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Eversheds' Dutch Office Head On 'Mandatory' Vaccinations, Managing Strong Personalities...and Oprah

Thera Adam van Straaten discusses whether vaccines should be mandatory, what it's been like managing her office from home, and what it takes to mentor strong personalities.

By Linda A. Thompson | July 20, 2021



Thera Adam van Straaten attributes the firm's high ratio of female partners to the explosive growth of its Amsterdam and Rotterdam offices. Image: Eversheds Sutherland

Eversheds Sutherland's global co-head of intellectual property Thera Adam van Straaten has been the firm's Dutch office senior partner since May of this year. She is also the co-head of its global intellectual property practice.

In this interview, she reflects on the trajectory to becoming a managing partner within a global law firm, the defining moments of her career, her thoughts on the topics of the day – such as whether vaccinations should be mandatory – and how she plans to build the Eversheds brand in the Netherlands.

Why did you become a lawyer?

I didn't want to become a lawyer. I wanted to become something like a combination of Oprah Winfrey and Terry Wogan. But my father advised me to study something basic, something relevant. So I started a law degree and tried to move toward the media industry by taking courses on IP, trademarks and patents.

When I did an internship at a Dutch TV production company called Endemol and realised that the really exciting issues and the interim injunction proceedings were [handled by] the company lawyer, I decided to also intern at a law firm. And there, I decided law was my path.

How has being an intellectual property lawyer changed since you started your career?

Globalisation and the Internet of Things has changed the world and definitely IP. You advise and litigate far more on international IP cross-border issues because companies rarely act only in just one jurisdiction. The negative part is that there are more counterfeit goods all over the world; the positive is that it is far easier, also for smaller companies, to protect rights with a click of the mouse.

Out of all the big law firms, Eversheds is the firm with the highest number of female partners (40%) in the Netherlands. What's your secret?

In the last four years, we've grown from 10 or so to 18 partners. When you have a small partner group like that and 50% lateral hires, it's easier to grow the female partner group. Because you don't have this baggage of ... with all these male partners, we have to vote for this one female partner.

The flip side of that is that we're new. We're trying to build an already well-known brand outside the Netherlands in the Netherlands and I think that female partners really like that challenge. The advantage of being a big brand is that diversity and inclusion is extremely high on the agenda, so [we're] also very welcoming and warm towards women.

In May you took over as managing partner for the Netherlands. Where do you want to take the firm over the next years?

We want to grow the brand in the Netherlands and show what it stands for. We have to do that by making more noise in the Dutch market, by showing what we can offer, by showing what clients we act for. It's also important to try to attract ambitious students who like our proposition of a global brand but also the [value we place on] personal relations, both amongst ourselves and with clients.

What has been the standout moment of your career?

Starting at NautaDutilh in May 1998 as a trainee. My mentor at the firm was Richard van Oerle; he taught me the legal skills I continue building on. He did that by being critical and demanding, but without ever damaging my confidence, or wanting to change me as a person. I wish everyone could have a mentor like him. I think that was essential for my whole career – that I started there and then with him.

What is your own style as a mentor?

I'm pretty blunt, strict and direct, so it's easier for me to mentor people with strong personalities. Although I must say that over the years I've tried to stimulate my associates more by asking questions instead of saying how things should be. I also take my associates to meetings with clients, to court hearings and so on because that's the only way you learn. If you [as an associate] want to take the lead in my files, I'm very happy if you do – that's my approach.

What are your tips to young lawyers who aspire to become a managing partner like you one day?

A career isn't built in one day. Younger colleagues will say to me: 'You have three teenagers and you're a partner and your co-head IP and a managing partner – how did you do that?' Well, I reply: 'You don't get three children in one go, generally speaking. And I didn't do all that in one day or even a year.'

So, take the first couple of years to become a really good lawyer. But also make sure you remain a pleasant person. And start building relationships with your colleagues in your firm, a trait that you will need if you want to become a partner. Your friends are your future clients. But I don't know what the magic ingredient is to becoming a managing partner. It's a combination of luck, circumstances and choices, all combined at some specific moment in time.

Have you been vaccinated? Do you think vaccines should be mandatory for office workers?

I had my first vaccine, so I'm waiting for my second jab. Being a lawyer and of course also a managing partner and a human, I do think that everyone is free to decide at a certain level. I wouldn't say [vaccines] should be mandatory, but I wouldn't mind it if the vast majority of the Eversheds population would voluntarily go get their vaccination.

How have you coped during the pandemic?

At my age and with three teenage children in the house I had my own little social bubble with enough noise and excitement to not be bored or lonely. So, I was in a lucky position. For me, the pandemic hasn't really been a dramatic year. I'm second-generation [in the sense that] my parents lived through the Second World War. My mother saw the bombing of Rotterdam. So, those of us who have desk jobs, we're nowhere near a situation that's really a crisis. Of course, it's different for frontline workers – I'm totally in awe of them.

What are you most looking forward to post-pandemic?

We were supposed to travel through Morocco in the summer of 2020, so that's still high on my list. Going on holiday with the five of us, making memories – that's something that I really look forward to.

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