

Kluwer Arbitration Blog

Tips from the Top: YICCA Blog Interview with Jadranka Jakovcic

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1. What drew you to the world of International Arbitration?

Before moving to the United States, I practiced law in Croatia where I gained litigation experience, among other. I love the dispute resolution aspect of legal work, and especially that of advocating for clients before a court or tribunal. During my Bluebook traineeship at the Legal Service of the European Commission, I had the invaluable opportunity of attending a hearing before the Court of Justice of the European Union, which inspired me to continue my professional development as a dispute resolution lawyer.

As the number of cases against EU member states started increasing, I saw an opportunity to develop specialized knowledge in the field of Investment Treaty Arbitration, an emerging field that not many in Croatia had knowledge about.

What first drew me to international arbitration remains the reason I keep being drawn to it. Practicing international arbitration requires knowledge beyond solely legal expertise; starting with knowledge of a particular industry to understanding the geopolitical background of disputes. One is continuously exposed to new subject matters and issues, thus perpetually challenged into learning something new.

2. 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)

Shortly after my tenure at the European Commission, I applied for a master's program and was awarded a scholarship to pursue an LL.M. in International Dispute Resolution at Fordham Law School. There, I started laying the groundwork for a career in international arbitration. I focused on various dispute resolution courses, from investment arbitration, to mediation, to international investment law.

Knowing I wanted to pursue an international arbitration career after graduating from the LL.M., I was fortunate enough to have some exceptional professors that recognized my passion for the field and prompted me to start researching and writing about topics beyond pure classroom work. Though still only theoretical, this was the first substantial exposure to international arbitration.

In addition to the classes and research projects, I became a member of the Fordham moot court team and competed in an all-LL.M. arbitration moot competition in Washington, D.C that year. The moot case was an investment treaty arbitration, which was the perfect opportunity to better understand how practicing in the field looks like. Working on the submission and preparing for the mock hearing was so rewarding, that I knew this was the career I wanted to continue pursuing for the foreseeable future. Now that I practice in the field and work on actual cases, I know it for a fact.

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

I understood early on that it would be challenging to break into the field. I knew I needed to excel in school and, moreover, look for opportunities to expand both my knowledge and expertise in international arbitration.

Being part of a class of students who were all smart and hard-working young practitioners, I was honored to graduate valedictorian of the International Dispute Resolution LL.M. program. At the same time, I was conscious of the fact that I needed to grow a professional network before an opportunity would ever arise. I used every occasion to do so, attending arbitration events and participating in projects. Slowly but steadily I started to develop a network that would become a cornerstone to my arbitration career.

Additionally, in order to keep up with the continuous development of international arbitration, I volunteered to work on projects that would hone the skill-set needed in the practice. Some of those projects involved working as a research assistant to Fordham Law Professor Josefa Sicard-Mirabal on her book *Introduction to Investor-State Arbitration* and being a judicial trainee with Justice Charles E. Ramos who, at that time, was designated to handle all international arbitration cases filed in the Commercial Division of the New York Supreme Court. These experiences were crucial in that they helped me develop the necessary skill-set to get a foot in the community of international arbitration.

4. 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?)

A pivotal moment in my career was the job offer to work for the top tier international arbitration law firm of Curtis, Mallet-Prevost, Colt & Mosle LLP. Being part of a team working on some of the most significant high-stake international arbitration cases in this field has definitely set my career path. At Curtis teams are big enough to cover every aspect of any given case, but at the same time cases are staffed to entrust a lot of responsibilities at an associate level. I am therefore learning much faster than I would have imagined.

I experienced how hard it was to land this type of position, and I feel very fortunate and grateful to have this opportunity to be here today. I look forward to all the challenges that further practice will bring my way to grow into the accomplished arbitration practitioner I aspire to be.

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

Perseverance. Starting with the job search when fresh out of law school, which can be lengthy and, at times, a discouraging process, to day-to-day life and work, it is important to stay levelheaded. Hurdles inevitably arise along the way. Setting clear goals and knowing your priorities helps to stay on the path towards achieving those goals. For those who are trying to enter the field and are still unsure if this is what you really want, try to get a feel of what it is like to practice in international arbitration by talking to practitioners. Job satisfaction, which ultimately translates into overall complacency, can only be achieved when you are satisfied with the work that you do day in and day out. When you have a clear idea of what you want, tenacity despite “failure” is really the only option.

Dedication. Putting your heart in what you do and perseverance are a must. Nevertheless, no results will be achieved unless these are combined with hard work. And – hard work requires dedication. Setting realistic short-term and long-term goals and devotedly working towards them entails genuine commitment. Like many others, an international arbitration career is a marathon, not a sprint. Therefore, pace yourself, and be patient.

Resilience. Compliments are great, but it is the challenging situations, the criticisms and the mistakes, that will toughen you up and help you prosper. So – be open to hear these criticisms, and be thankful to receive it. If properly accepted, constructive feedback can only help you thrive. The nature of this job, its unpredictability, its uncertainty, and constant change, calls for resilient personalities.

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

Every day we make seemingly minor decisions, and choose between options. Each of these options can potentially take our life in opposite directions. Therefore, when compounded, these minor

decisions can have a major impact on the path our life will take us on.

For me, the decision to start a career in international arbitration in New York, far away from my family and friends back home, might have been one of the toughest so far. At the same time, consciously making this choice, and having selfless support of my family, left no room for doubts.

Like in any demanding job, one has to make many, sometimes tough, decisions and, inevitably, sacrifices. Therefore, it is important to have priorities set right and to know that this is the path we have chosen, and continue to choose every day.

7. 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?

Do not wait for an opportunity to come up; go out there and create one. Be patient. Be honest. Be genuine. Work hard. Once you break that glass ceiling, and achieve your goals – never forget where you came from, and continue to work harder.

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