

# Building blocks and stepping stones: success strategies for a career in international arbitration

by Dr Bernd Ehle, Partner, LALIVE, Geneva

The number and size of international arbitration groups in law firms around the world continue to grow, leading to an increasing need for young and dynamic lawyers who are interested in the practice of international arbitration. Yet, the number of students and young lawyers wanting to get into this field is also growing, and it remains difficult to break into the international arbitration community. This note gives some advice as to which skills and experiences may help find a job and launch a career in international arbitration.

- (1) **The starting point: strong legal skills.** Knowing at least one legal system well and having an excellent academic record is not always sufficient to get a job or to become a poised advocate and astute strategist, but it is the indispensable basis for success. In addition, while knowledge of arbitration law is required, experience in other fields of the law, such as litigation, contract negotiations, transactions, comparative law, or public international law, may be equally valuable when starting a career in arbitration.
- (2) **Get proficient in foreign languages.** For non-native speakers (and even for native speakers!): excellent English skills – both written and oral – are crucial as this is the language used most in international dispute resolution. Good drafters are sought-after by numerous law practices. Depending on where and for which kind of clients you practice, other languages can be a huge asset.
- (3) **Be creative when trying to “get your foot into the door”.** Law firms are not the only employers in international arbitration. There are many other places that offer a career in international arbitration or from where to build contacts, in particular arbitral institutions, certain multinational corporations, universities, independent arbitrators and international organizations (e.g. WIPO).
- (4) **Have the right attitude.** Advancing from intern to associate, from junior associate to senior associate, and eventually to partner level, comes with hard work and normally requires to “fit into the team”. The more dynamic and pro-active you are, the better. Given the nature of the cases, it is impossible to be successful in international arbitration without being a team-player. Take ownership for your work and take responsibility for it; don’t just do what you are asked to do. Try to make yourself an indispensable part of the team. Be the one who everyone – senior and junior, partner and intern – wants to work with.

- (5) **Be flexible.** One of the advantages of practicing international arbitration is that its truly international nature allows lawyers to practice in various jurisdictions, without necessarily being admitted to practice there. If you do not find a position in your jurisdiction of choice, consider a temporary move to other important or upcoming places of arbitration. How about, for instance, Abu Dhabi, Singapore, Stockholm or Vienna?
- (6) **Be cosmopolitan.** The more at ease you are in a multi-cultural environment, the easier it will be to navigate your way through arbitration hearings and conferences where cross-cultural awareness is more than useful. Any cross-cultural legal experience, in particular exposure to both the civil law and the common law system, is a plus.
- (7) **Consider attending a specialized post graduate program.** A growing number of excellent LL.M. programs are offered by the universities of Geneva, Stockholm, Queen Mary in London, Pepperdine in Malibu, to name a few. If you have participated in one of those programs, potential employers will be comforted that you have “the drawers in the right place” and can “hit the ground running” when starting employment.
- (8) **Be an active networker.** Networking is no longer an activity left to senior lawyers for attracting work. Today, young practitioners need to get out and make themselves known. The various below-40 arbitration associations that exist around the world are an excellent starting point. They provide an informal forum in which to make contacts which can be useful throughout a career. Local or international arbitration-related conferences are also useful. When participating in a conference, speak up and show the world who you are; simply participating is not sufficient to be remembered. Contributing to arbitration publications is another way of gaining visibility and getting your name out.
- (9) **Be the right person at the right time.** Of course there is an element of luck as in any job search. It might be that your (exotic) language skills open doors as a certain law firm is looking for a certain profile at a certain time. Remember that employers’ recruitment needs evolve constantly and are driven by the nature of the cases they are involved in.
- (10) **Be patient.** Be prepared to start from the bottom and to take on responsibility gradually; don’t try to jump certain stepping stones. Most senior arbitration lawyers at some point worked as interns and performed *inter alia* the kind of hands-on logistical tasks that today help them understand how to run cases efficiently. Getting to a stage of pleading multi-million dollar cases before distinguished tribunals takes time, and a lot of patience. Good judgment and a feel for the right strategy are not something one can learn at university. Gradually gaining experience by observing more senior lawyers is a large and crucial part of the training of a successful arbitration practitioner.