

## The Devil wears Strava – new horizons for Business Development?

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**With *The Devil Wears Prada 2* currently in cinemas, I've been reflecting on how much professional life has changed since Meryl Streep's iconic *Miranda Priestly* first reigned terror across our screens in 2006. The original film belonged to an era of impossible deadlines, rigid office routines, immaculate tailoring and the pursuit of professional success at almost any cost, but fast forward to 2026 and I think it's fair to say the modern workplace looks pretty different than the one some of us knew twenty years ago.**

Perhaps one of the most noticeable shifts has been the growing importance of workplace wellbeing. Thankfully, wellbeing has moved a long way beyond the fruit bowl in reception or the corporate volunteer days which employees were often too busy to take. Increasingly, it is becoming embedded in how organisations think about culture, performance and connection. In sectors like ours, where deadlines, pressure and packed diaries are part and parcel of everyday life, wellbeing is no longer viewed as a "nice to have" or a box-ticking exercise, when workload permits. Instead, it is creating sustainable ways for people to thrive professionally without running permanently on empty. Ambition and high performance still matter, of course, but there is a growing recognition that success is difficult to sustain if it comes at the expense of health, balance and human connection.

That emphasis on connection feels particularly relevant at a time when AI is transforming how we work, communicate and do business. As work becomes more digital and automated, I think there seems to be an even greater appetite for genuine human interaction. If we can use technology to reduce some of the administrative burden from our working lives, perhaps the real value lies in creating more room for the things which technology cannot replicate: wellbeing, shared experiences and meaningful professional relationships, and not simply more work.

From a BD perspective, that shift is especially interesting because the way we build and nurture professional relationships also appears to be evolving and I've noticed a subtle, but definite move towards relationship-building that feels a little more informal and experience-led. Don't get me wrong, the traditional networking staples are still very much alive and incredibly valuable, and conferences, lunches, industry events and panel discussions still have their feet firmly under the table. Increasingly, however, some of the most meaningful professional connections seem to also be finding their feet elsewhere: on running routes, cycle rides, charitable initiatives and, well, pretty much anywhere beyond the usual corporate settings.

Perhaps that reflects a broader change in what professionals are looking for from working life generally. So, not simply more networking opportunities (let's face it, there's enough events taking

place most days of the week), but more genuine relationships, shared interests and stronger communities, which create spaces where people connect in ways that feel less transactional, less “salesy” and perhaps, dare I say it, more beneficial and enjoyable.

### **The rise of the arbitration runner ...**

Take Arbitration Runners for example: a growing community bringing together people from across the arbitration world who, in their words, like to “kill two birds with one stone” - i.e. combine networking with a run. Indeed, the initiative has gathered momentum over the last 12-18 months, with monthly meets taking place across Paris, Geneva, Madrid, London, Munich, Stockholm, Helsinki, Bogotá, Berlin and Washington DC, and more hubs emerging all the time.

No matter your location, it’s typically a short route (often around 5km) with all abilities welcome and the only real requirement being a pace comfortable enough to keep the conversation flowing. Its popularity suggests that meaningful professional relationships do not always require a name badge and running alongside someone has a way of breaking down barriers that formal networking often cannot. And, of course, nothing quite levels the playing field like everyone in Lycra. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that it has earned a firm place during **London International Disputes Week**, where we’ll be meeting on Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> June at the **IDRC** at 8am for an 8.10am start for a 5-6km run along the Thames before coffee and pastries afterwards.

There are countless other examples of this type of thing too. From the regular get-togethers and runs organised by **Constructing Excellence Essex Club (CEEC)**, to the Holmes & Hills lunchtime running group, the yoga initiatives at DWF, and the Property Sports Network women-only run. Throw in the “sport du jour”, padel, and these are just a small handful that I’ve either taken part in myself, or that I’ve spotted on LinkedIn, but they all point towards the same trend: networking increasingly happening through shared activities, wellbeing and community, rather than solely in traditional corporate settings.

### **Charity begins at home**

Some of these initiatives also come with an all important added charitable dimension. Earlier this month, Fenwick Elliott held its annual “*Jog On with Fenwick Elliott*” charity 5km and 10km event in Battersea Park, raising funds for causes close to the firm’s heart: The Stroke Association and The Migraine Trust. It was a fantastically well-organised and genuinely enjoyable event, bringing together more than 200 people from across the construction and legal communities.

For those less keen on running, there is the **London Legal Walk** - the annual 10km charity walk taking place on 9<sup>th</sup> June through central London organised by the London Legal Support Trust, which brings together hundreds from across the legal sector to raise money for organisations supporting access to justice and free legal advice services. Just another example of how professional networking is evolving through a blend of wellbeing, community and charitable purpose.

And, of course, it is not just running and walking; cycling has become something of a BD goldmine too. “Cycle to PAW” sees professionals from across the arbitration community cycle more than 350km from London to Paris over three days in the lead up to Paris Arbitration Week. Raising tens of thousands of pounds for Save the Children, the ride combines endurance, fundraising and networking in equal measure. I have it on good authority from MCMS’s Jonathan Cope, who completed the challenge in 2025, that the healthy dose of camaraderie developed over long days in the saddle demonstrates exactly how shared challenge can foster the sort of professional and personal relationships that you don’t always get the opportunity to build elsewhere.

### **Master’s Challenge 2026 - Land’s End to John o’Groats**

Sticking with the cycling theme, there can be few more ambitious or iconic challenges than Land's End to John o'Groats, and that is exactly what Matt Molloy, Master of the Worshipful Company of Arbitrators, will be taking on this summer.

From 23 July to 4 August 2026, Matt will pedal more than 950 miles from the southernmost tip of England to the northernmost point of Scotland. Joining him at various stages along the route will be a number of guest cyclists and supporters, including Past Master Simon Underwood, fellow dispute resolver and member of the Worshipful Company of Gold and Silver Wyre Drawers, Peter O'Malley, and Jonathan Cope, who will no doubt be drawing on the benefit of his *Cycle to PAW* experience!

Beyond the physical challenge itself, the ride has an important charitable purpose. Together, the team will be raising vital funds to be shared equally between the WCA Charitable Trust and Solving Kids' Cancer UK — two organisations making an extraordinary difference in their communities. If you are able to support the challenge, I know any donations would be hugely appreciated:

**<https://www.justgiving.com/crowdfunding/matthew-molloy>**

### **Time for a change of pace?**

Relationships have always sat at the centre of successful business development, but the environment in which those relationships develop is certainly changing. Whatever it might look like, BD is increasingly about understanding where communities gather, what motivates people and how trust is built in contemporary professional life. Authenticity, shared experiences and meaningful conversations matter, perhaps now more than ever in a world increasingly shaped by technology and hybrid working, and wellbeing sits somewhere within that equation. It's not as a cynical networking strategy dressed up in activewear (nobody needs "mandatory fun"), but perhaps a reflection of changing professional values.

These days, I think workplace wellbeing sends a pretty powerful message about culture, about permission to pause and about acknowledging that demanding careers and personal wellbeing do not need to exist in permanent opposition. Culture increasingly shapes reputation; reputation shapes relationships, and, in turn, relationships create opportunity.

Traditional relationship-building, of course, still matters, and always will, so I'm not suggesting the future of networking will entirely replace conferences with running clubs or substitute client dinners for yoga classes, but perhaps the horizon is widening. And, judging by the growing number of professionals voluntarily signing up for endurance activities and challenges, maybe the devil doesn't wear Prada anymore; maybe the devil wears Strava instead. Kudos!



**CASSIE LEAVER**