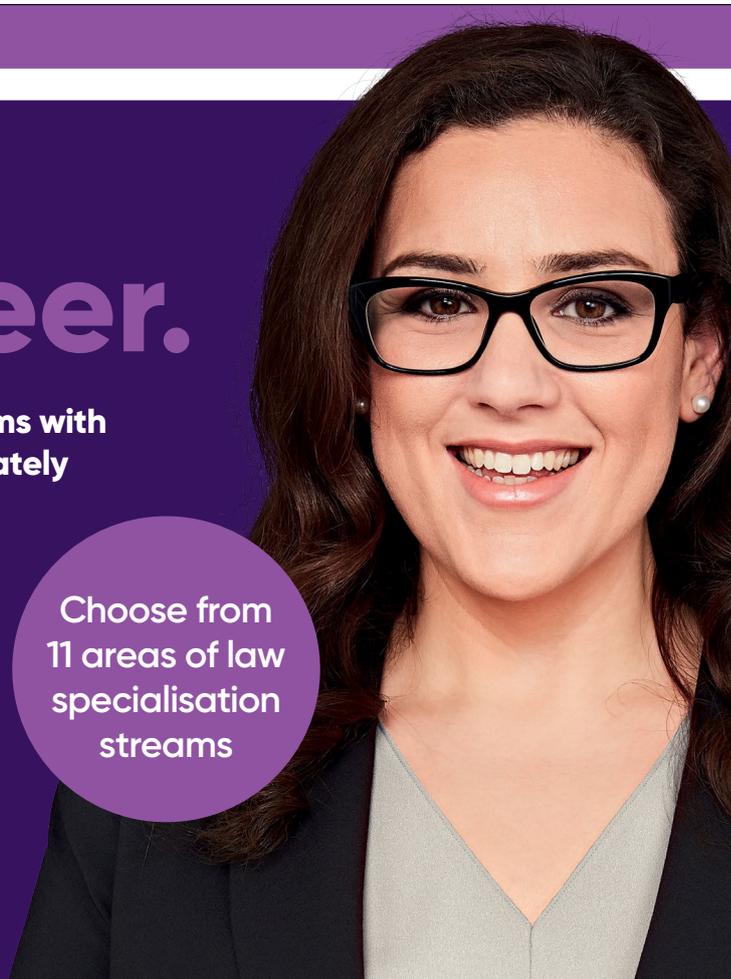
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to connect you, do some research and find out where these individuals hang out. Do they play golf? Which country clubs or private membership organisations do they frequent? Go there and engage with them. You can do this by attending monthly events hosted by those organisations and clubs. You should have done your research about who you wish to build a relationship with. Armed with that information, find a way to offer value to this person. This could be as simple as offering to connect your target individual to someone you believe can help them or benefit them in some way. Politely ask for their contact details or their business card after the conversation has warmed up. Once you have their contact details, you can follow up with them. If you remain actively engaged in the club or community, other members will notice and you may even be tapped on the shoulder to take up a volunteer board position. This will definitely boost your credibility in the organisation.

Lastly, I feel it is important to touch on the topic of 'mindset'. We tend to perceive high-net-worth individuals as those who seem to live in their own private, insulated world. They drive into gated communities, they relax at country clubs while we don't. This perception couldn't be further from the truth. Most are actually quite involved in the community. When you get to a certain social level, there's a motivation to be a central figure in the community and give back. If they are giving back to the community, by definition, they are involved in the community. If you truly want to crack into the high-net-worth market, you must first become part of that world and be in places where this group of individuals spend their time. From there you can ask for the appropriate introductions.

A lot of junior solicitors approach networking cautiously. Do you have any tips or advice to share with other junior solicitors when it comes to networking?

Networking events can be daunting, especially if you are an introvert.

Personally, I am not the biggest fan of networking events because I feel that it takes a long time to build a genuine relationship with someone new. Building a bond with a new contact can't be done in one networking event unless you click so well that you end up following up for regular catch-ups. Small talk is often shallow and that is how a conversation is when you meet people for the first time at an event.

For me, my secret sauce is found in LinkedIn. LinkedIn allows me to reach out directly to decision makers whose goals and needs are aligned with my services. If this person is going to an event I will be attending, I will first send them a message requesting some time to chat at the event. That way, this person is prepared for you and will warmly receive you.

If you are a lawyer, chances are that you are networking to bring in more clients. Put yourself in the shoes of a prospective client you wish to bring to your firm. What do they want to see in a lawyer? Most people would take comfort in having a lawyer who is caring but at the same time tough and knowledgeable. Having a good understanding of your prospect's industry and lingo is critical. If you speak their language, bonding becomes easier. Start with that and as time passes, you will develop your own preferred method of networking after some trial and error. Bottom line: know your client's industry well, speak their language, and show them you care about their business goals and their success.

For face-to-face networking, the key is to market who you are, not what you do. Build personal relationships with people, follow up for coffee meets or even lunch. Remind them that if they ever need help, that you have their back. This statement goes a long way in networking. You stand out from the crowd because you showed your caring personality to them, not just what you do for a job. If these prospects are in need of a lawyer, you will be at the top of their mind because of the personal connection they already have with you.

In your experience, how do you think Perth can be more attractive to ASEAN investors?

I would encourage Australians seeking to do business in Asia to understand the concept of "Guan Xi". Guan Xi is a central idea in Chinese society that describes the rudimentary dynamics of opening doors to new business opportunities. The concept is widely embraced among Asian businesses. The central idea can be likened to "mateship but in business". Loyalty is very important. Guan Xi, or personal connection, is powerful stuff, and it can divide the loyalties of the people your business or client depends on. When relationships come first, as they always do in China and Asia, you'd better know who's friends with whom. Because Guan Xi is so pervasive and powerful, it's crucial to understand and manage personal networks before they turn into liabilities. Businesses must bring transparency to existing relationships and prevent conflicts of interest from developing.

Are there any pitfalls when it comes to 'Guan Xi'? Can you give me some examples?

That's a great question. I have lost count of deals that have gone sideways because of a lack of cultural understanding. I am referring to cross border and international deals where project funders are usually from China, Malaysia and Singapore. A couple of years ago, I witnessed firsthand how a developer and his business broker lost a potential multi-million funding deal because the broker had tried to cut the "gatekeepers" to the investor, out of the deal. The gatekeepers had helped make the introduction to the investor however the broker wanted a large share of the commission and tried to cut the "gatekeepers" out of the transaction. When the gatekeepers inevitably found out that such bad faith was present in the deal, they collectively decided to convince the investor to dump the deal saying in Chinese that "there is no honour in this transaction". Guan Xi is built between parties over many



years of trust, loyalty and mateship. As such, the Guan Xi between the investor and his long-time associates prevailed.

What projects are you working on now, and what is in the horizon for you?

I hope to be able to continue connecting Australian businesses with our investors in Malaysia

and foster greater international trade between the two countries. Australian entrepreneurs are very innovative but access to private capital remains a major hurdle many startups have to overcome in order to scale quickly. With a slightly reduced company tax rate for SMEs, Australia is slowly becoming more attractive to foreign investors. Australia has steered through tough economic times well and I believe

Australia will continue to be a major player in the Asia-Pacific region.

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