

## Alumni Newsletter

July 2016

### Under African skies

Following a secondment with Slaughter and May's Best Friend firm **Anjarwalla & Khanna** in Nairobi, Shyam Radia decided to explore the opportunities that the fast-growing economy of East Africa could offer...

In September 2015, Shyam Radia boarded a plane bound for Nairobi - ready to experience an entirely different way of life to scope out the possibility of setting down roots in the Kenyan capital.

He now works as the in-house legal counsel for the Sunbird Group, which specialises in construction and support services across East Africa. Sunbird is one of a number of multi-national and Western entities looking to establish themselves in Nairobi.

As well as building its own operating businesses, Sunbird also looks to buy stakes in existing ones. Shyam explains:

**"Nairobi is a key hub for East Africa - and Africa as a whole. There is a great deal of economic activity going on, which is creating opportunities for interesting and novel businesses or service lines. This has been accompanied by a huge demographic shift so it's a very exciting place to be right now. Kenya's capital has a growing and youthful population - and is experiencing rapid urbanisation that is encouraging demand for secondary infrastructure."**



Operating a business model similar to Capita, which has been hugely successful in the United Kingdom, Sunbird looks to offer an integrated approach by delivering a range of complementary services to companies that are active, or looking to be active, in East Africa. As a relatively young company that is only in its third year, Sunbird continues to develop its on-the-ground expertise and presence to realise its objectives.

## Adapting to a new role

With a remit for legal and commercial activity across the Group, Shyam's role extends to covering operations across Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Uganda, Mozambique and South Africa.

*"It's a completely new environment for me, because the jump from working in a law firm to a business really does require you to view issues through a completely different lens. As an in-house lawyer I'm looking to deliver a commercially desirable solution - and being part of a young company means you just have to get stuck in, which for me, is what makes it an incredibly exciting venture to be part of."*

Shyam's days can comprise supporting fundraising processes to M&A activity or corporate governance matters, working closely with the team operating out of London.

*"Although some things may seem more relaxed, there's a real ethos of hard work at the same time. As the legal function my job is to support our Executive Team and MDs as they endeavour to grow the Group, so it's really a case of being available whenever, and wherever, they need to consult with you."*

## Early involvement

Shyam's interest in East Africa stems from childhood. The son of East African Asian parents, he often visited Kenya over the years. It was his involvement with Slaughter and May's Africa Practice Group, however, that made working in Nairobi a serious consideration:

*"I spent four years in William Underhill's team at the firm - which was both challenging, but equally rewarding. During my training contract I had already completed a six-month secondment to the firm's Hong Kong office, and while I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, the firm's growing activity in Africa was a natural link for me and I loved the idea of being a part of it."*

Shyam's involvement with the African Practice Group included researching sectors and commercial opportunities in specific countries, as well as helping to coordinate networking events:

*"One separating characteristic of Slaughter and May is its focus on establishing relationships with the leading law firms in the jurisdictions where it operates. It occurred to me that having someone in Nairobi would be a great way to build an on-the-ground relationship. I went to Richard Smith and presented my idea. He liked it and set the wheels in motion. A few months after speaking to Steven Galbraith, the partner responsible for East Africa, I was on a plane to Nairobi."*

## Life as a Best Friend

It was with Anjarwalla & Khanna (A&K) in Nairobi that Shyam got his first real taste of working in East Africa:

*"Whilst on secondment to a Best Friend firm, you work entirely for the host practice - under their auspices in the same way you would as an employee, but at all times you're an ambassador for Slaughter and May. For both firms, this was a brilliant opportunity to learn more about each other - in terms of how they operate and how they go about their work, and I was able to share experiences of life at Slaughter and May with my colleagues at A&K. On a more granular level, I was able to discover what opportunities there were for Slaughter and May across the region, as well as explore ways of cultivating this relationship with A&K. Throughout my secondment, I was able to offer first-hand intelligence to Steven, Richard and Andrew Balfour [Head of the Africa Practice Group] about my experiences and how I was getting on."*

This included getting familiar with certain aspects of Kenyan law. "In many ways Kenyan law has a strong tie to English law and a lot of work we did was actually governed by English law because of its international nature," Shyam explains.

"At the same time, I found that, culturally, the business arena is much more personable in Nairobi - by virtue of the fact that you may be dealing with family businesses on the one hand or international investors who are getting familiar with the terrain on the other, so whichever side of the fence you are on you have to be willing to spend time to build those relationships and get in front of people."

### Making the move

It was this vision of what Nairobi could achieve that brought Shyam back to Nairobi after spending some time in London after his secondment was complete - signalling the end of a six-year career with Slaughter and May. "While I had really enjoyed working at the firm," he says, "the lure of this vibrant, cosmopolitan and stunningly beautiful part of the world was just too big. So, off the back of my secondment I thought I would try and forge a career for myself out here in the business sector. If anything, I certainly wanted to give it a go."

Having left his role at Slaughter and May, Shyam gave himself three to six months to find a job in Nairobi. With a bit of luck, he found that it was the personal touch that helped him land a role:

*"My time with A&K gave me an opening to working out here so I started to look for opportunities in a business setting - which was what I was really interested in doing. While I had previously worked in private practice, I learnt a few things about the business environment here during my job search and I was aware that there was a real crossover between work and the social scene, and that was precisely how I came across the Sunbird Group - which just goes to show that it's worth meeting with everybody you can."*