

Career Moves

Getting ahead: my story so far



Paul Keane,
managing partner,
Reddy Charlton
Picture: Fergal Phillips

'If people are positive and open, good things happen'

Each week, we profile one of Ireland's foremost corporate leaders, tracing their career to date and exploring the lessons they have learned along the way. This week, we meet Paul Keane of Reddy Charlton

Paul Keane is managing partner of law firm Reddy Charlton. Founded in 1908, Reddy Charlton is one of Ireland's longest-established legal practices, employing 25 people, including five partners, in Dublin.

Keane is also non-executive chairman of Newbridge Silverware and honorary consul general at the consulate general of Sweden in Dublin.

Tell us about your career to date.

I qualified as a solicitor in 1979 following studies at Trinity College Dublin and the London School of Economics. I worked in the Department of Trade, Commerce and Energy for a short period after university and then joined Reddy Charlton. I am a member of the council of the Law Society of Ireland and I chair the society's task force on the Legal Services Regulation Act.

As a keen apiarist, I am happy to report 100 per cent growth in my beehives this year. If I could emulate that growth in my other business-

es, I would be very happy. In terms of business expansion, as market conditions improve, property transactions are becoming increasingly complex. In response, we have expanded our banking and property division, adding to expertise now required by clients.

Are you where you expected to be in your career?

Obviously I wanted to be a good and successful lawyer, but I cannot pretend that I had any great plan. I always had an interest in business and its legal challenges and a general view of what I wanted to do. Planning for a career or a business is a useful discipline, but over a period of a lifetime, unexpected twists (often delightful) will occur. Generally, I have found that if people are positive and open, good things happen to them and things work out well in the end.

What was the best career advice you got along the way?

Always put forward a solution. I learned that in my very first job in the civil service. I was an administrative

officer in the Department of Industry, Commerce and Energy. You were just in with notions about yourself, but knowing nothing. Any report had to include a recommendation as to what should be done. If you were lucky, your recommendation might reach the top brass, but regardless, you had to propose a solution.

I can't stand it when a lawyer writes to a client to say: "There's the problem and I am warning you." That's not problem-solving, it's problem-finding and it is no good to anybody.

Based on your own experience, what are your top career tips?

Solicitors are lawyers, not fee-earners, so focus on the client, not the fee. Find opportunities to add value to your clients and business will follow. Secondly, identify role models to help guide you along your way. I have been lucky in that regard, being inspired as a student by Kader Asmal, professionally by Gerry Charlton and Mr Justice William McKechnie and I would add William Doyle for his enormous courage in consistently embracing new directions for Newbridge Silverware.

How would you define your work style and how has this evolved over the years?

The common problem now is that we are becoming submerged in email. This hampers everyone's work style. I try to prioritise. However, the exigencies of the service and the insistence of email make it a constant struggle.

I much prefer to spend time talking to my clients. Occasionally, I enjoy the bliss of ignoring email for part of the day.

Obviously, I am fortunate to have a good team around me. It is important to delegate efficiently, although I don't know that my team would always agree that I do so.

In terms of managing teams and individuals, what are your insights?

Try to prioritise - to delegate. I don't necessarily think that I do either very well. Again, you might ask my colleagues. Above all, recognise what a great job they do.

What about communication and negotiating the typical ups and downs of working life?

It's important not to take oneself too

seriously. Appropriate levity goes a long way. With the written word, keep it simple. Even a lawyer's eyes glaze over when faced with slabs of text and convoluted thinking.

Generally, I find that people respond well to a narrative, an account of what has happened, or what could happen. Whether you're explaining something to a junior lawyer, client or an audience, if you can tell a story it will enliven and illustrate what you are seeking to impart.

Has networking played an important part in your career?

I heard myself described recently as a 'consummate networker', although I have never thought of myself as such. My number one rule? Be genuine. If you are "the networker" rather than the professional, people see it for what it is. The key to building client relationships is that you really care about what you do for them. As a French lawyer friend of mine once said, with all of his Gallic charm, "You have got to love your client."

If you had to choose another career tomorrow, what would it be and why?

May I choose two? Both involve storytelling. I would lecture on legal topics as that's something I enjoy enormously and I would moonlight as a tour guide in Ireland.

However, it would give me equal pleasure to bring Irish people to Sweden and introduce them to what is a most beautiful and sophisticated country.

Employment

Are discretionary bonuses really discretionary?



Alison Maughan

The issue of discretionary bonuses and allowances was recently considered in the context of the Equal Pay Act 1991 in the case of *Cleary & Co v B&Q Ireland Ltd* (High Court, January 2016).

Ten employees of B&Q Ireland claimed that their employer's discretionary bonus scheme was a zone of discretion and not subject to the provisions of the 1991 Act. The employees' contracts of employment stated that: "All bonus schemes are discretionary and are subject to the rules. They may be viewed or withdrawn at any time."

B&Q Ireland argued unilaterally withdrawing the bonus scheme was permitted by the terms of the employment contract expressly provided for in the contract. The tribunal, with this argument, found that there was a breach of the 1991 Act.

In relation to the allowance paid to employees working in stores, the tribunal allowed the case of *Minister v Anor v Minister of Finance & Ors* [2014] 461 and found that the allowance was separate from the employee's salary, and considered compensation for working in a particular area. The deduction of the allowance is not a deduction from wages under the 1991 Act.

The decision was appealed to the High Court where the employee argued that they should have been entitled to the first bonus following the decision to end the scheme. This was because, as said, it related to a period of work already done and the employees had accrued the bonus at the time the decision was made to withdraw it.

The employees also argued that the zone of discretion was an integral part of the wages payable to employees under the contract.

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Movers

