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Smashing stereotypes:
Standing out as a FQL in a small
city with big dreams
*interview with Abhilasha (Lasha)
Singh*





A B H I L A S H A (L A S H A) S I N G H

Interviewed by Yama Choezom and Mei Gong

Abhilasha (Lasha) Singh, is a dual qualified lawyer who is admitted to practice law in India and Australia. She worked as an indirect tax lawyer in top tier law firms in India for over seven years before moving to Australia in 2019. She grew up in a small town in India (Patna, Bihar) in a traditional education focused family and is the youngest amongst five siblings. Outside of work, Lasha enjoys cooking and treating friends to Indian vegetarian delicacies. She is also very keen on travelling and has a long bucket list of places to visit. In Canberra, she enjoys bush-walking and tries to go on regular hikes. When time permits, Lasha likes to do some colouring and work on some crafts. Lately, her creative cells are being put to the test as she has been busy doing the interiors and furnishing of her new house.

Chatting to Lasha over a Teams meeting one weekday evening was a memorable experience. For me (Yama), Lasha's candid recount of the requalification challenges that she faced in Australia strongly resonated with my requalification journey. For me (Mei), Lasha was one of the most prepared interviewees I have come across to date (she had prepared written answers to all of our draft questions before the interview). Collectively, we believe that Lasha's incredible journey of carving opportunities for herself in the small city of Canberra is a great testament that while volunteering and networking will open doors, having the right attitude and aptitude will help one push through those doors and realise their dreams.

Finding community and connections in a small capital city

Lasha is currently an in-house Legal Counsel and intellectual property manager at Seeing Machines, a company headquartered in Canberra that aims to harness artificial intelligence technology to reduce transport related accidents. Despite having had no prior experience in technology, aviation or intellectual property, Lasha has helped Seeing Machines negotiate favourable contracts with some of the world's largest brands. Yet the path Lasha took to get there was not a linear one, and her journey to ultimately find connections and build a supportive community were key to her success.

Before Lasha even set foot in Australia, she had applied for a volunteering position with the United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA).

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While she did not succeed in securing that role, Lasha's UNAA contact forwarded her resume to the UNAA Young Professionals Network (YPN) team where she secured a role as the Operations Manager for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) region.[1] After managing memberships and recruitments as Operation Manager, Lasha was promoted to be the ACT President of the UNAA YPN where she led the team through a tough COVID-19 year. From there, she moved into the National Leadership team and is currently the National Secretary of the National UNAA YPN.

For Lasha, it was a kind and thoughtful manager at work, a supportive partner at home, a helpful network, and a circle of close friends that kept her motivated to overcome the challenges she experienced in Australia (further explored in the next section). Lasha recalls that her manager voluntarily did a thoughtful gesture to encourage her to keep striving on her requalification journey when she felt like giving up and being a 'career paralegal' instead. The manager liaised with the Human Resources department to issue Lasha with an official letter confirming her promotion to Legal Counsel post-admission.

The requalification process was not smooth sailing

Despite Lasha's prior achievements as a highly experienced tax lawyer in India, she nevertheless found the process of requalifying and securing her first role in Australia challenging. We listened in admiration as Lasha humbly shared her experience of drafting three high profile writ petitions overnight, flying across cities, briefing a senior counsel over the same weekend and flying back to appear in Court on Monday.

All of the above achievements demonstrates how talented Lasha is but the legal industry has been tough and challenging for her. Lasha shared moments of struggles that she had to overcome while seeking employment in Australia. Lasha said,



"It was a very difficult process, and nothing seemed to make it easy - not me graduating from one of the best law schools in India nor having worked for the most prestigious law firms in India".

[1] For readers who may be unfamiliar with what the UNAA YPN does, it is a group of over 50 young professional leaders who volunteer their time to further the UN's Sustainable Development Goals by hosting events, lecture series, speed mentoring and similar events. The UNAA YPN is present in most States and Territories across Australia.

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Lasha reflected on several nights that she cried herself to sleep during her job hunting and study days, having been disheartened by the 'tough and long' process and wanting to **"completely give up"**. Lasha further reflected:

"To get through the requalification process, you need strong reasons, be it a better quality of life, professional opportunities, or being close to your life partner"

Transitioning from private practice to in-house - more smooth sailing than expected

Although Lasha had practised almost entirely in private practice in tax law in India and wanted to explore other fields within the law, her move to become an in-house Legal Counsel in Australia was entirely unplanned. Lasha reflected candidly that

"When I was job hunting I was in a 'beggars can't be choosers' situation and I was willing to take up the first job offer that came my way".

Having landed in an in-house role, Lasha reflects that in-house is a great learning environment as it empowers lawyers to become a 'jack of all trades', broadens their horizons but admits it can be a 'steep learning curve'. Having said the above, Lasha was also cautious to point out that individuals may face external challenges and limitations which may mean they cannot work in the practice area they aspired to or land the best job (whether it is due to financial dependencies, lack of opportunities, timing) etc.

It is for the above reasons that Lasha believes that it is important for aspiring Foreign Qualified Lawyers (FQLs) to have a clear vision of what ***"makes them stand out as the preferred candidate as compared to a locally qualified lawyer"*** and focus on transferable skills and experience.



Fun fact!

I skydived on my birthday a couple of years ago in Brisbane, I've done zip-lining at one of the longest trails in Asia (in Mauritius) and trekked the famous tiger nest in Bhutan.

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For example, Lasha leveraged her experience of working for a tax team in a full-service law firm, where she was exposed to contracts, mergers and acquisitions, advisory and litigious work which helped her demonstrate to prospective employers her ability to **“learn and work in any field of law”**.

Tips and advice for aspiring FQLs

When we asked Lasha what advice she would give to aspiring FQLs, Lasha provided the following practical tips:

1. Get the right information from the right place

Lasha remarked that for many, the requalification process can be long, documentation heavy and expensive, so it is important to plan ahead and get the right information. This is particularly important as each person’s requalification journey may look very different depending on where they came from and which jurisdiction they want to get re-qualified in.



2. Always compete with and compare only with yourself and be patient

This resonated with us well because it was not the first time we have heard stories of aspiring FQLs having to move from one country to another, and settle for jobs that are nowhere equivalent to their positions back home (effectively a demotion). Lasha encourages aspiring FQLs to keep the end-goal (admission in Australia) in perspective and know that post admission, career opportunities can ‘expand enormously’.

3. Build and reach out to your network

Legal professionals and FQLs practicing law in Australia are great resources and are often very open to providing advice and suggestions. In Lasha’s case, her proactive efforts in reaching out to FQLs practising in Canberra through LinkedIn as well as her personal network ultimately helped her to find her feet in Australia and land a secure in-house Legal Counsel role.

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