

# Careers in Law: Q&A with Jim Delkousis, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of PERSUIT

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Q&A with Jim Delkousis, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of PERSUIT.

**Education:** 1988: L.L.B., University of Melbourne; 1993: Masters of Law, University of London.

**Career in Brief:** Jim is the founder and CEO of PERSUIT, a legal technology company which provides a request for proposal (RFP) platform for in-house legal teams. Before founding PERSUIT in 2016, Jim spent his career in private practice, first from 1990 to 2007 at King & Wood Mallesons and then with DLA Piper from 2007 to 2016, where he was Global Head of DLA Piper's Infrastructure and Construction Disputes practice.

## Can you provide a brief description of your current role and the work you do?

I am the founder and CEO of PERSUIT. PERSUIT provides in-house legal teams an RFP platform for distributing work to their trusted law firms in a fair, transparent, and competitive manner.

My day-to-day work has changed significantly since we launched PERSUIT in 2016. In the first few years most of my time was split between two main tasks.

My first task was working with our engineering and product team to help develop the PERSUIT software platform. Because I did not have any coding experience, I focused on educating my team on the problem we were looking to solve, the personas we were solving it for, and the process in-house lawyers use to engage outside counsel. As we began to build and iterate on our software, I provided feedback from my own legal experience.

My second task was finding general counsel with a track record of being early adopters of innovative law department practices who could see the value that PERSUIT could deliver and were willing to purchase our product. I spent much of my time traveling around the US and Europe to promote the vision to make those early sales. Finding out whether anyone was actually willing to pay for what our team built was the scariest part of my becoming a legal technology innovator.

Once we made those early sales and found our product fit for market, I started focusing on building out our team across all the functions required to scale a software company, including sales, customer success, marketing, product, engineering, and operations. Hiring the right talent and helping that talent build out these functions is ongoing, and is probably the most important part of my current role.

Having put in place a great leadership team, I am now able to spend my time setting the broader strategic goals and direction of PERSUIT, and doing whatever is required to help my team execute on those strategies. That can range from working with our key customers to help expand their use of PERSUIT to building of a community of our customers' general counsel who are willing to share their best practice learnings in the use of PERSUIT.

## What are the factors that led you to found your own company?

I founded PERSUIT because I felt strongly that the way in-house teams engaged their law firms on a matter by matter basis needed to change. The factors that led me to this conclusion included:

- My experience dealing with in-house teams and their struggle to find which of their panel firms were best placed to undertake the work required, at their most competitive price. Any attempt to undertake an RFP process at the matter level was painful and cumbersome. I knew from my experience that many law firms could do the required work and do it well, but finding which one and obtaining their most competitive price was effectively impossible.
- My frustration as a law firm partner at winning a place on a client panel and then not being informed of potential new client engagements. Having little transparency over what work the client was sending to its law firms and not being given the opportunity to pitch when that work was being awarded felt like



a missed opportunity for both the client and my firm. When we did get invited to pitch, the lack of transparency around what I had to price in order to secure the work did not seem to me to be in the client's best interests.

- The introduction of transparency and competition in most buyer and seller relationships except in the legal industry, or at least not between Fortune 500 companies and the AmLaw 100 firms. This trend, combined with the increasing pressure within organizations to digitize, convinced me that the same factors would inevitably transform the way in-house teams engaged their outside counsel.

Therefore, after having spent 17 years as a law firm partner, I was up for the challenge of creating a solution which enabled in-house teams and their trusted law firms to better transact, buy, and sell, on a single online platform.

### **Did you know when you went to law school that this was the kind of work you wanted to do?**

Not a clue. Law school was all about becoming a lawyer, and that was all I focused on. I developed that focus because I had tried to major in accounting the year before, and it was clear that was not the right choice for me.

My initial choice to study accounting was my most valuable mistake, for at least two reasons.

First, although deep down I had always wanted to go to law school, I was not confident that my grades would get me there so I resigned myself to pursuing my back-up plan. When I learned that I had done well enough to get into law school, I still chose accounting. I think I had prepared so well for accepting that my second choice would be my path that I thought I should stick it out. In truth, it was probably a lack of self-confidence that I had what it took to be a lawyer. Lesson number one: believe in yourself.

Second, I learned how valuable taking the wrong path can be. Spending enough time walking down the wrong path can make the right path so clear that when you do make the transition, you do so with a level of energy and clarity of purpose that would otherwise have been absent. Certainly that is what happened with me, leading me to put all my energies into law school.

By 2015 I had spent 25 years working at law firms, 17 years as a partner. I had turned 50 and, having had a very fulfilling career as a lawyer, I could not help but think about what I wanted the next ten years to look like for me. Did I want it to be much the same as 40 to 50, with more of the same type of major project litigation and arbitration

work? I could see that the whole world was digitizing, with organizations trying to work out their own digital journeys. The only space I really knew was the law firm and client relationship space, and I was convinced that space was going to change. Relationships between in-house teams, as buyers, and law firms, as sellers, would begin to shift from being purely personal to include data, transparency, and competition. I did not know exactly what that evolving space would look like but I decided that I wanted to have a hand in shaping it. So I decided to end my BigLaw career and start my new career in legal technology.

### **Are there particular skills or personality characteristics that are essential to be successful in a legal technology career?**

My answer is not all that glamorous: success is found in the grind, and your capacity to maintain the grind over a long period of time.

In my experience, in order to achieve success in any career you have to work hard over an extended period, with incremental improvements and learnings which are barely even noticeable at the time. With the passage of time, those improvements and learnings perform the magic of compound interest. I appreciate that my approach is not very fashionable. We always seem to be hearing about "working smarter, not harder" and "hacks" to get to our destinations faster, accelerating our careers. Those short cuts may exist, but I have never been able to find them.

In addition to grind, grit, and determination, I suggest:

- **Listening.** Most of us are so caught up in formulating a response to what we have heard, or thinking about what is more important to us, that we have not developed the skills or been properly trained to listen. Give me a great listener on my team ahead of a great talker, any time.
- **Empowering and developing others.** Developing this skill at an early stage of your career will pay off massively in the long run. This is one I still struggle with, as legal training does not help very much. Lawyers are typically trained to drill into the details, be aware of the risks, and do our best to minimize those risks. That kind of training can result in developing into a control freak. What I have learned is that empowering and developing those around you is key to a successful career. Whenever I think about my proudest career moments, I am not in the scene. I always see the team I worked with and what I helped them achieve.
- **Continuously learning.** This is very much a mindset. I cannot say how well I did on this attribute early in my career, or how well I embraced it. I was more focused on winning the next case, or achieving the next

career milestone, than stepping back to understand and appreciate the bigger picture of learning, self-improvement, and personal growth. I achieved much of my learning almost as a by-product of the career goals I had set for myself. It was only when I left being a law firm partner, the only thing I had ever done and the only way I knew how to define myself, to do something I had never done before and had no idea where to start, that I realized the importance of continuous learning. Embrace continuous learning as a mindset in your professional career and your options will continue to expand.

- **Making meaningful connections.** During a career you will have thousands of interactions with others. Every time you do, you leave a mark, good, bad, or indifferent. Most often you can control your role in that interaction and the footprint you leave. I have seen career-defining opportunities born out of interactions that might have seemed trivial at the time. A past impression that causes others to say “I know someone” when looking to fill a new role. Your footprint will often determine whether you are that “someone.”

### **What were the biggest challenges you encountered in your legal career?**

One stands out. In 2007 I left a very comfortable position as a senior equity partner at King & Wood Mallesons (then Mallesons Stephen Jaques) in Australia. I left to join a law firm that I had not previously heard of, DLA Piper, to head up their Litigation & Regulatory practice in a region I had never been to, the Middle East. I suspect I was offered the role because somebody said, “I know someone.” I recall landing in Dubai and getting into the office for my first day. I walked into my empty-shelved office, with no clients, no work, no local language skills, and no knowledge of local law or how to find it. I really had no idea what I was in for, just a welcome email from the managing partner asking for my business plan. I felt sick to my stomach. I had left a senior equity partner position at what was Australia’s premier law firm, with my family planning to uproot their lives and join me in six months.

Looking back, my six years in the Middle East were the most rewarding of my legal career, and the period of which I am most proud. When I left in 2013, I had assembled a remarkable team of talented lawyers to take over what had become a thriving multi-jurisdictional disputes practice, handling some of the most difficult, high-profile cases that the firm had seen. Starting with that sickening feeling on day one, and overcoming what seemed at the time to be insurmountable hurdles, including a global financial crisis, taught me that the path less trodden, and the scariest, can often be the most rewarding.

### **How did your experience as a practicing attorney prepare you for your current role?**

All successful technology businesses share a common denominator: they understand the customer problem they are tasked with solving and they solve it well. My experience as a lawyer, and in particular, as a partner in BigLaw dealing with general counsel around the world, gave me the deep domain experience to both understand the problem I had experienced in the industry and begin the journey of solving that problem. Looking across industries at buyer and seller relationships becoming more transparent and competitive, with an increasing ability for law departments to compare like-for-like offerings, I could not accept that the relationships between law firms and law departments would remain immune. Without my legal background, there is little chance I would have had the experience and insight to even begin working out what a solution might look like.

Over and above domain expertise, the characteristics I identified as necessary for a successful legal career, grind, grit, determination, listening, empowering, continuous learning, and meaningful connections, are all transferable and necessary when pivoting into a new career.

One thing I was not well prepared for was becoming a novice again. As a long time law firm partner, I was used to having a high level of subject matter expertise, seniority, authority, and respect. My move to a legal technology start-up made all of that disappear pretty quickly. Suddenly, I was the least sharp tool in the shed and there is not much that can prepare you for that experience.

### **If you had not become a lawyer, what job do you think you would have?**

I have a hard time imagining a different career path for me. I had already started down the accountant path when I was 18. Six months into that direction, I knew I had made a mistake. I then spent the next 30 years defining my entire existence by reference to what I did (“I am a lawyer”) and who I was (“I am a law firm partner”). I found it difficult to break free of that mindset.

At the same time I had always been fascinated by entrepreneurs and their journeys, struggles, failures, and successes. The digital revolution seemed to be breeding more and more of them to the point where I caught the bug. Coupled with the fear that I would die wondering about what might have been, I decided to take the plunge.

### What advice would you give to an attorney considering working in law or legal technology?

The advice I typically gave junior attorneys starting their careers in a law firm or company was to work as hard as they could, with the lofty goal of making each early year count for the equivalent of two years. By that I did not mean working long and inefficient hours. I meant working to learn as much as they could. Every bit of extra learning you squeeze into your early career accumulates with great impact over time. Taking every opportunity to learn, which means doing anything and everything that is thrown at you, and always being on the lookout for those opportunities, plays a key role in developing a successful legal career.

As for a career in legal technology, my advice is to gain at least a few years of experience at both a law firm and in-house. Bringing a level of domain experience to your legal technology role can only help you understand the problem you are looking to solve and the strategies that are likely to help in doing so. That is particularly the case if you end up with a customer-facing role in which you are required to build trust and confidence with the customer, who is often a lawyer. Experience in legal practice will certainly help you do so.

### Is there any general advice that you wish someone had given to you when you started out that you can share?

It might have been helpful when I started my career for someone to lay out the skills and characteristics which I later learned were essential to a successful career, but I am not sure how much of an impact that would have made on me. Like most things, words need context to make a real impact. I expect that kind of advice at the beginning of a career without the context, which means life learnings and experience that ground the advice and give it meaning, typically has a limited impact. However, if you were starting out in your career and you had the discipline to measure yourself on a regular basis against those characteristics and develop strategies to continuously improve on them, that would be powerful.

#### About Practical Law

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### About PERSUIT

Founded in 2016, PERSUIT is a legal technology company which provides a request for proposal (RFP) platform for in-house legal teams.

PERSUIT's key value propositions are:

- **Savings.** Reducing its clients' external legal costs by an average of 37%.
- **Quality.** Delivering better legal outcomes by enabling law departments to make "apples-to-apples" comparisons of law firm proposals. PERSUIT's platform provides in-house teams data in the format they need to choose the right firm at the matter-level, which creates more opportunities for the best placed firm to win work at their best price.
- **Transparency.** Enabling firms to better understand the scope of work they have to price and the opportunity to revise their pricing real-time to meet, or beat, the competition.
- **Consistency.** Providing in-house teams with industry best practice RFP templates across all practice areas to achieve competitive and, if required, alternative fee arrangement (AFA) or fixed fee pricing.
- **Fairness and compliance.** Providing general counsel with comfort that their in-house teams undertake fair, transparent, and compliant law firm selection processes.
- **Repeatability.** Allowing in-house teams to customize, formalize, and scale their law firm selection criteria, such as their requirements around experience, cost, and diversity and inclusion.