Bloomberg Law

They've Got Next: The 40 Under 40

Business & Practice

Neil Barlow of Clifford Chance

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Please describe two of your most substantial, recent wins in practice.

One of the most rewarding aspects of my practice is building long-term client relationships and partnering with clients throughout the investment lifecycle. An example is my work advising Permira and the founders on their investment in Alter Domus. From Permira's initial acquisition in 2017 through its exit in 2025, I advised on the company's growth strategy, including seven US acquisitions that helped transform Alter Domus into a leading global provider of fund administration services with more than $2.5 trillion in assets under administration. The journey culminated in its $5.3 billion sale to Cinven. Advising across every stage—from investment and expansion to exit—required navigating complex cross-border transactions and coordinating multidisciplinary teams. What makes this matter particularly meaningful is the opportunity to contribute to a value-creation story over nearly a decade and see that vision realized through a successful outcome.

A complementary aspect of my practice is advising clients on innovative, strategically significant transactions that sit at the intersection of investment, financing, and partnership structures. This was evident in KKR's acquisition of a significant stake in Harley-Davidson Financial Services. Rather than a traditional acquisition, the transaction involved a bespoke structure combining an equity investment with an ongoing capital deployment program designed to provide scalable, long-term funding. Delivering the transaction required coordinating multiple stakeholders while navigating complex commercial, regulatory, and structuring considerations. The result was a tailored partnership that advanced the strategic objectives of both parties and reflects the increasingly sophisticated ways private capital is being deployed today.

What is the most important lesson you learned as a first-year attorney and how does it inform your practice today?

The most important lesson I learned as a first-year attorney was the power of listening. Early in my career, I believed value was demonstrated by speaking quickly and offering solutions. I soon realized that the lawyers and leaders I most respected were distinguished not by how much they said but by how carefully they listened—to clients, to colleagues, and to the subtle dynamics shaping a transaction.

In private equity, clients are rarely solving purely technical legal issues. They are balancing commercial objectives, investor expectations, regulatory risk, and reputational considerations at the same time. Learning to pause, ask thoughtful questions, and understand the broader context before responding fundamentally changed how I worked. It allowed me to better identify client priorities, anticipate concerns, and provide advice that was commercially grounded rather than reactive.

That discipline remains central to my practice. Listening closely builds trust and leads to better judgment. It also informs how I lead teams—creating space for junior lawyers to contribute, encouraging diverse perspectives, and fostering collaboration under pressure.

Technical expertise is assumed. The ability to listen—carefully, consistently, and with humility—is what ultimately differentiates effective advisers and leaders.

How do you define success in your practice?

In private equity, success is built on trust. This is a relationship-driven business, and the clearest measure of impact is when clients repeatedly entrust you with their most significant and strategically complex matters. Earning that trust requires listening carefully, understanding what is truly driving a transaction, and delivering clear, commercially grounded advice that enables decisive action.

Success also means creating durable value beyond the closing. The real measure is whether we have helped clients deploy capital intelligently, manage risk with discipline, and position investments for sustained growth. When clients view us as long-term partners—integrated into their strategic decision-making rather than engaged on a transaction-by-transaction basis—that reflects meaningful impact.

Equally important is building a practice and team that strengthen over time. I measure success not only by the matters we execute but by whether colleagues feel challenged, supported, and positioned to grow. Ultimately, success is defined by enduring relationships, sound judgment under pressure, and a platform that grows stronger year after year.

The emergence of artificial intelligence is transforming the practice of law. How has AI impacted your strategic approach to your work?

AI has changed the speed and mechanics of how legal work is delivered, accelerating process-heavy tasks such as diligence, research and first-pass drafting and enabling work to be done in parallel on fast-moving transactions. At the same time, it has sharpened what it cannot replace: AI can enhance efficiency, but it cannot replicate judgment, creativity, or the ability to navigate complex negotiations and client relationships. My approach has therefore been to integrate AI deliberately into workflows where it adds value while maintaining rigorous oversight to ensure accuracy, confidentiality, and appropriate use. It has also influenced how I think about developing junior lawyers—encouraging thoughtful adoption without losing analytical discipline. Ultimately, AI is not changing the role of the lawyer but raising the speed, consistency, and quality with which that role is delivered.

How would more junior lawyers on your team describe your leadership style?

I'd hope junior lawyers on my team would describe my leadership style as focused, accessible, and invested in their development. I set high standards, but I'm equally committed to creating an environment where people feel comfortable asking questions, taking ownership, and learning quickly. I try to strike a balance between being hands-on—particularly in complex or high- stakes moments—and giving junior team members the space to build confidence and judgment. Just as importantly, I prioritize clarity, responsiveness, and team cohesion, because in fast-moving transactions, how we work together is as critical as the outcome we deliver.

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Who is your greatest mentor in the law and what have they taught you?

My greatest mentor in the law is Jonny Myers, global head of private equity at Clifford Chance. Jonny has had a profound impact on my development as both a lawyer and a leader. One of the most enduring lessons Jonny taught me is the power of listening. He impressed upon me that strong judgment begins with understanding—listening to clients to uncover what truly matters to them, listening to colleagues to appreciate their perspectives, and listening to the dynamics surrounding a deal before offering a view. That discipline has shaped every part of how I practice and lead.

Jonny also taught me the importance of taking smart, deliberate risks. He encouraged me to pursue international assignments, even when they were outside my comfort zone, and to step into opportunities that would stretch my capabilities. His advice—that growth often happens at the edge of uncertainty—has stayed with me throughout my career.

Above all, Jonny demonstrated what it means to invest in people. He entrusted me with meaningful responsibility—including helping to build the US private equity practice—and gave me the space to grow into a leadership role. His mentorship remains one of the defining influences of my career, and I carry those lessons forward in how I advise clients and develop the next generation of lawyers.

What are you most proud of as a lawyer?

I am most proud of helping to build a high performing US private equity practice that thrives because of the people behind it. The growth of the platform has been meaningful not simply because of the scale or profile of the work but because it was built collaboratively—by aligning teams around a shared vision and challenging one another to deliver at the highest level. Seeing lawyers I once worked with as juniors now leading transactions, shaping client relationships, and mentoring others is what I value most.

I am equally proud that clients increasingly rely on this platform for their most complex and strategically important matters, a trust reflected in our recent No. 7 ranking in Bloomberg's US private equity league tables. That recognition mattered not as a headline but as validation of a long term approach grounded in talent, sound judgment, and consistent execution.

Ultimately, what I am most proud of is helping to build a practice defined by strong teams, enduring client relationships, and work that creates durable, long term value. Being asked to guide clients through their most consequential decisions is a responsibility I never take lightly, and it continues to shape how I approach both my work and my leadership.

Tell us your two favorite songs on your summer music playlist.

Before becoming a parent, I might have given a different answer. Since welcoming our first baby earlier this year, "Rainbow Connection" by Kermit the Frog has dominated the playlist. My other pick is "Don't Look Back in Anger" by Oasis—an anthem of my youth that is great for a group sing-along and with it sparks a healthy dose of nostalgia.