

Edition: October 2020

Q&A: Annette English – “Anyone who is doing the same thing they were doing 15 years ago I do not believe will survive the coming changes.”

In our Q&A, Morgan + English Commercial Lawyers’ managing partner Annette English explains how COVID-19 has underlined some of the strengths of the firm’s innovative model; why she and her team have been so committed to embracing technology innovations; and how juggling multiple businesses and board roles is delivering great opportunities and networks.

With your husband and business partner Daniel Morgan, you run a deliberately niche agribusiness legal practice from your offices in Scone in the Hunter Valley and Balmain in Sydney, specialising in the thoroughbred industry, beef production, food-processing and infrastructure. Tell us how you got started almost five years ago.

When we started the business it was very unusual for a boutique commercial practice for the area, so it’s been an interesting experiment and process. We’d broken away from a firm in Muswellbrook, a town best known for mining, and opened our doors in Scone, which is in the heart of the Upper Hunter. It’s the second-largest thoroughbred breeding area in the world. We had connections with a lot of high-net-worth clients and offered what I call an “external inhouse counsel” practice for these people and their businesses. From the outset, we said we’re not doing what we called mums and dads law, and we’re not doing crime or family law work, which has long been the staple of most rural and regional practices. We wanted to set up a boutique agribusiness firm that was tailored to our target demographic who were seeking tailored services, and it was terrifying.

How did you arrive at your unique mix of practice areas?

Daniel and I had been involved in the thoroughbred industry for many years and felt we had developed a high level of specialised skill in that space in terms of legal services. However, for our own protection and the scope of work that we wanted to do, we took the skills we’d learnt from that industry to service a broader agribusiness clientele. That led to having multifaceted specialties.

Your firm won the gong for Regional/Suburban Law Firm of the Year 2020 in the Australian Law Awards. Do you see that as an endorsement of your model?

Well, the main thing is that it's nice for the morale of the firm and it also represents great affirmation from our clients. We have a lot of great, savvy clients and they've trusted us and taken us to the level of their business. That's a real honour. We're doing something different and it's good to see that recognised in the form of an award, particularly in a regional space.

Morgan + English now has a team of 18, with 11 fulltime and part-time lawyers who are supported by a strong junior and paralegal team. How does it work?

At the old firm we had a lot of administrative staff, but what I wanted at Morgan + English were staff who were more engaged in the legal and business process – people at a junior level who could comprehend what we were doing as a firm and participate in the process. Our daughter, Jemima, is studying law and I knew we needed more people like her – a smart student who is happy to type and do the photocopying, but who if I give her a problem can do some research, come back with an answer and complete the first draft on a matter for us. We have five high-level paralegals and what they bring to the firm is amazing, including great agility and cost-effectiveness.

How has the firm fared during COVID-19?

Like many firms, we experienced a big jolt in March and April when we had just taken a lease on the Balmain office. I was in the foetal position and thinking 'how are we going to survive?' However, I spent about 10 days developing a COVID-19 policy and we took it a day at a time. In a sense, we were really lucky because when we opened our firm we made it a paperless office. That suited the pandemic because we had a lot of junior staff who we had to manage remotely while using technology in a clever way. We started training immediately on Microsoft Teams and implemented a daily 9.15am group meeting and a 4.45pm close-of-day meeting so we could communicate clearly with everyone in the firm and let them know what was happening. That was a significant change for our business. Since COVID-19, there's been a lot of freedom to try different business models. There has traditionally been a conservative element within the law – both with firms and clients – and some clients will come with you on a new journey and others will say 'that's not how lawyers behave'. The freedom as a result of COVID-19 is that a lot of those shackles have been removed and you don't have to behave in a traditional way. For example, we now have a virtual telephone reception rather than having someone on the calls all the time. Our firm hadn't done it before because I was concerned about client expectations. But it works, and the current environment has given us a chance to get rid of some incredible inefficiencies and smarten up profitability.

We understand that you have a lot of city clients who have properties and business interests in the Hunter Valley. How do you manage operating across regional and city offices?

That's part of the COVID-19 silver lining. Everyone knows how to do Zoom meetings now, whereas in the past we'd have been tearing around the country on planes for face-to-face meetings. Clients are much more amenable to organising an online meeting and, as their lawyers, we can pull up documents on the screen and type on them in real time and turn things around really quickly. In the past we'd have had to email the document to them and ask them to look over it and come back to us later. In today's world, you've got to make the transaction happen quickly.

Morgan + English prides itself on providing flexible online legal services which suit the needs of your clients, along with using the latest technology. How do you stay up to date with tech tools and what works for you?

It's almost one of the job requirements of our paralegals to keep introducing the 'older people' in the firm to different technology. We're constantly reviewing processes and using artificial intelligence and technology to increase efficiency. A lot of firms are terrified of AI, but we use it to do base-level tasks very quickly. That frees up our lawyers to sell their skills and expertise to clients, rather than focusing on process. On the accounting side we use Receipt Bank software to process bills, receipts and invoices, which cuts down on data entry. Microsoft Teams has been a very important tool, not just the audio-visual aspect of it but also its project-management facility, Planner, which helps with personal and teamwork planning. There are also a whole lot of add-ins such as calendar and task-setting tools, and the platform has been great for monitoring our paralegals and reporting back to them.

Why have you been so adamant about embracing technology?

I'm 53 now and it's sometimes difficult to keep up with technology changes, but I've always been an Apple geek and over a decade ago I got the very first iPhone in the Hunter Valley. As a graduate in the early 90s, I worked for Blake Dawson Waldron and their technology was very advanced for the time, including rolling out Apple laptops. So I've always loved technology and new gadgets. I've worked with lawyers in the past who have adopted the voice of 'I'm old school and I like traditional paper' and I remember a time when Daniel starting sounding like that. I said to him: "If you don't get on board with technology now you will be redundant." The same is still true today. It's not just about you as a lawyer, it's about what your clients expect. No one will be interested in you being 'old school'. When we left the old firm, it had about eight administration staff and now at Morgan + English we have one person in the role working three days a week. Intelligent technology use is part of how we provide a cost-effective and speedy solution for clients. We would not be able to do what we are doing now, or have the clients we have, if we were acting like a traditional rural law firm. We'd look like Luddites.

What are the key challenges in running a boutique firm in the current COVID-19 environment?

Uncertainty. I had been looking to do more recruitment earlier this year, but I put it on hold because I was terrified of the uncertainty. The firm has ended up being smashed with work and it has sometimes been tough to get all of it done. The pandemic is affecting so many businesses differently, but there is still the threat of the impact that the recession will have on the economy. Will it be dire? Will we start to come out of it quickly? For the industries in which we specialise, food-processing has gone through the roof and there has been a lot of activity in agribusiness. However, if I look at the thoroughbred industry, it's a secondary industry. So if, for example, you're a successful plumber with a chain of businesses and you love horse racing then you'll be tempted to buy a horse and get involved. However, if your main plumbing business starts to take a hit, you'll cut horse racing. So I see some possible fracturing in that sector and, as a whole, the firm is in a holding position at the moment. We're not making the bold decisions I had been planning before the pandemic.

What's the key to getting and keeping good clients?

We have the trust of our clients. Law is all about trust and relationships. Our firm has a lot of high-net-worth clients who are anti-Big Law firms. They find them very slow, they over-complicate their transactions and they are very expensive. We're not cheap, but I believe that we're good value and agile. We work hard to deliver to the clients' business needs and look beyond just the "legal answer".

What do you relish about practising law?

I love the prospect of making a business that is different. Law is going through a massive change and anyone who is doing the same thing they were doing 15 years ago I do not believe will survive the coming changes.. The clients won't accept it. At the same time, I know there are some new law firms doing some extraordinary stuff, but they may be too scary for our clients, who are often around the same age as Daniel and me. They want a high level of legal services, but they want us to do it in their language too. To see the vision we had for Morgan + English actually coming to fruition is very exciting.

You are very much part of the horse-racing scene in NSW. What's happening in that area for you?

Racing is a big part of our life. Our horse, Al Mah Haha, competed recently at Randwick in the 2020 Kosciuszko, a big race that is like the country version of the famous Everest race. It got held up and came sixth, which was so disappointing. If it had come third we'd have won a lot of money! But the great thing about racing is that it's an incredible community. We love it.

Outside of Morgan + English you have an exhausting schedule running two other businesses, Safe Industries Australia (a work, health and safety consultancy firm) and Thoroughbred Recoveries (which helps businesses in the thoroughbred industry resolve debt issues). You are also company secretary of Arcadian, a global supplier of organic and natural meat, and a board member of Martins Stock Haulage. How do you fit it all in?

I have to say this year has been a bit tiring. However, being involved in all these interconnected businesses leads to cross-pollination of ideas and information, and the roles help give me gravitas in the legal business because I can understand all the issues around cattle and agistment and water licences and so forth. Being in those different meetings you start to understand other businesses' strengths and vulnerabilities, and as a lawyer you think about what you can bring to those businesses and your own.

Can you explain your management approach?

I haven't had any formal training in management, which I'd like to get. As a leader, though, I see a lot of people working in businesses complain that "I don't know about that" or "I didn't hear that." So the key is to keep the lines of communication open, which is what we do through the Microsoft Teams meetings that I mentioned earlier twice a day. I try to make sure that everyone knows what's happening in the firm, even the matters they are not involved in, and that they are also involved in the triumphs of the firm and what's happening with our clients. It's a very inclusive model and we like people to have buy-in with the firm's success.

What is next for you?

It's hard being a business owner. You're wearing many hats and trying to be good across a lot of things while delivering a service. For lawyers, it can be tough because they aren't typically trained in business unless they've gone out and done specific business training or worked in non-legal areas. You're trained as a professional and you learn as you go. For me, the next stage is being better trained in business and further developing those skills so I can take our firm to the next stage. We can't stand still.

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