

NLJ career profile

As he takes the reins at the Association of Costs Lawyers, new chair **David Bailey-Vella** reflects on imposter syndrome, breaking down barriers & surprisingly unrelaxing hobbies



What was your route into the legal profession?

As a young boy, I always promised my mother, who worked in law for over 35 years, that having another legal professional in the family wasn't on the cards. After graduating from university with a degree in philosophy, I picked up a temp job working as a paralegal in a law firm working on a large human rights case; and so my legal career began. Within a few months I joined the costs department, assisting with the drafting of a £40m budget in a group litigation case.

Which person within the profession inspires you most?

This is going to be a typical lawyer response I'm afraid. It doesn't feel right to single one person out, but I have always been inspired by strong female lawyers, who through sheer determination and grit, break down barriers within the profession and in doing so forge their path while inspiring others along the way. Imposter syndrome is very real among lawyers from all backgrounds, and as a costs lawyer I have often felt it difficult to equate myself with other legal professionals in the industry, such as solicitors and barristers.

Who is your favourite fictional lawyer?

Andrew Beckett in *Philadelphia*, played by Tom Hanks. In the film, Andrew was a senior associate at a prestigious law firm, who was fired for being gay and having AIDS. This was set during the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. More important, however, is the fact that the film was inspired by the life of Geoffrey Bowers.

Bowers was one of the first lawyers to publicly challenge HIV/AIDS discrimination, filing a complaint against his employer, Baker McKenzie, after being

dismissed by the partners due to his AIDS diagnosis. His case was one of the first to go to a public hearing, and although he died just a few months later from the disease, the case set a precedent for future legal actions and raising awareness about the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS.

“Joining the profession without any legal qualifications seemed at first to be a stumbling block”

What change would you make to the profession?

Our values at the Association of Costs Lawyers (ACL) are to be community-first, inclusive and proactive.

Historically, there have been many barriers to entering the legal profession, be it socio-economic background, gender inequality or racial bias. Social mobility has been a priority of the ACL since I joined the council in 2021.

Since then, we have partnered with important organisations such as Women in Costs, and have forged strong links with the Access to Justice Foundation and Legal Ombudsman. In the last 12 months, we have also introduced two scholarships per year, sponsored by the ACL, to study the Costs Lawyer Professional Qualification, applications for which are considered against the framework of social mobility. While this is a good start, there is still more work to be done within the wider legal profession.

What has been your biggest career challenge so far?

Joining the profession without any legal qualifications seemed at first to be a stumbling block. I couldn't afford to go back to university for my GDL/LPC, so had to explore other options. I was lucky enough to be given the opportunity to study towards my costs lawyer qualification, while working full time. Sadly, during my studies my mother fell sick and sadly passed away before I gained my qualification. This was a huge setback for me, but I got through it with the support of my colleagues, family and tutors.

If you weren't a lawyer, what would you choose as an alternate career?

While studying at university, I considered a career as a primary school teacher, but the thought of further education at that time was a little daunting. I firmly believe everything happens for a reason, and as a father of two incredible kids, I can, hand on heart, say I am very happy I did not pursue this career choice; teaching is truly a vocation!

How do you relax?

This might seem far from relaxing for many, but I enjoy training for competing in triathlons. While a husband and father first, I enjoy training with my local triathlon club and competing in multi-distance races. The remainder of my time is spent with my family, often exploring the outdoors with the kids and learning from my son about the many dinosaurs which I never knew existed!

David Bailey-Vella is chair of the Association of Costs Lawyers (associationofcostslawyers.co.uk) & legal director at specialist litigation law firm Davis Woolfe (daviswoolfe.com). [NewLawJournal.co.uk](http://Newlawjournal.co.uk)



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