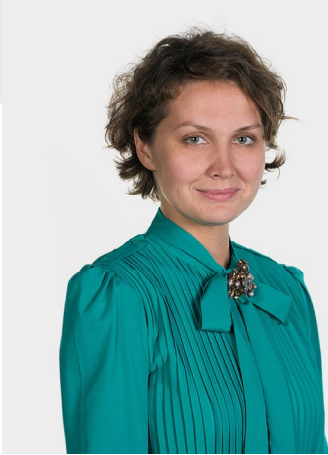


Q&A: IRYNA AKULENKA



IRYNA AKULENKA
MANAGING CONSULTANT
HKA

TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND.

I am rather atypical to most of my colleagues. Before starting a career in claims some five years ago, I did seven years of project management in engineering and construction. So, let's say it wasn't a natural progression unlike for many other consultants, I basically started completely from scratch after leaving a managerial position at a previous company.

In education, again, not too typical either. My first degree is in electrical engineering, but in my daily job, I am dealing with contracts and quantum – which is typically done by quantity surveyors.

Finally, in the construction industry and in the Middle East region, you won't meet a woman from Belarus all that often!

WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY?

At the time, and without going into detail, it wasn't a choice as such. I graduated as an engineer from a Belarusian university and went on to work in construction.

In hindsight, I would not change this path for anything. I am enjoying the challenges the industry offers.

Besides, one of my greatest goals is to change the industry for better and to allow it to attract (and retain!) more female talent. I am a mother of two girls, so this is extremely important to me.

In hindsight, I would not change this path for anything. I am enjoying the challenges the industry offers.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU IN YOUR JOB?

Although it may sound a bit of a cliché, from a personal standpoint my biggest inspiration is to be the best example to my daughters. I think we all want our kids to be proud of us.

From a professional standpoint, there is still so much to learn, and indeed I am learning something new every day. Our work is never dull!

DESCRIBE A TYPICAL DAY IN YOUR ROLE.

Perhaps one would expect to hear something like ‘no day is typical’ but not from me, I am a person of routine and I value that. I start my day by checking my email and attending to any urgent matters that may arise, perhaps answering requests, dealing with follow-ups and generally setting my ‘to do’ plan for the day. I am most productive early in the day, so I quickly get into either drafting or reviewing various documents or else dealing with quantum calculations.

Of course, there may be meetings throughout the day, either with clients or team members and sometimes business development activities such as meeting with clients, participating at events or networking. But the latter wouldn’t be a typical day.

As Vice Chair of the CIArb UAE branch, I would also typically have some minor matters to attend to on a regular basis.

Lastly, I am an avid reader. I always keep up to date with what’s going on in the industry and in the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) field. Knowledge is key!

HOW DO YOU DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN YOUR SKILLSET?

In our profession, and believe it or not, just as in many others, practice makes perfect. Most of the skills we maintain and/or develop come from practical training daily.

However, as I said, there are always trends and developments one should keep track of. The pace of change nowadays is truly unprecedented. There is always something new to learn so I tend to read daily for at least half an hour.

I also take professional courses to add to my list of certifications and accreditations. Recently though, due to time limitation, I must be more selective. In my pipeline for 2020 is the RICS Expert Witness course and CI Arb Mediation course.

WHAT PARTICULAR STRENGTHS DO YOU THINK HKA HAS THAT DISTINGUISHES IT FROM COMPETITORS IN THE MARKET?

I am a believer that every organisation is unique and there is a niche for everyone.

When it comes to HKA, I think we do attract the best talent, for various reasons. Throughout my five years here, I have worked with some extremely bright individuals. Clients value this.

From an employee's perspective, HKA is very supportive of the advancement of young professionals. This is not typical in the industry as there can be a common perception that some clients only value 'grey hair'!

Lastly, the scale and the complexity of projects we deal with is arguable of the highest level. One truly learns on the job.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUNGER PEOPLE LOOKING FOR A CAREER IN CONSTRUCTION?

Generally, to everyone, my advice is not to be discouraged by the apparent challenges, the construction industry has a lot to offer. The rewards are often (if not always) disguised in obstacles that seem to be impossible to overcome. Construction is at the verge of unprecedented technological changes and the next decade or so will be very interesting to watch. Remember, the sky is your limit.

To young women specifically, do not dwell on the downsides, whether they are real or perceived. The industry is changing, it is becoming more fair, open and welcoming to both genders and generally to people from all walks of life. There is a shift in the way people think and an acknowledgement of the historically ingrained biases. You may sometimes still get an odd look but believe me, the industry has never been more accepting than it is today. Take risks but calculate them well.

Construction is at the verge of unprecedented technological changes and the next decade or so will be very interesting to watch. Remember, the sky is your limit.

LOOKING BACK OVER YOUR CAREER, WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENT?

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It is a difficult question as I have many, I am proud of, and I am very thankful for that.

Because I wear many hats, which is so demanding yet so rewarding, this is probably inviting a conversation of its own... To cut it short, if I looked back to when I came to Dubai some fourteen years ago, I would never expect to be where I am today, in all aspects of it!