

OUR PEOPLE

My White & Case story

Hamburg OEP Sylvia Fiebig talks about her White & Case career to date.



Hamburg Office Executive Partner Sylvia Fiebig describes herself as a 'White & Case baby'. She joined the Firm straight out of law school just after the merger between White & Case and German law firm Feddersen Laule and has been here ever since.

She'd originally applied with Feddersen Laule for an internship and, having started that internship in the Mergers & Acquisitions practice in 2002, an unexpected twist meant she switched to Insolvency.

She says: "It was at a time when the German legal market was opening up to overseas firms and, while the Firm was in the process of merging with Feddersen Laule, practically the entire M&A practice of the Hamburg office was hired by a UK firm.

"I remember leaving one Friday and coming back on the Monday to an empty floor before being moved to the Insolvency team – something that shaped my entire career.

"I knew nothing about insolvency, but the practice always needed helping hands and the rest is history."

Sylvia finished the internship and was planning to spend some time figuring out what she wanted to do next when she got an unexpected call from the Insolvency partner Sven-Holger Undritz asking 'when will you come to work for us?'.

"That took me by surprise," she says, "but I did the interviews and started a few weeks later."

Sylvia took the job as an associate in 2002.

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"But the opportunity came up at White & Case and, while I assumed it would reaffirm my belief that an international law firm wasn't for me, I quickly realized that I really enjoyed it.

"I've ended up staying for 22 years."

Despite the change from Feddersen Laule to White & Case, the transition from a German to an international firm was smooth and gradual.

Sylvia says: "I didn't really feel the change immediately. It was something that happened over time as the office became more and more integrated and outward looking.

"But, as a newly qualified lawyer in my first position, there was still a steep learning curve.

"The pace was much quicker, with so many different matters to handle at any one time. Even getting used to all the different English law terms was a challenge, but I just went with the flow.

"And, of course, over time, being part of White & Case has opened up international opportunities.

"I'm the daughter of a flight engineer, so I was used to travelling, but White & Case opened up a whole new world for me – I could go to all these new places and meet so many interesting people.

"That's something I still love to this day."

Sylvia also benefitted from several influential mentors in her early years at the Firm.

She says: The partners had so much time to train me, which gave me a great education. It also helped that the deals I worked on started small and became more complex over time, so it was the perfect introduction.


"The variety of work also kept things interesting, because I never felt things were standing still.

"It also helped that I was given responsibility very early on. I took my first appointment as an insolvency administrator with the Court of Hamburg after only two years as a trained lawyer, which would be unthinkable today."

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Sylvia continued to grasp opportunities to drive her career forward and, in 2007, became a local partner before being made partner in 2012.

Her career so far has had many highlights and she's worked with many inspiring people, but she's reluctant to single anyone out. She explains: "The matters I've worked on have been so varied and they've given me the chance to work with people from so many different fields and walks of life.

"The Firm has so many brilliant people from all around the world who offer such a variety of perspectives. It's what's continued to make working for White & Case very special."

While Sylvia has been working in the Hamburg office for more than 20 years, the continual change has kept things interesting.

"The most visible change was when we moved from a very old heritage-protected building into our current modern office," she says.

"I think that's when our transition from a German firm to an international one became more obvious."

One thing that hasn't changed over that time is the way the Hamburg office has been able to retain its people.

Sylvia says: "There are so many colleagues who have been here for a similar time as me or even longer and have risen through the ranks.

"At the same time, we have so much new talent bringing new perspectives and ideas, which is very refreshing."

Sylvia gives this advice for people to get the best out of their career at the Firm. She says: "Very often, associates can complain that their career isn't progressing as fast as they'd like or that they aren't given enough feedback.

"But, in my experience, I've never had a problem getting the advice or direction I needed, because everyone here is very open. But they won't give it to you on a silver plate – you must ask for it.

"White & Case offers so many opportunities, you just have to be willing to take them. It's amazing what you can achieve when you put your mind to it."

"It's the same with opportunities. I'd advise anyone to stay curious, look outside your comfort zone and, if someone wants you to get involved on another project, just do it, and see where you end up.

"When I look back on my career and think of the projects I learned the most from, they were never the projects that were in my plan, but I accepted them and they were brilliant.

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"It's amazing what you can achieve when you put your mind to it."



One of those opportunities came up in 2019, when Sylvia stepped up to become OEP of the Hamburg office. And, while it's a challenge balancing her job as an insolvency lawyer with overseeing the office, she's embracing the role.

She says: "Being an insolvency lawyer requires good management skills, so that prepared me well for managing this wonderful, crazy group of people!

"It also helped that I worked closely with former OEP Sven-Holger Undritz, so I already had many years seeing how things worked.

"The Covid-19 pandemic brought its own unique challenges, but we're a fairly small team and everyone knows everyone, so we were always there to support one another."

Sylvia also stepping out of her comfort zone in 2019 when she volunteered to do pro bono work at the Moria Refugee Camp on the Greek island of Lesbos.

She says: "I was among a number of lawyers from the Firm who volunteered to provide immigration advice, even though immigration law wasn't necessarily our speciality.

"It was outside of our comfort zone, but all of us would agree that the experience was truly lifechanging.

"Seeing people who were not that different to us, but who had been forced to leave their jobs and homes because of a war makes you realize how much we take for granted and how quickly your life can change completely.

"They had to risk their lives and often their families lives to travel to a refugee camp with awful conditions, with only an outside chance of asylum.

"We offered them legal advice for their asylum interviews, so they had a better chance of being approved and starting a new life.

"It was a humbling experience that has given me a completely new perspective on life."

