

EMERGING TALENT MEMBERS IN FOCUS



The Emerging Talent Network has been established by Infrastructure New Zealand to develop the next generation of infrastructure leaders. Each month we will be profiling an ET member working in a different part of the industry. If you would like to be profiled, or would like to nominate someone to be profiled, please answer the questions below and send your picture through to [Tara](#).

We would like to introduce Laressa Mills from Dentons Kensington Swan in Auckland as this month's Emerging Talent Member in Focus.



LARESSA MILLS
ASSOCIATE

大成 DENTONS KENSINGTON SWAN

1. What organisation are you with, and what do you do day-to-day?

I've been with Dentons Kensington Swan since November 2018, working in the National Construction and Major Projects team in Auckland. I predominantly specialise in resolving construction disputes for a diverse range of clients across the construction industry including principals, contractors, subcontractors and consultants. I thrive on the opportunity to contribute to the sector and support construction and infrastructure clients on a variety of issues relating to delays, payment disputes, variations, cancellation of contracts, building defects and negligent advice. I have acted for several clients to help them resolve their complex disputes in many forums including the High Court, at mediation and by adjudication under the Construction Contracts Act 2002.

2. Tell us about your career background and how you got to this position/role?

I began my legal career in a boutique litigation firm acting for and advising clients on a variety of civil litigation proceedings including breach of contract and misrepresentation claims for construction disputes; negligent claims for construction disputes; and bankruptcy proceedings. When first starting out, I predominantly worked for homeowners in leaky building claims against architects, contractors, councils and consultants. After a couple of years doing this type of work, I moved to London and worked for an American consulting firm in their economics and damages and global construction team. I worked with a variety of experts including project managers, engineers, delay specialists and forensic accountants drafting expert reports for 'magic circle' law firms on construction projects all over the world. The projects were large-scale and included a new 22km rail project in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam and a new bio-product mill in Finland (the largest in the Northern hemisphere). I really enjoyed my time in London. While the disputes are similar to those that we see in New Zealand such as timing, quality of works and payment issues, it was the size of some of the projects and variety in them that I experienced overseas that really cemented my interest in the construction industry. I returned to New Zealand to join Dentons Kensington Swan in their Auckland office in November 2018 and have been involved in some of New Zealand's largest construction projects since.

3. Tell us about a project you are currently working on and why it interests you?

I am the lead solicitor on a complex dispute relating to an earthquake damaged high-rise building in Christchurch. The building cost approximately \$50 million to construct in 2008/09 and opened just before the first earthquake hit on 4 September 2010. After a series of earthquakes including the major one on 22 February 2011, the building suffered significant damage including significant stress on and weakening of the steel links in the building. These steel links are designed to make the building earthquake resilient by stiffening the building in an event and bringing it back to centre after an earthquake. Although the building was safe from a structural perspective, some repair works were required to be carried out and many of the weakened steel links were replaced. The building has been reported on in the media, and more can be read about it [here](#).

I am enjoying learning about the performance of buildings generally from a structural perspective and the new technologies and methods that engineers are using particularly in Christchurch in response to the series of earthquakes in 2010/11. Buildings seemingly move in many ways not visible to the naked eye!

4. What are the biggest successes/challenges with the new ways of working? (i.e., video conferencing, lack of events and in-person meetings, etc.)

In August last year, we ran an exercise to test the firm's ability to respond to an emergency event. The hypothetical incident we used in the exercise was an earthquake significant enough to mean we had no access to our Wellington office for the day. The exercise also tested the ability of all staff to work remotely and to continue to provide our clients with the exemplary level of service they expect from us. The exercise was a success with disruption to staff and clients being minimal. It was great because we had good plans in place which would work in the 'real world'. We learnt several things during the exercise that would enable us to respond even better if something was to happen. And well, as we all know, it did with COVID-19. The test run meant when the country went to Alert Level 4 with two days' notice it was a seamless transition from working in the office to working from home. A lot of staff have since utilised the firm's 'My Balance – Flexibility' policy and changed the way they work to suit their specific needs.

Despite the successes, a big challenge with the new way of working for me has been the lack of face-to-face social interaction at industry events. I always get more out of attending events in person and meeting new people beforehand at the welcome reception. It can be uncomfortable at times to attend an event on your own, and introduce yourself to others, but it's a nice challenge and I usually end up leaving the event with new connections and having learned more about a client's needs or business in the industry.

5. Can you think of one example where your age diversity has materially affected the outcome of a work situation or project, either positively or negatively?

As part of the firm's 'Business Development' series, I have been active in encouraging greater collaboration amongst Associates and Senior Associates in our Auckland office. I identified a gap in the firm's business development strategy in supporting intermediate and senior level lawyers to grow their practices. In order to better understand our individual areas of expertise (and passions!), we have implemented regular catch ups (social and personal development training) both in and outside the office – the aim is to drive more effective collaboration at all levels.

To learn more about opportunities for a career with Dentons Kensington Swan click [here](#) or you can connect with Laessa on [LinkedIn](#).

