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A partner in a law firm and renowned expert in cybersecurity and data privacy practice, but this is only part of Dominique Shelton Leipzig's professional life. *James Coker* meets Dominique during this year's RSA Conference to find out about her enormous contributions to this growing sector...

DOMINIQUE SHELTON LEIPZIG

Dominique Shelton Leipzig is living proof you don't have to be loud or domineering to make your way to the top of your profession. Meeting her in the Ritz hotel in San Francisco, California, where she is staying for the prestigious RSA Conference 2022, I am immediately struck by her softly spoken tone and apparently laid-back demeanor. At this event, she is due to moderate a keynote panel titled 'Privacy 2022: Perspectives From The Top.'

It quickly becomes apparent that beneath that calm exterior and measured, soothing voice lies a burning passion in several areas. First and foremost, to enhance data privacy and security practices in an ever-digitized and data-driven world. Another considerable part of her life is helping others, especially the disadvantaged, achieve their potential, emphasized by her active volunteer work. More on that later.

In April 2022, Dominique began her current role as a partner in the cybersecurity & data privacy practice at the law firm Mayer Brown, a move she describes as the "culmination" of her interests and skills. Sitting within the company's cybersecurity and data privacy group, she is tasked with helping "bring privacy and data security together to bring the fourth industrial revolution forward." The link between privacy and cybersecurity has been accelerated by a swathe of new legislation in recent years, particularly the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) and the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

Learning the Language of Business

Dominique and her colleagues are focused on helping the C-suite and boardroom understand the increasingly complex legal issues related to data. As part of this, Dominique founded Mayer Brown's Global Data Innovation team, enabling her to be special counsel to C-Level executives and the board on data. This requires encouraging significant collaboration among various stakeholders, such as CISOs, CPOs, lawyers, and the C-suite and boardroom. "It is fascinating that data has gone from a compliance issue to a business issue – such that it is front page news and in the boardrooms of major companies around the globe," she observes.

However, there is often a "disconnect" between how these very different personality types communicate, preventing these conversations from leading to meaningful outcomes. For example, Dominique notes that legal professionals, CISOs and CPOs "speak in a language of 'how' – how to fix things and do things and are very detail-orientated." This differs from board members and the C-suite, who "want to know what the issue is and its relevance to their business in about two bullet points... that's just not the way lawyers, CISOs and CPOs are trained."

She first truly appreciated the need to communicate with different types of professionals when representing the California Chamber of Commerce in

negotiations about the application of the CCPA after it was enacted in 2018. This involved speaking to numerous groups to understand the differing positions of the relevant parties, from business groups to politicians. "A lot of business-friendly terms came out of that, and that was due to listening and understanding what's important to each side," she recalls.

Dominique has therefore put a lot of emphasis on being a "translator," someone who can bridge this divide. For this, she has literally "gone back to school," first gaining a certificate in Corporate Governance from the UCLA Anderson School of Management before recently completing the NextGen Directors Program at UC Berkeley Executive Education.

This dedication to continuous learning highlights Dominique's burning passion for privacy and data protection; I get the feeling you could get her speaking for an entire day on these issues, and all of it would be entirely relevant and useful, both to those familiar with the industry and those who are not.

In fact, she doesn't even view her professional life as 'work' as such. While Dominique acknowledges that when it comes to work-life balance "you would probably see more work," at the same time, "it doesn't feel like that." She adds: "I've been able to deeply intertwine my personal interests with my work, and that's how I've made that balance."

Another notable component of Dominique's role at Mayer Brown is the →

global nature of the work. She points out that data protection legislation is emerging worldwide, significantly impacting global companies. “It really does bring together everything that I was interested in. There’s a highly political and international component to these data protection laws that goes back to my international relations routes,” she outlines.

Lawyer at First Sight

To understand these routes, it’s essential to revisit Dominique’s childhood and adolescent years, primarily in the 1970s. She explains that she and her sister were around five years old when their parents “went back to school.” At this time, her father went to law school, while her mother, who is Haitian by birth, studied for her doctorate. Unsurprisingly, “much of that time was formed by intellectual discussions that filled our household.”

Sometimes it is said that people are born into a particular career, and in Dominique’s case, there is a strong

from French-speaking Haiti, influenced a true French connection for Dominique, who continuously studied the language every semester “from the age of five all the way to college.” In fact, her mother, Marie-Denise Shelton, is a renowned French Language and Literature professor at Claremont McKenna College in California. “It certainly was an influence to make sure I understood what she was saying!” adds Dominique.

Given this backdrop, it is unsurprising to hear that Dominique’s undergraduate degree was in International Relations and French Civilization at Brown University in Rhode Island from 1984-1988, which encompassed a year studying abroad in France at L’Université de Lyon II and the Science Politique university. “That course of study naturally hit all of the things I was interested in,” she notes.

Nevertheless, Dominique insists “there wasn’t any thought of any other career path” than the legal profession, and following her undergraduate degree, went to Georgetown University Law Center

This course took Dominique under the stewardship of Professor Anita Allen, an internationally renowned expert on privacy law and ethics, who at the time was on loan to Georgetown from Harvard University. “I loved that course,” Dominique reminisces.

Indeed, this experience proved to be a seminal moment in Dominique’s life, although she wasn’t to know it for a while. After working in various aspects of commercial litigation for several years, becoming a partner at a law firm for the first time in 2001, she became involved in litigation that followed a Federal Trade Commission (FTC) investigation into advertising acquisitions due to privacy issues in 2007 and 2008. She believes the privacy issues that evolved from such cases have grown in importance today, leading to a “tension between privacy and the marketing function for most enterprises.”

These issues have been exacerbated by surging digitization – Dominique points out that 2.5 quintillion bytes of data were created each day in 2018, a figure that persisted through the pandemic, and which “is only going to increase” due to the vast number of connected devices coming online.

The incredible growth of data is also making cybersecurity a major component of Dominique’s work. She points out that “global data breaches cost our economy \$6.1tn last year.” Therefore, cybersecurity is very much a business issue – not least because of the enormous fines that can now be leveraged on companies for large-scale breaches following legislation like CCPA and GDPR. As a result, she regularly liaises with cybersecurity professionals “as it’s very important the security professionals understand the legal metrics that they’ll be viewed on because the technical controls are just one piece of a six-part process that regulators care about.”

Her work in the field of privacy, particularly now at Mayer Brown, “brings together a lot of my interests over the years.” She adds: “I love international relations and my practice is global, which is so important because data is not sitting in one country and most of our clients are global companies and they need to use, move and transact with their data globally.” Dominique currently advises companies on privacy laws in the 35 countries in Africa.

The theme of interests coming round full circle is a recurring one throughout our conversation and is emphasized by Dominique’s recent encounters with her old college professor, the aforementioned Anita Allen. This includes Allen presenting research on privacy to the International Association of Privacy

“I’ve been able to deeply intertwine my personal interests with my work”

argument that this is the truth. As well as her father pursuing a career in law, her mother had previously studied the subject in her native Haiti. Before that, her maternal Grandfather was a prominent attorney. So, was it inevitable that Dominique would continue this fine family tradition? “Yes, I was one of those complete nerds and knew from the beginning I wanted to be an attorney,” she laughs.

During those household intellectual discussions, Dominique developed a keen interest in politics, which is often heavily entwined with legal issues. On one watershed occasion, Dominique was encouraged by her parents to write to African American congresswoman Yvonne Brathwaite Burke about an issue and subsequently received a signed letter in reply. “It was really impactful to see you could participate in the process and make a difference,” she says, smiling.

The political issues she developed the biggest passion for tended to be international in nature. “When something happens in one country, it’s usually the canary in the coalmine of where it’s going to happen next,” she observes.

This global outlook was heavily influenced by the international nature of her own family. Her mother, who came

from 1988-1991. Again, her passion for international issues played a big part in this decision. “I went to Georgetown because of its international focus,” she explains. Initially, this focus sat nicely with her plan to pursue international law, potentially around prosecuting war crimes. However, after undertaking an internship at a law firm in Atlanta after her first year, “I decided I wanted to do commercial litigation work.” She recognized this wouldn’t be possible as an international public lawyer, “so I went ahead and joined an American law firm to do litigation.”

A Need for Privacy

This straightforward, no-nonsense approach is typical of Dominique’s style. She sees what she wants to achieve and goes for it. It’s a refreshing mindset. But how did she end up focusing on privacy and cybersecurity?

Her interest in this field stems from a course at Georgetown about privacy in American law. While this course predated the internet and the avalanche of data shared online, “we dealt with some of the tough issues around privacy that we’re dealing with today.” This includes writing a paper on the exposure of the private lives of politicians, such as the ‘outing’ of gay men in the public eye.

Professionals (IAPP) board, of which Dominique is a member. “It was a real treat to see her from that vantage point as a board member,” she comments.

A Commitment to Diversity

Allen’s influence on Dominique’s life goes beyond engaging her in privacy. Dominique explains that Allen was one of two African American professors who taught her at Georgetown, the other being Elizabeth Patterson, who continues to work at the institution’s law school to this day. This proved “very empowering” to Dominique, herself a woman of color. However, an incident occurred during her time at the law school that demonstrated how her race could be weaponized against her. A fellow student in the same year wrote an op-ed piece in the university newspaper criticizing affirmative action programs, arguing that Black students didn’t belong in the law school because their grades and test scores did not merit it. “That was the first time in the profession I became acquainted with the idea that someone could use an idea about a whole group’s capabilities to try and contain the aspirations and careers of others,” she states sadly.

It reflects Dominique’s character that she was unwilling to sit back and accept this situation. Instead, along with other students, she took action to ensure the university took the appropriate response according to its own code of conduct. Disappointingly though, “we had to take time out of what we should have been doing, which was study because we were getting close to exams.” This experience had a profound impact – “that’s why I’m so passionate about diversity,” she says.

Years later, in 2007, with Dominique’s career in full flow, she came across a similar incident, showing that such attitudes have not disappeared. This was during a visit to the UCLA School of Law, where she was invited to talk to the students about her career. During the visit, a student asked Dominique to sign a petition against a campus professor’s ‘mismatch’ theory, which advanced the view that affirmative action harms Black students because their grades do not justify them being there. Finding that this view “removed the dignity of these students,” Dominique and fellow professionals decided to help the students act against these views being advanced on campus.

As shown by the above examples, Dominique is someone who values actions over words. Rather than loudly talking about an issue using endless platitudes, she makes sure she does something practical to make a difference. In keeping with this approach, she is involved in

numerous volunteer activities designed to offer opportunities to those from underrepresented backgrounds. This includes being on the Los Angeles Steering Committee at Just The Beginning, which helps students of color and other disadvantaged communities pursue a career in law. She notes that one of the biggest barriers to these students, who are typically middle school and high school children, “has been a lack of encouragement and visibility of what the possibilities are.”

Dominique believes the demonstration that people of color can have successful careers in law, like herself, can make a huge difference in encouraging more people from these communities to pursue their dreams. “I do think a picture is often worth 1000 words,” she outlines, pointing out that the inauguration of Kamala Harris as the US Vice President in 2021 “lit off a fire of enthusiasm and interest” in young girls across the US.

Opportunity Knocks

One of the biggest hurdles is ‘imposter syndrome,’ which worsens as youngsters reach college age. This is a major impact of the mismatch theory, in Dominique’s view, and is a perspective that’s not easy to shift from the minds of diverse students, who regularly confide these feelings to her. “My message to these students is that you are not an imposter, you’re learning – if you’ve got that question, probably 1000 other people have it, so it’s OK to ask it. Get the answer, be empowered and move forward,” she advises.

If you believe the COVID-19 pandemic would have curtailed Dominique’s ability to help people pursue their dreams, think again. With so many people, from students to those at mid-career level, reaching out to Dominique for advice, she set up a monthly Zoom call to answer their questions. The topic of diversity increased in prominence during these discussions following the death of George Floyd in May 2020. Fellow board members at the IAPP began taking part too, and the initiative has gone from strength to strength – to the point where Dominique has now stepped down from this mentorship role. “Often, if you put something in place and get the ball rolling, the next thing you know, it is self-sustaining,” she observes.

She is also a founder of NxtWork, a non-profit dedicated to diversifying the C-suite and the boardroom. When the initiative began in 2020, she never envisioned it becoming a non-profit organization and having the impact it has had – “it was just a group of women business leaders coming together and sharing ideas.” With the first meeting

date of March 19, 2020 prevented due to rising COVID-19 cases, the group began meeting virtually, and things rapidly evolved from there, with the organization reaching 32 women. Again, Dominique’s penchant for doing rather than saying came to the fore. “We looked at what we could do from our vantage point of the years of experience that we had. What could we do that was impactful and different from everyone else?”

In the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, many corporations made representations that they wanted to diversify their leadership at the C-suite and Board level. However, they often seemed at a loss of where to find diverse leaders – “that was something we can help with, we know women that have been leading teams for decades,” explains Dominique. This puts the group in a strong position to help businesses develop strategies to diversify their leadership teams and provide access to the “deep networks” of the NxtWork women. “It’s an opportunity to move the needle because we can help them find diverse people that would be right for their positions,” she says.

Her desire to help others fulfil their potential is not limited to the legal profession. Dominique is a board member of the Center Dance Arts, helping promote dancing in Los Angeles. This feeds into her passion for the arts more generally, which allows her to unwind from the complex and heavy world of privacy. “I have a huge respect for what the artists are doing, whether its visual arts or dance expression; they’re creating a mode of communication from what someone envisions that we can then enjoy as a performance or a work of art,” Dominique explains.

Is she much of a dancer herself? “Other than jumping around my living room, no!” she laughs.

The desire for a break from the world of privacy doesn’t last long in Dominique’s case; it’s a job that always stays fresh and interesting due to its ever-evolving nature. “There is a culture of learning because we’re just at the beginning – it’s not going to be in my lifetime that we’ll finish thinking through how we’re going to regulate all this data we’re creating,” she says. “To be part of that process requires flexible minds, and that means diversity to get the great ideas we need.”

The interview therefore ends on a familiar theme – the inter-connections of Dominique’s interests and skills. In the field of privacy and data protection, where collaboration, diversity, continuous learning, and an international outlook are so key, Dominique Shelton Leipzig is a living embodiment of the path the sector must take over the coming years