

DAVID MCLEAN

MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY OPPORTUNITY

It was by chance that Westpac New Zealand CEO David McLean found himself filling in for his banker colleague, only to find he had changed occupations altogether. The former private practice and in-house lawyer tells Sasha Borissenko about his rise to the top.

HAILING FROM a farm in the Bay of Plenty, David McLean finds it hard to put his finger on why he decided to pursue a career in law.

"I was probably not smart enough to be a scientist, and accounting or engineering seemed a little stale for me. Although the arts were interesting, it didn't seem to lead

training ground, he says.

"Litigation seems quite glamorous but I was thrown into the deep end - the District Court and the Children's Court.

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to a career at that time so it came down to a process of elimination."

He went into private practice for three years after university, which made for a good

a chance that the outcome can be outside of your control - say it's your client not telling you the whole story or the other side throwing a curveball."



Instead, David found commercial to be more enjoyable insofar as he enjoyed the process of working with both parties to make a deal happen in a way that serves all interests.

It was thus no surprise David decided to move in-house.

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"I suppose I found it logical to then work more directly with a client. You get to see beyond the transaction, and being part of business strategy was more interesting."

But it's not a case of whether in-house or private practice is better, David insists, as each is important in its own right.

"It's very important for any large corporation to have a strong in-house team because they live and breathe the company strategy, which an external team can't be expected to do. Having said that I don't think the right model is to have an in-house team doing everything. The reason for that is there's an attraction that the cost of having in-house may seem lower than the rates you get quoted from external, but that's superficial long term."

There's less flexibility and optionality with all in-house lawyers and it's very important for the corporation to get the best person for the job, he says.

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cleverly using the best of external lawyers, as well as building good relationships.”

But in-house lawyering isn’t for everyone, he says.

“Private practice is arguably a more pure form of the law. But if you’re wanting greater client exposure and to drive deeper into their issues, the possibilities in the corporate environment are great.

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From lawyer to banker

After practising as an in-house lawyer for six or so years David made the transition almost accidentally from in-house lawyer in a bank, to being a banker, which eventually led him to secure the position of Westpac New Zealand CEO.

“I’d often be in meetings as the in-house lawyer with clients and bankers, and one day a banker couldn’t come so I filled in last minute. Then I found myself doing the negotiations during the next meeting and so on.

“When I look back I guess you can plan your career as much as you like but you should also be prepared to take things and opportunities when they come to you.

“I do miss the law on occasion. I keep my practising certificate current, mostly for sentimental reasons. The camaraderie in the law is wonderful. But now I only use it very rarely - to admit my children’s friends to the bar.”

After working for various national and international banks he took up a job at Westpac in 1999. In mid-2014 he was asked to come back from New York to be acting CEO for six months, and in February 2015 he took up the role in a permanent capacity.

“I’d been working for Westpac for 16 years and throughout that time I sat around forming a view of what I’d do if I was in charge and now I’ve got my dream job where I’m doing just that.

“The interesting thing about the banking world is that digital technology and innovation have the power now to disrupt traditional models of how we operate. We have to change

and adapt. We have to grasp this opportunity to improve the quality of the customer experience. We have to do everything to a high standard, and as efficiently as possible.”

Benefits of the job

“It’s great being the captain of a diverse team whose job it is to set the strategy and run every aspect of the bank. I enjoy steering the team in the right direction and it’s important to ensure we’re working closely together.”

A typical day for David involves getting to work around 7am with a coffee, where he plans out what’s in store - whether that’s meeting with internal and external parties, meeting customers, staff, regulators or external counter parties.

“There’s definitely plenty of variety. It’s all set out months in advance, which helps things.

“It’s a 24/7 job, well at least you’re always on call. The role of a bank is to keep the machinery of the economy moving along so it’s important to be available, because if things go wrong there are very widespread effects.”

But David does enjoy his down time, whether that’s spending time with his family, reading a book or walking along the beach

CAREER TIMELINE

- 1982 - 1985**
solicitor at Macalister Mazengarb
- 1985 - 1988**
company secretary at Natwest NZ
- 1988 - 1994**
capital markets at Southpac
- 1994 - 1998**
New Zealand branch manager at Deutsche Bank
- 1999 - 2010**
MD NZ for Westpac New Zealand Limited
- 2010-2012**
general manager for Private, Wealth and Insurance, and Institutional Banking at Westpac New Zealand Limited.
- 2012-2014**
Head of the Americas for Westpac Institutional Bank
- June 2015 - Jan 2015**
acting CEO of Westpac New Zealand Limited
- February 2015 - present**
Westpac New Zealand Limited

with his dog, for example.

It’s the interaction with people, whether they’re clients or customers, that’s kept him enthused throughout his career.

“I’ve always liked trying to understand people’s needs and to determine whether, as a service provider, we are meeting them. I suppose it’s now frustrating that I don’t have as much time to do that in person.”

Catering to customer needs is something that he thinks he developed thanks to working in the legal sector.

“Training in the law made me a better banker. You’re used to clients’ interests being paramount and, as a banker, customer interests are paramount. So that came naturally to me when I moved [into banking].”**NZL**

FROM BANKING TO TACKLING CHILD POVERTY

“I think the thing I’m passionate about is New Zealand and New Zealand’s economy progressing. I feel that the banks have an important role to play in that.”

Outside of the workplace David hopes to improve the situation for New Zealand children.

“I want New Zealand to grow. It’s shocking to think some kids in New Zealand are being born who may never have the chance to succeed. It’s embarrassing to think kids have third-world diseases, or can’t read or write. Everyone needs a fair chance at the bottom end.”

As a result, Westpac are supporting a pilot campaign with The Middlemore Foundation for Health Innovation that aims to bring together the three elements of education, health and tackling issues in the home.

“We are still at the beginning stages but we want to help to set these kids up for success, otherwise they

have no chance to have a good education, a good job and will be condemned to terrible outcomes.”

By working with schools and students’ homes it is expected truancy rates will be reduced, NCEA pass rates will improve and the early detection and prevention of illnesses will contribute to better child health.

The three-year pilot will be independently evaluated by Victoria University and currently involves six schools and 1,700 students in Papakura, one of New Zealand’s poorer communities. If successful, the aim is to roll the programme, known as Mana-ā-riki, across the country.

