

EIP



International Women's Day 2020: Angela Jack

Barrister Angela Jack lends her support to International Women's Day 2020 and suggests that by creating a more equal workplace companies can retain talent.

Describe your role at EIP

I'm an employed barrister working as a senior associate in the litigation team. I am involved in the teams putting together our litigation matters for court. I delegate work to associates, trainees and paralegals and work collaboratively in teams of up to ten people including a partner managing the case.

What are your main challenges?

The biggest challenges are keeping on top of the big picture and the details. Some of the litigation is big multi-jurisdictional litigation where it's a fast-moving area of the law. You have to know what's going on in the bit you're dealing with, but you also need to know how that fits in with the client's bigger picture and also how it fits into the legal landscape which is developing. There's also a lot of detail in the work we are doing at EIP and you have to have an eye for that detail. You can't do all of that yourself and you have to make sure you're confident that you have asked other people to do the right things and they are confident they know what they are doing.

What career path have you taken?

My route has been non-typical. I wanted to do IP law when I was at Bar school and up until doing my degree I had followed a scientific route but I then did a law degree. I found when I was looking for pupillage I really should have done a scientific degree if I had wanted to do IP law. So I pursued a career as a barrister and ended up doing social housing law for over a decade. I found I enjoyed it and did that for ten years. I then looked

for a change, wanted to be employed rather than self-employed and found that my litigation experience meant that I was of use to the EIP team even though I didn't have a science degree.

International Women's Day is about celebrating social, economic and political achievements of women. Which personal achievement are you most proud of?

I'm particularly pleased that whilst I took a long and winding route to get here I have ended up doing IP law which is what I wanted to do when I was at sixth form.

The common perception of the legal industry is that it's male-dominated. What has been your experience in the firms you have worked?

When I was practising at the Bar and now, it's not male dominated in terms of numbers but you do find the very senior roles tend to be male dominated and there are a lot of reasons for that. A lot it is historical and even if you have change, at the time that I came into the profession the people senior to me were pre that change and tended to be disproportionately male.

There are definitely problems with retaining women in the law, still. Having children is a real pressure point and the law is not always as flexible as it might be. I think it's interesting that it can find a certain flexibility in other situations that it historically couldn't find when looking at people with family commitments. Going way back there were barristers who would have been MPs or journalists and done something alongside their work at the Bar and clerks could manage that but they couldn't countenance the idea of somebody having caring responsibilities as well. That has changed enormously even in my time at the Bar and certainly looking at people who are employed as lawyers there has been massive change there and people are starting to realise they can be more flexible. Not all firms are as enlightened as EIP on that front.

Can you describe any initiatives you have seen or been involved in which promote a working culture of equality, diversity and inclusivity?

I've been involved with an organisation called The Sutton Trust who are doing a lot to try and help people from non-traditional backgrounds to get into the law and challenging a lot of the barriers that people from more privileged backgrounds don't even realise exist in terms of connections to work experience and having the aspiration in the first place and knowing those careers are out there and available to you. I've been involved on and off for a number of years since when I was an independent barrister and EIP has been involved in various initiatives.

What simple things can everyone do to help create a more gender equal workplace?

My big one is use of language and thinking about the preconceptions that can come with the language you use. For example, even amongst the paralegals themselves they might refer to themselves as “the girls”. Equality cuts both ways; we have a male working in that team and I think it’s just being careful not to do that. Also not to refer to themselves as “girls” because I think it suggests where they see themselves in the hierarchy and that’s not necessarily where they should see themselves in the hierarchy – it makes them sound more junior.

The 2020 International Women’s Day campaign theme is #EachforEqual. What is your interpretation of that?

Equality generally is about equality of opportunity and that cuts all ways. It’s about making sure that women have equal opportunities in the workforce but also that men have equal opportunities to take on parental roles without barriers to that. There is a suggestion that if men ask for parental leave they run into the different but equal problems as women who are taking time off work. If you address those issues you reduce some of the systemic barriers, particularly to women who have children. There’s nothing to be gained from even unconscious bias against women with children because men with children might also make the same choices. If you have two people of a certain age where they might have children and you think either might go off on parental leave that shouldn’t then feed into how you differentiate between them.

Another big driver is recruiting and retaining the best people and not putting artificial barriers in their recruitment and retention procedures. The kind of haemorrhaging of women that goes on at the independent Bar is not in the industry’s best interests either because you plough all this energy and money into training people and then lose them at a level when they are starting to really contribute back. That’s a bad business decision as well.