

Interview with Denise Sheehan

What inspired you to pursue a career in law, and what attracted you to specialise in Property?

I took the long way into law, and I wouldn't change it. After school I went straight into work, both in law firms and outside them, and spent time living and travelling overseas. I had enjoyed legal studies at school, but it was only when I came home, with some life experience behind me, that I saw law as a career I genuinely wanted. I enrolled as a mature-age student and studied by distance education, both full-time and part-time, while working full-time in law firms. It wasn't easy, but I knew exactly why I was there.

Property was always my area of choice, and I've never second-guessed it. It combines technical precision with real commercial outcomes. You need to get the detail right on title, leasing, easements and transfer duty, but behind every matter is a client's business or personal goal, whether that's buying a family home, securing a site or growing a portfolio.

It's also a practice built on long-term relationships. People and businesses will always need places to live, work and trade, so the work is resilient and it keeps changing with the market. I enjoy the full lifecycle too: front-end deals from concept and offer stage, through contract and settlement, and on to resolving disputes when things don't go to plan.

What have been some of the defining moments or highlights of your career so far?

One defining feature of my career is that I've grown through every stage of practice. I started as a paralegal and worked up through solicitor, associate and senior associate at Gadens. I then spent three years as a Senior Associate at Allens and returned to Gadens as a Director in 2021 before being appointed Special Counsel in July 2024.

Being recognised in this year's Australasian Lawyer Elite Women list has been a real highlight, and an unexpected one. The list recognises women lawyers for their passion, dedication and resilience, and I'm genuinely humbled to be included alongside so many women I admire.

It meant a lot to me because of the path I took to get here. Being recognised in this way feels like confirmation that a non-traditional pathway isn't a detour. It can be a real strength. For anyone considering a less conventional route into law, my advice is simple: the experience you bring with you is an advantage, not a delay.

Has your experience as a woman in the legal profession shaped your approach to leadership, collaboration or client service?

Yes, very much so. Property and development work has traditionally been quite male dominated, particularly on the commercial side of the table. Early in my career I learned that trust is earned through reliability and clarity: being thoroughly prepared, getting the detail right and doing what you say you'll do. That has stayed at the centre of how I practise. The profession has changed a great deal since then, and it's encouraging to see so many more women leading deals and teams in Property today.

That experience, combined with the route I took into law, has made me very conscious that people succeed in different ways and on different timelines. As a leader, I try to build a team where people with different backgrounds and commitments can thrive, for example, by making time for regular, informal mentoring, so that people feel comfortable asking questions and talking openly about their career goals.

In collaboration, I value the range of perspectives people bring, because the best outcomes rarely come from one way of thinking. With clients, I draw on my earlier working life to understand the commercial pressures they face, so my advice is practical as well as technically sound.

What changes to the industry have you witnessed over the span of your career that have positively improved the space for female lawyers?

The change has been significant. When I started out, women were not the majority of the profession – now they are. Today women make up the majority of solicitors, and it's far more common to see women leading teams, running major transactions and sitting at the head of the negotiating table.

Flexible work has also gone from the exception to the norm. When I was studying while working full-time, flexibility was something you negotiated quietly, if it was available at all. Now it's built into how firms operate. That benefits everyone, but it has made a particular difference for women balancing careers with caring responsibilities.

In Property specifically, digitisation has transformed the way we practise. Electronic conveyancing through PEXA, electronic signing and remote settlements mean the work is no longer tied to a particular desk or a physical settlement room. That has made it much easier to work flexibly without compromising on client service.

What further progress would you like to see across the industry to support women in building and sustaining successful careers?

Much of the focus has been on early-career women and parents of young children, and that's important. But I'd like to see more attention on the later stages too.

Many senior women are caring for ageing parents, managing their own health, including menopause, and carrying heavy leadership loads, often all at once. It's something I see among my peers. Senior roles are also often built around constant availability, which can make flexibility feel out of reach just when women are stepping into them. That's often when we lose experienced women who would otherwise become partners or leaders.

I'd like firms to talk openly about these issues and offer practical support at every stage, for example, carer's leave that extends to elder care, menopause-aware policies, and senior roles that can genuinely be done flexibly. Keeping women in the profession isn't only about getting them through the door. It's about making sure they can stay and lead for the long term.

What would you say to young female lawyers asking for career advice?

First, there's no single right path. I came to law as a mature-age student after years of working, and at times I felt I was behind everyone else. In hindsight, that earlier experience became one of my greatest strengths. So don't compare your timeline to anyone else's. Whatever you've done before, and whatever you do outside work, it all adds to the lawyer you become. Careers are long. Taking a different route, stepping back for a few years or changing direction doesn't mean you've failed.

Second, look for sponsors, not just mentors: people who will back you, not only advise you. You can help that happen by being clear about what you want. Too many talented women wait to be noticed and assume good work will speak for itself. Good work matters, but you also need to tell people you want to run that deal, go to that client meeting or be considered for promotion. Ask for feedback, ask for opportunities and don't wait until you feel completely ready.

Third, law can be demanding, so set boundaries early and protect them. For example, decide which commitments outside work are non-negotiable for you and be upfront about them. It won't always be easy, and there will be busy periods when deadlines come first, but the habits you build early are the ones that sustain a long career.

Finally, you'll have hard days and you'll make mistakes. Everyone does, including senior lawyers. What matters is how you respond and what you learn. Back yourself, because the qualities that make you different are often the ones that will set you apart.

Looking ahead, what continues to motivate and inspire you in your work?

I'm motivated by two things. The first is the work itself. Property is changing quickly. In south-east Queensland in particular, population growth and the infrastructure pipeline leading up to the 2032 Olympics mean there's a great deal happening. I enjoy helping clients navigate those changes and make the most of the opportunities they create.

The second is the people. That includes the clients I've worked with for years, some of whom I've seen through many stages of their business, as well as my colleagues and particularly my team. Watching junior lawyers and career paralegals grow in confidence and capability is one of the most rewarding parts of what I do.

After all these years, I still find there's something new to learn on almost every matter. That, and helping to build the next generation of Property lawyers, is what keeps me inspired.

What trends or challenges are currently shaping your area of practice, and how are you helping clients respond?

Property is being shaped by several forces at once. Economic conditions, interest rates and construction costs are putting pressure on project feasibility and making deals harder to get over the line. Many clients are rethinking how they use and hold property. Developers are looking at build-to-rent and mixed-use projects, owners are repositioning older assets, and landlords and tenants want more flexibility in their leasing arrangements, such as shorter terms, turnover-based rent and more creative uses of space.

Sustainability is also moving from a "nice to have" into the documents themselves. It now appears in green lease clauses, in reporting obligations and in the questions buyers and financiers ask during due diligence.

I help clients respond in three main ways. First, I structure transactions and leases that are commercially flexible but still protect the client's position, for example, staged settlements, conditional contracts or lease terms that can adapt as a project evolves. Second, I identify issues early in the process, so they don't derail a deal at the last minute. Third, I take a practical, solutions-focused approach to resolving problems before they become disputes. That saves clients time and money and protects the relationships that matter to them.



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Special Counsel

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Lawyer Elite Women 2026 report