

Member Spotlight: James Conomos

After dipping his toe into accounting, James Conomos was tempted away by the law



As JCL's Managing Partner with more than 30 years' experience, Jim leads the firm's strategic direction, which has always focused on effective and efficient problem resolution. He is a recognised leader in commercial litigation and insolvency law and has garnered a widely respected reputation within Queensland's legal community.

The firm was established because Jim is passionate about achieving positive outcomes for clients and providing real value for money. Since JCL's inception, Jim has consistently adopted a pragmatic, direct and confident approach to skilfully navigate his clients through complex legal matters, with unwavering commercial results.

Jim's impressive career has seen him serve as the Queensland State Chair of the Insolvency and Reconstruction Committee of the Business Law Section of the Law Council of Australia, Queensland State Chair of the Insolvency and Reconstruction Committee of the Queensland Law Society and the National Chair of the Insolvency and Reconstruction Committee of the Business Law Section of the Council of Australia.

James Conomos has built up a successful boutique legal practice during the past 30 years, but early on he was destined for another career altogether.

James has been practicing law – commercial litigation and insolvency – for more than 35 years and for much of that time he's headed up his own firm, James Conomos Lawyers (JCL). He's a well-known legal figure in his native Brisbane and works closely with senior lawyers and judges across Australia, New Zealand and further afield. Ironically, law wasn't his first career choice; initially, James trained as an accountant. For this, he blames his education – or rather lack of it.

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"I wasn't the greatest scholar," he laughs. "My sisters were much better students, but I managed to get into university and eventually received a degree in commerce."

This degree landed him a role at a small accountancy firm sampling documents for audits, a job that he admits was repetitive and deathly dull. Staring at a possible 40 years

of poring over audit forms for a living, James decided to switch careers and return to university to study law.

"Now, I enjoyed that degree," he says. "I liked the way that in law every factual situation is different. Every problem a person has is different, so you get to help people in relation to different types of things. Whereas in accounting all the work was exactly the same."

"After doing this for 35 years, I still really enjoy it. That's important. With law you get lots of enjoyment out of it, make lots of good friends, meet people and get to be involved in organisations like IR Global. Of course, it also helps that you're well remunerated."

The downside to this is that you're often dealing with people's personal issues, particularly with litigation, or with the tragedy of people's businesses when they're going through an insolvency. "It is kind of a thankless job," James says. "You're dealing with everybody else's problems and if you want to be any good at it you have to take all that on board. You constantly carry the problems of someone else with you and you care about these and end up taking them to heart. Dealing with that is a challenge, but that's the job."

When he first started out on his legal career, James benefited from a placement with a local judge. James's

father was a well-known doctor and had high profile friends in Brisbane who would get together to watch rugby league every week – these friends included a high court judge.

"The judge asked if I would like to be an associate of his when I finished my degree," James recalls. "It was a role helping senior people there with research and other aspects of their job, so I worked with them and learnt the ropes. Over time I got to know all the judges in the Supreme Court and in every court in the country."

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Today, most of the young lawyers James met on the way up in their careers are now senior lawyers and judges – he admits it was a great stepping stone for his whole career.

After his time as an associate, James worked for an oil firm before being headhunted by two lawyers who had spilt from larger firms: "They got me involved when they only had about eight or nine people. But after about 18 months, the firm had been built up to about 250 people. We had this amazing group, all young lawyers, working crazy hours."

While it was a great opportunity to further his career, James admits it wasn't a great environment to work in: "A lot of people got sacked and I learnt a lot about people and ideas and how to do things differently. I stayed there for about two years and then I left and started my own practise in 1992 and have been going strong ever since."

JCL has built its success on commercial litigation and insolvency work, although James was not an insolvency specialist to begin with: "I really didn't do a lot of insolvency

before I started JCL, but I had this interest in it and you never really know what area you want to focus on when you start out."

Since then, the company has built an enviable reputation for its work and has clients across Australia and internationally – including New Zealand, the US and the UK.

"We're a boutique firm, so we end up getting work from other lawyers, judges or high net worth individuals," he says. "Because it's insolvency and commercial litigation, most of the time your clients are people. We do have some repeat clients, but a lot of the work is an enormous piece of litigation that goes on and then ends, and then hopefully that person will never come back unless they find themselves in the same situation again."

During the pandemic the firm has been as busy as ever, but James is bracing himself for an even busier second half of 2021. Commercial litigation work has been increasing steadily in recent months, but insolvencies in Australia are set to rocket as more distressed businesses fold because of the Covid crisis.

"We've had a really busy time, which is a good thing for the business but not so much in the real world," he says. "The insolvency work is still pretty dry out there. But by the middle of the year that will change. A huge number of businesses are completely screwed. It is going to be a bit of a disaster. The tax office, which is a big cause of insolvencies in the country, has been very inactive recently, but they're starting to become more active now."

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A lot of this forthcoming work will be done via videoconferencing. Proving you can teach an old dog new tricks, James has embraced this during the past year; it means he has to do a lot less travelling – rather than fly to Perth or Sydney for a meeting, which can take hours in the air, he can sit in the comfort of his home or office and go through the work.

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"All of the hearings we do at the moment are without being there in person," he says. "That really appeals to my colleagues and I; going out of the office to sit in a big building doesn't really make much sense anymore. You end up wasting time and costing people more money. With technology, everyone wins."

James is hoping this becomes a permanent fixture for the legal sector: "I think the courts should try to use technology more. There are not many cases where you're going to need a person to give evidence."

Meanwhile, James will continue to build JCL as a go to firm for litigation and insolvencies in Brisbane. Moreover, as part of the IR Global network, he'll be working on international cases and with his colleagues in the US, UK and East Asia with or without the technology. "Yes, I've missed the events in the past year, but I'm sure they'll be back in the near future," he smiles. "Technology is all well and good, but as a member of the IR Global network it's always good to catch up with people – from the region and further afield – in person."



James Conomos

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James Conomos Lawyers was established by James Conomos in July 1992 as a boutique legal firm offering specialist expertise in commercial litigation and insolvency. The firm came into being because James is passionate about achieving positive outcomes for clients and providing real value for money.

Since then, James has pursued his desire to help younger lawyers learn the art of law and problem solving. Through his mentoring, James has shaped a team of capable and ambitious lawyers who will adeptly solve your legal problems within a realistic time frame.