

Kluwer Arbitration Blog

Interviews with Our Editors: In Conversation with Ban Jiun Ean, Chief Executive of Maxwell Chambers

Arie C. Eernisse (Associate Editor) (Shin & Kim) · Tuesday, August 15th, 2023



*Ban Jiun Ean is the Chief Executive of **Maxwell Chambers**, the world's first integrated dispute resolution center in the heart of Singapore. Maxwell Chambers assembled arbitral institutions, service providers, and legal practitioners under the same roof, making the Chamber a one-stop shop for customers in a facility equipped with best-in-class hearing facilities and state-of-the-art supporting technology. Jiun Ean studied law at the National University of Singapore and started his career as a policymaker at Singapore's Ministry of Law. Jiun Ean led Maxwell Chambers from its inception in 2010 to 2015 as a Chief Executive. After exploring various industries, Jiun Ean returned to*

*Maxwell Chambers in 2022 as Chief Executive. Prior to his return in 2022, he led the **Singapore Mediation Center (SMC)** for three years.*

Mr. Ban, thank you for joining us on the Kluwer Arbitration Blog! We are happy to have this opportunity to share your story and perspectives with our readers.

1. You have witnessed the growth of Maxwell Chambers from its inception to its current status as one of the world's premier dispute resolution centers. Can you tell us about some of the challenges and successes you (and Maxwell Chambers) encountered in its first five years from 2010 to 2015?

The most immediate challenge from the outset was persuading users to bring their cases to Maxwell Chambers when it was an unknown entity. Notwithstanding the grand opening and strong early marketing efforts, people by nature don't naturally want to use untested products, particularly when there are very high stakes involved for international commercial disputes. It took the first few brave users to give glowing feedback to the wider community before we began to see greater adoption of our facilities. This was because the physical rooms were impressive, but service was

harder to gauge from photos and tours – it took actual cases for the credibility of Maxwell to begin to be earned.

The other major challenge was to deal with the building capacity being much greater at the outset than the caseload at the time, leading to a lot of spare capacity and inefficiencies. This was deliberate, as the intention was to launch Maxwell Chambers with some room to grow, but it did put the financial position on somewhat challenging ground for the first few years. Thankfully, by 2015, the caseload had grown to the point where Maxwell Chambers became profitable, but it took a lot of hard work and not a small amount of faith.

2. After helping establish and then leading Maxwell Chambers in its early years, you took a hiatus from the center and then returned in 2022. Can you tell us about your experience and any relevant insights you gained?

My sojourn away from Maxwell was really more for myself, to explore various paths that would not have been possible on my career trajectory at the time. It was illuminating, and took me from setting up a performing arts theater, to designing educational card and board games, to writing novels, to being involved in the domestic mediation scene in Singapore. In that time, I learnt a lot about entrepreneurship and the drive that founders require to make startups successful, which contrasts greatly with the energy often displayed by people in more comfortable salaried positions. The problem solving attitude and resilience I had to learn during that season have proven useful in these months back at Maxwell, particularly as we are embarking on an exciting new phase in the company's development.

3. During the COVID-19 pandemic era, most arbitral centers faced difficult times economically. Although you were not leading the center at the time, can you shed some light on what Maxwell Chambers' experience was like and how it survived that period from a financial standpoint? Did any unexpected "silver linings" come about during that period?

COVID was difficult for Maxwell Chambers, being not just a center for physical hearings, but also being in a small city-state that relied heavily on international work. When the borders closed, physical cases at Maxwell became limited to domestic arbitrations and mediations. The government stepped in to provide support for various industries ravaged by the pandemic, such as tourism and air travel. Maxwell Chambers was one of the companies that received some assistance from the government, but the financial footing was precarious by the end of 2021. Since then, however, Maxwell has recovered somewhat and is back on the path towards growth and profitability soon.

The most important positive effects of COVID were the structural changes it wrought on corporate mindsets towards work. Maxwell Chambers, like most other companies, was forced to quickly pivot to being able to service its clients online, to digitalize, and to adopt the use of new technologies. This was painful and accompanied by a fair amount of birthing pains but has stood us in good stead coming out of the pandemic. The team learnt a lot about what works and what does not in the international dispute space, and, as a result, our facility is much better equipped for tomorrow's hearings. Likewise, the transition to hybrid working arrangements internally required careful calibration to find the right balance between saving staff time, money, and effort by

allowing remote working, but with an eye on team dynamics and company cohesion that can only be strengthened by in-person gatherings. The result today is a team with better morale and productivity, which the clients respond to positively.

4. Since your return to the helm, what have been your most important goals for Maxwell Chambers?

The most important goal is to transform Maxwell into a tech-ready company, not just in the provision of our traditional services, but to explore the creation of entirely new revenue streams using technology. Another important goal has been to re-establish and strengthen our network and links to law firms and institutions, which had been affected somewhat by the border closures over the past few years.

5. Some dispute resolution centers operate within or as part of an arbitral institution, but Maxwell Chambers stands apart. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of this? Are there any other unique features that you think distinguish Maxwell Chambers from other integrated dispute resolution centers?

A major advantage of not being part of an arbitral institution is the ability to cooperate and collaborate with other institutions regularly. As it stands, Maxwell Chambers has built up a diverse ecosystem of practitioners, institutions, and service providers from all over the world, something that would be challenging for an institution to do. Our partners and tenants include the ICC, based in Paris, the PCA, based in The Hague, ICDR, based in New York, WIPO, based in Geneva, among others. This would not have been possible if we were a hearing center that was within or part of an arbitral institution.

Another advantage is that we can focus on our core business of running facilities, enjoying economies of scale as well as the ability to take in non-ADR work such as training and seminars.

A disadvantage is that we are at the very downstream end of a dispute resolution process, whereas institutions are further upstream and have visibility and involvement in cases much earlier. We are also occasionally mistaken for an arbitral institution because of unfamiliarity with the concept of a standalone center not linked to any institution.

6. In White & Case's 2021 International Arbitration Survey, respondents expressed a preference for a "mix of in-person and virtual" proceedings in 2021. What are your thoughts on how the widespread adoption of virtual hearing technology in recent years will affect the future business of centers like Maxwell Chambers?

We see the exact same preferences for cases in the past two years. Lawyers and arbitrations remain largely convinced that their best work is done live, hence a significant proportion of a hearing continues to be conducted in person. However, junior associates, clients' counsel who are observers, as well as witnesses who have only been allocated a small amount of air-time, now tend to only remotely participate via online means. This by no means results in any diminished case

numbers. In fact, in some sense, we have seen a new type of booking emerge – that of a secure, well-equipped remote hearing location for witnesses to give testimony from. Cases seated in London, continental Europe, and the United States are among those that we have seen use Maxwell Chambers as a remote hearing location for witnesses from Asia. Going forward, we are convinced that the demand for high tech room setups will only continue to grow.

7. Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning technology are gaining traction in legal practice, including in dispute resolution. Has Maxwell Chambers explored the integration of AI technology into its operations and, if so, how will it enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of arbitration processes?

Currently, we see that most of the use cases for AI, particularly generative AI, is for drafting, research, and voice to text transcription. Maxwell Chambers does not provide such services but works closely with trusted partners in the industry for these. We are nonetheless monitoring the development of AI with interest, and looking for ways to apply it in our services and products.

8. As one of the global leaders in the dispute resolution center administration space, do you have any tips or advice for others interested in opportunities in this area of international dispute resolution?

Scale matters. Because cases come in all shapes and sizes and of varying durations and start dates, having many rooms to play with helps in accommodating clients' needs better. A two-room hotel will likely have a lower occupancy percentage than a twenty-room hotel, because of the better versatility of the larger hotel. So, starting a new facility with a small number of rooms will create a challenging situation. "Go big or go home" really does apply in this scenario.

Service is more important than facilities. As much as the furnishings and equipment are necessary, they are just the beginning. To provide the kind of experience that will make lawyers come back, service has to be of a high quality.

Thank you, Mr. Ban, for your time and perspective! We wish you all the best!

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