

# Young ICCA Interview: Amanda Lee

## **Kluwer Arbitration Blog**

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Young ICCA

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*Amanda is an independent arbitrator and a Consultant at Seymours, based in London. Her practice focuses on international commercial arbitration, domestic and international commercial litigation and Privy Council appellate procedure. Her experience includes disputes arising in relation to a variety of sectors, including the recycling, construction, automotive and finance sectors. She has acted and participated in international and domestic arbitrations conducted on an ad hoc basis and under institutional rules.*

*Amanda completed her LLB at Aberystwyth University, Wales and her LPC at the University of Law, UK. She is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators, admitted to the New York Bar and a Solicitor-Advocate with higher rights of audience in civil proceedings in England and Wales. She speaks, publishes and tweets about issues relating to alternative dispute resolution and diversity.*

*Amanda is the founder of Careers in Arbitration, a member of the Board of Directors of ArbitralWomen and the Steering Committee of Young ArbitralWomen Practitioners, an Ambassador for the Alliance for Equality in Dispute Resolution and a visiting lecturer at the University of Law, UK.*

### **What drew you to the world of International Arbitration?**

I joined a dispute resolution boutique handling international work so it was inevitable that I would cross paths with international arbitration. When I became dual-qualified in England and Wales and New York I recognized that international arbitration provided opportunities to develop a transferable skillset in a way that English litigation practice did not.

**When did you start laying the groundwork for a career in International Arbitration? (e.g., was it while in law school, during a moot court, during your career or placed on a case**

***within your firm)***

Unlike so many of the industrious aspiring practitioners of today, I cannot claim to have planned to be an international arbitration lawyer prior to entering practice. I was lucky enough to join a firm where I had the opportunity to work on international and domestic arbitration matters and international litigation from the outset. However, as I look back, it seems like I was always interested in a legal career with an international component.

My goal from a young age was to qualify as a lawyer in America so international practice was always on the cards. I guess that I laid some groundwork without knowing it though. I chose to study International Law and Human Rights Law at undergraduate level, which proved to be sensible. I did not participate in moot courts – I used to be terrified of public speaking and advocacy was the bane of my existence. I particularly enjoyed civil litigation at law school so dispute resolution was ultimately a logical progression.

***What kind of groundwork did you do to set yourself up? (e.g., what steps did you take to enter the field?)***

Having entered the field of arbitration as a by-product of becoming a litigator, for a number of years I was content to simply undertake arbitration work and develop my knowledge and practical skills. After practicing for a number of years, however, my firm encouraged me to formalize my practical knowledge by completing the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators' Accelerated Membership Program, before ultimately progressing to Fellowship.

In the year prior to becoming a Fellow I began to take positive steps to establish a presence in the field: writing my first article, speaking at my first arbitration event and so on. Social media ultimately became one of my key tools and I invested time in working out how to use it effectively and how to avoid the pitfalls – poorly written posts full of typographical errors that express controversial views are best avoided, for example. I began joining committees shortly thereafter because it was important to me to give something back to the wider arbitration community.

My committee appointments ultimately led to leadership roles, which I consider to be invaluable when it comes to establishing yourself and making connections. I had the pleasure of serving as the first female chair of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators' Young Members' Group for two years, and I now have the pleasure of serving as a Director of ArbitralWomen. Both roles have allowed me to work with fantastic colleagues from all over the world.

I did a lot of additional groundwork before I began to sit as an arbitrator though – but that is another story.

***Describe a pivotal moment in your career in arbitration and how did that affect your career (e.g., an opportunity to work with a prominent arbitrator/on a pioneering case?)***

As an aspiring arbitrator, one encounters the chicken and egg problem – to obtain appointments, it often seems like one must have been appointed and vice versa. Obtaining appointments is challenging at the best of times but when you are 5'1" (154 cm) and people regularly assume that you are a trainee or a paralegal (no disrespect intended to the many lovely and impressive trainees and paralegals out there) it can be particularly demoralizing. Let's face it, when people hear the word 'arbitrator', it is still the case that few will picture someone who looks like me.

So, my first nomination to act as an arbitrator in an international arbitration, as a party-nominated arbitrator in an institutional energy-related arbitration back in 2016, was a bit of a game changer for me. Of course, getting nominated and getting appointed are two separate hurdles – and that arbitration ultimately did not proceed – but it helped me to properly picture myself on the other side of the table for the first time.

***If we look at arbitration as a battlefield, what are the three metaphorical weapons any lawyer needs, and why?***

Words: as a lawyer, words are your greatest weapons. Arbitration lawyers must be able to wield words with confidence, weaving compelling and persuasive stories, communicating their meaning in a clear and comprehensive manner and adapting to the unexpected as and when required. If a lawyer cannot wield words well, then the battle is over before it has begun.

Humanity: the ability to simply be nice; to treat your opponents, parties, witnesses – basically, everyone – with civility and to resist the urge to rise to the bait when others do not behave in kind; is often undervalued. Empathy can also help you to more effectively convey your client’s story. Never make the mistake of confusing politeness or niceness with weakness though.

Humor: last but not least, a good sense of humor can be a very effective weapon if you know how to use it. In particular, being able to laugh at yourself is invaluable. This field can be stressful and although we all know when we must be serious, we are all human too. Caution is required though, as international arbitration requires significant cultural sensitivity and humor, unlike laughter, is sadly not a universal language.

***Upon reflection, are there any decisions you made that you feel aspiring arbitration practitioners could learn from?***

Do not waste time wondering if you are good enough when an interesting opportunity presents itself – I did too much of that at the beginning of my career. Many of the most rewarding things I have done in recent years have happened because I had a cup of tea with someone or volunteered to speak at or organize an event. Given the chance again I would decide to start saying ‘yes’ to opportunities at an earlier stage of my career. I always encourage my mentees and the aspiring practitioners that talk to me about their careers to look for, create and take advantage of opportunities.

***Is there any additional candid advice or insight that you can offer to assist those who are entering the field, deciding whether to enter the field, or already are in the field of International Arbitration?***

Recognize that the world of international arbitration is much bigger on the inside. Arbitration is a form of dispute resolution with its own unique features, but understanding the law applicable to different types of dispute is as important as understanding procedural norms. So, resist the urge to over-specialize too early in your career. Arbitrations do not take place in the abstract – they involve commercial parties, sales of goods, investors, patents, mergers, acquisitions, charter-parties, insurance and more. It is not enough to simply understand institutional rules, the New York Convention and which law applies to which part of the underlying contract.

For those deciding whether or not to enter the field, think very carefully. It can be very rewarding but it is also challenging and for many the route to success is paved with rejection. You will need thick skin to survive. There are a lot of excellent candidates and not enough jobs. Tread carefully and proceed with your eyes open.

For those entering the field, having excellent academics, relevant experience and enviable language skills is not enough. Success will not come looking for you. You have to make your own way and identify the approaches that work for you. The arbitration community is full of wonderful, supportive people but you have to find them, work out how you might be able to engage with them, give something back and hopefully build long term professional relationships. Oh, and learn how to use social media properly – be careful not to create content that will come back to haunt you as your career progresses though!

For those who are lucky enough to be practising in this field, do whatever you can to keep getting better. Read a wide variety of different, good quality publications and books – it will improve your writing. Give at least as much back to the arbitration community as you get from it, whether by mentoring, teaching, sitting as an arbitrator at moot competitions, serving on committees or contributing to thought leadership initiatives. Look after yourself though – balance is important. I learned that the hard way.

Arbitration is a competitive and demanding field and challenging to break into as a result. That being said, I developed the [#CareersinArbitration](#) project to try and make things a little bit easier. My initiative aims to try and make information about entering the field more accessible to excellent candidates from all over the world. For those who do not know the ‘right’ people yet and may not hear about vacancies over a coffee or at an event in a particular city, inside knowledge can be invaluable. There is a lot more to come in the future so if you are trying to enter the field, watch this space and follow [Careers in Arbitration](#) and the hashtag [#CareersinArbitration](#) on LinkedIn.