

# Business Better (Episode 35): Conversations with Women Leaders in Finance, with Special Guest Meredith Smith from Stash

Speakers: Kim Phan, Meredith Smith

John Wright:

Welcome to Business Better. A podcast designed to help businesses navigate the new normal. I'm your host, John Wright. After serving nearly 15 years as senior vice president and general counsel of the Triumph Group Incorporated, the global aerospace components supplier, I'm now a member of the securities and M&A group at Ballard Spahr, a national law firm with clients across industries and across the country. This is another episode in our women and finance series and features a conversation with Meredith Smith, general counsel at Stash. A financial technology and financial services company operating both a web platform and mobile apps that allow users to incrementally invest small amounts. Ms. Smith talks about her career path, its challenges and her role as chief legal officer of a rapidly growing startup. Speaking with her as my Ballard Spahr colleague, Kim Phan, a partner in our Washington DC office, who counsels clients on privacy and data security law. Let's turn the episode over to Kim and her guest.

Kim Phan:

Welcome everyone to the latest in our women in finance sub series of Ballard Spahr's Business Better podcasts. My name is Kim Phan. I am a partner in Ballard Spahr's privacy and data security group and consumer financial services group. And it is my pleasure today to welcome to our podcast series Meredith Smith, the general counsel at Stash, which is a personal finance app that helps make investing easy and affordable. Meredith was previously at Sullivan and Cromwell. And before that received her Juris Doctor at New York University School of Law and received her Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Virginia. I'm from Charlottesville, Virginia, so I feel a kinship to her there. Meredith was also named by Chambers and Partners as one of the most influential GCs in the USA in 2019. And she was featured by Business Insider in 2020. So we were thrilled to have her here today. Meredith, welcome.

Meredith Smith:

Thanks so much, Kim. Good to be here.

Kim Phan:

So we're here to hear about you and your role as the general counsel at a Fintech startup that's exciting and new like Stash. Can you just describe for our audience today, what are some of the many job responsibilities that are on your plate?

Meredith Smith:

Oh my gosh, so many. So many and it changes every day. But I'm the... When you think of general counsel, in-house, handling really a piece of everything. That really is what it is day to day. And sometimes I hit 10 different areas of the law just in one day. From advising on the products we offer to our consumers, we're what you call B to C business. So there's a lot of product advice. But litigation, employment, transactional work. The fundraising, M&A transactions, intellectual property, corporate governance, working with the board, I'm the secretary of the board. So I am in all the board meetings and help prep the legal compliance presentation for those meetings. I also have our compliance and our risk departments reporting to me. So as I've been here three and a half years or so, I've really developed quite a large team. And a lot of my day to day is really about helping my team and supporting my team and helping them do the best they can do. Helping them with hiring decisions, getting them the resources they need.

Meredith Smith:

So a lot of what I do now is management as well, in addition to the substantive areas of law that you would really typically think of being in a general counsel's skillset. So really a lot of everything and it changes every day. This time last year, we were a month into COVID lockdown and obviously I never would have thought we would have been working through return to work policies and all the legislation that came out around leaves that people were taking around COVID and all the different tax breaks and employment requirements. It's like there are things that come up that you never ever would have expected you have to deal with. So there's always something like that.

Kim Phan:

Well, it's great to hear that you've built up a team around you to help you and support you in all of these different job responsibilities that you have to handle, but I'm sure that didn't start out as the case and that it takes time to build that type of team. And being at a startup, I'm sure it's very different from the in-house legal departments at large established multi-national companies. Any tips you can offer to our listeners about how to build that type of team around you and how to handle being understaffed and trying to handle all these different compliance areas, legal areas, as well as juggling what you were saying? Some of the corporate side of things, handling investors and fundraising and all of that. Sounds like a lot.

Meredith Smith:

Yeah, it's a lot. It's why having a great team, and I have an amazing team, I should list them all by name, honestly, but they are fantastic. And it's just so important to get a good team as you grow and to hire at the right time, I think. We'll talk about some of those things on this podcast, but one thing I didn't really learn at SNC that... I was involved in recruiting. We had classes of 120 associates start every year. And you have the hiring and recruiting department set you up with interviews, but you've never really had to make those decisions yourself on resourcing. And it is absolutely a skill. And I find it to be one of the hardest things about managing people is knowing when to hire and doing it on time.

Meredith Smith:

And I've made mistakes in that in the past. It's really difficult to wait until you'd need someone because hiring takes time, training people takes time. So you really have to anticipate the needs ahead of time so that your team doesn't get totally slammed. So it's a really tough skill to develop. And one that I'm still working on and I think we'll be up over 20 people across compliance risk and legal in the next couple of weeks, but it is tough and it's so important.

Kim Phan:

I'm sure you've had to develop a lot of different new skill sets having left your role as an associate at Sullivan and Cromwell to take on this GC position. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What was it like? That transition? I'm sure it was dramatic. How have you been handling it?

Meredith Smith:

It was totally dramatic. It was dramatic and probably traumatic at the same time. It was crazy. And to some extent, I really probably had no idea what I was getting into. I not only switched from law firm to in-house, which I think is its own switch, but also to a startup. When I interviewed at Stash, I remember going there and walking in and there was this neon sign when you walk in. It was like this loft space and flat iron district in New York City. And there were there kegs, there was cold brew kegs, there were beer kegs. It was so stereotypical startup. So there was a big shift in, not only substantively, the way I had to think about moving in-house and really being a business partner verse a pinning on things and writing memos and being so precise about every single point in the memo. To be that in-house person where you're really answering questions, if not on the fly, within the workday.

Meredith Smith:

So you have to get up to speed and give somebody your opinion on something in 12 hours, which is tough. You never have all the facts. You never know the law to the extent you would have at a law firm. And putting the time in to get everything absolutely correct. You don't have the time for that. So changing in-house and also changing to just startup and startup culture and the pace. It was tough. And I would probably laugh, with my CEO now, thinking about who I was then, who I am and how I approach my job today, three and a half years later. But it was a drastic shift for sure, just in the way you speak to people, knowing your audience. Explaining really complex legal and regulatory issues in a way that people can understand is something that's really totally different from law firm.

Kim Phan:

So what was your path to Stash? What made you think to go there? Why did you want to move in-house from your big law career? What was the impetus there?

Meredith Smith:

Yeah. At SNC, I have so many great things to say about my experience at SNC. I have great friends from there. I have great mentors from there. I still speak to many people there quite often. But they really, especially in the financial institutions group, which was the group I was in, they really train you to be a generalist from day one. That's totally in their mantra. It's just, this is your client and whatever they need, that's that's what you'll do. So I did everything from transactional work to regulatory work, corporate governance. Really anything that the clients had that required outside assistance from us, I really saw. So you start to... I was there from 2009 to the end of 2017. And over the course of that time, as you stay with clients and service them over that period of time, you really pick up a lot of those pieces.

Meredith Smith:

So I think it was really training me to do what I do today in terms of just having eyes on just a whole set of different sorts of issues. But I really... The work I found at SNC the most rewarding was when I really stayed with clients. I remember one client I was staffed on from the week I got out of orientation to the day I left. I still had a relationship with this client and seeing them as a private company, pre IPO, go through IPO and then work through issues as a public reporting company and the scrutiny that comes along with being a public reporting company and everything between. Those are really the most rewarding. You have those really close relationships with the folks that were in-house there.

Meredith Smith:

And that's why I thought in-house was a good move for me. It was what I was trained to do. And that's really what I enjoyed the most when I was at SNC. So started thinking about a transition to in-house. One thing we'll talk about probably a little later is just the power of networking and the power of relationships. And I got the Stash through our relationship that a SNC partner had with someone on the exec team there. And having good relationships with people is just so important to just career development, but so many other things, and ultimately, ended up at Stash through just one of those... This partner knew I was looking, he knew of this job and it just worked out really well.

Kim Phan:

Well, we're so glad that it did work out for you. It looks like you're doing a great job. But let's talk a little bit more about your background and how you got to where you are. I understand you have a Finance degree from UVA. Did you always know you wanted to go into finance? Obviously you focused on that in your career, in private practice. Now you're there working at Stash, doing consumer finance law for a startup. Why is this your passion? Is this an area that you would advise others to go into? Tell us a little bit about that.

Meredith Smith:

I was one of those people in college that had no clue what I wanted to do. I, always, am so impressed with people nowadays who go to college, knowing what they want to do and having a passion for the degree they're pursuing. I was not that person. I wasn't that mature when I went to college. I picked a college, I played a sport in college. I played lacrosse and where I chose to play was really... I wanted a great school and I wanted a good team to play for. And UVA really hit the mark. I mean, you've been to UVA. It's absolutely beautiful. It's a fantastic school. It's a great lacrosse program. And that's how I ended up there.

Meredith Smith:

The idea that what degree I was going to pursue when I was there was even in my choice. It wasn't even a part of why I chose UVA. It just wasn't in my thinking at the time. I was obviously 18. So I really didn't... I was one of those people that has a dad is a doctor, and I'm like, "maybe I do pre-med", or whatever. And the schedule for pre-med didn't really work out with the lacrosse schedule. So I was like, "Oh, I'm going to look for something else. Oh, finance. That's super applicable to anything I might do." So I was all about keeping doors open. And to me, there's an undergrad program at UVA. It's called the McIntyre School.

Meredith Smith:

It's really well-regarded. It's kind of a feeder to their MBA program. You apply and do that program the last two years that you're at UVA. And it was one of those things where it's like, "how will I not use this?" The things you learned in that program are really applicable to almost any industry that you would go in. So to me it was really about how do I keep doors open? Learning about project management, knowing accounting, econ, to some extent. Don't really use econ too much, but marketing, how to value a company and think about growth and that sort of thing. All of that, I felt like no matter what I did post college was going to be relevant and it certainly is, right? So I got a Finance degree undergrad. I actually took a class at the McIntyre School called Business and the Law. And that's what really got me thinking about the legal field. It was an amazing class. I just loved it. Very little of it was about the business aspect of the law, but it was just super interesting. And I liked it. So that's where that started, was in that class actually.

Kim Phan:

So that one class turned you away from pursuing an MBA and pursuing a JD instead?

Meredith Smith:

Exactly. There were those classes in college that you just really liked. And I just really liked that class. And to be honest, law school was one of those steps that really, I thought, what was just a continuation of opening doors. A similar reason I went into and got a Finance degree was, you can do all sorts of things with a Law degree. You don't have to work at a firm. You don't even have to work in-house. There are plenty and plenty of business people, CEOs, heads of companies, entrepreneurs that have Law degrees, because it is just so relevant to absolutely anything you do. Really, anything that I felt like it was one of those things that would continue opening doors, even beyond college.

Kim Phan:

So I know that open doors, networking, these are all important skills and things that you've been working on throughout your career. But let me ask you a very focused question for our current times. Have there been challenges that you have faced along the way as a woman? The legal profession, as you know, remains predominantly male, especially in leadership roles, like general counsel roles. And certainly I think we all know that the tech world is similarly male dominated at the top. How have you been navigating that as a woman and in both the law and in the tech space?

Meredith Smith:

Yeah. I've certainly been in a room or on a call now, virtual call or zoom call now, where I'm the only woman in the room or on the call. Honestly, I've gotten just used to that. But I think at Stash, at least, it's ingrained in who we are as a company or

this idea of financial inclusion that it's really reflected in our employee base as well. There's a number of women on our exec team. We have more and more women in our senior management levels. So I actually... My day-to-day, I see a ton of women. A ton of our outside counsel are women, including yourself. So I don't see it every day anymore. I see women all over the place but, I think we have to get better.

Meredith Smith:

I think there's... I have three kids. I took maternity leave while I was at SNC, twice. I also took maternity leave at Stash, once. And the reality is, having kids really changes your work-life balance and the demands outside of work. It does for men too, but I think the reality is that once you have kids, it puts so much pressure on your ability to continuing to deliver legal advice at a really high level, because it's so demanding. People need legal advice, especially on the really complex stuff and the really sensitive stuff usually right away. It is a demanding profession. I think to some extent it is really just tough to juggle both. But my husband and I both work. We divide up duties. He's great. We divide up duties. So I don't... I certainly have time to spend on demands at home and demands at work and have been able to juggle it. But it's a skill in and of itself to kind of make your schedule in a way that kind of lets you do things at home. And it's certainly tough.

Kim Phan:

Well, it's great to hear that you found that good work-life balance, and you have a family situation that allows you to do that. I personally have to applaud Stash. The whole concept behind Stash, obviously, is to bring investing to the average consumer and make small investors a reality. And that I'm sure you and your role as GC are supporting that. Are there specific initiatives that you want to highlight for our audience today that may be happening at Stash broadly, or maybe specifically within your legal department? Do you advance diversity in the consumer finance industry to support women and people of color as they try to navigate the consumer financial world and jump into this world of investing that might not be something that they are otherwise familiar with or have had to deal with in their day-to-day lives?

Meredith Smith:

Yeah, as a company, at least, we have been making a huge effort to really focus on diversity inclusion. We hired an amazing person to actually really lead diversity inclusion efforts at Stash to help us with different programs, different trainings, sending up employee resource groups, and just really being a voice in advising all the employees at the company on how to increase our diversity and tackling implicit bias and having really open conversations about it. So we've done quite a bit. We actually signed... There's a Fintech coalition that I think Betterment actually spearheaded and got 30 or 40 Fintechs to sign on to, sometime last year, to really support diversity in the Fintech industry, largely through recruiting and promotion of the black community. And we signed onto that. We have different vendors and partners who are also doing very similar things. But it takes a lot of education.

Meredith Smith:

It takes reaching out to different areas to get more resumes, right? One of the biggest things is for every single role at our company, how do we increase the candidate pool to get more diverse folks in? And that's a big piece of it. Having your careers page and post it on LinkedIn, doesn't always get, necessarily, a diverse candidate. You got to be way more proactive than that. You have to go to two different colleges and different industry groups to really increase that candidate pool. And I think that's a huge piece of it, is reaching candidates in different places. And I think we've been doing a great job at it. I think we have to continue to do better just like everyone. But it has been a huge focus for us. And again, largely because it's so aligned with who we are as a company, with really reaching every American and giving them a really affordable way to invest. It's so aligned with that. So I think we're doing great things and we'll continue to do great things.

Kim Phan:

Well, that's exciting to hear. And so glad to hear that Stash has committed to that. Just as a quick follow-up question, as far as your legal department and your uses of outside counsel. Is that something you're committed to? As far as utilizing diverse partners, associates at law firms that you're you go to for outside counsel. I've been giving a lot of thought actually recently to

this idea of implicit bias and how things work out. In my own career, I realized that the three primary associates that I utilize are all Asian females. I didn't do that consciously and I don't know that they gravitated toward me consciously, but that's just how it worked out. And I'm sure the reality is that other lawyers and their practices are the same. That people gravitate toward light. How do you navigate that? As far as an in-house counsel reaching out to outside counsel to ensure that there is similar diversity amongst the firms that you utilize?

Meredith Smith:

Yeah. I think, really first you have to be aware first. When I think about hiring outside firms, sometimes it's... if it's not an outside firm that you use on an ongoing basis... We met years ago and what not, but when I onboard a new firm, sometimes it's in a ridiculous flurry of, "we have to get someone, yesterday." So being aware and really making a proactive effort, especially in times where it's like, "we got to get somebody in, quick." That's not always the case, but being aware and really making an effort to get different RFPs, right? Always go to a number of different firms, ask for who is the team that is going to service this?

Meredith Smith:

Send me their bios from the partners all the way down to the junior associates. Granted everybody kind of deals with staffing different ways, but I want the credentials and the backgrounds of everybody who's going to be on the team, so I can make sure the team's diverse. But I've also noticed that, I always want the best outside counsel for us. The outside counsel who's practical, who knows our business, who knows the law. We go to outside counsel when there's really complex things. And there are lots of qualified, overly qualified and tremendously qualified outside counsel, and there are diverse. They're there, and sometimes you just have to put a little bit of extra effort into making sure you're reaching out to multiple firms and getting RFPs. But we lots of women who are outside counsel. Lots of different races, so I'm happy. And they're all great. So it's not like I sacrificed, they're all fantastic.

Kim Phan:

Well, it's great to hear that you have such a thoughtful approach to that, and I'm sure that's only just one of the factors that led Chambers to name you as one of the most influential GCs in the US. That must feel great. Can I ask you, do you feel like you're at the pinnacle? Do you feel successful? How do you define success? What else do you want to accomplish in your career or for Stash?

Meredith Smith:

Oh my gosh. So when that came out, I had no idea. I had a friend who sent me the article and I would... I am so proud. It's amazing, honestly. I'm so proud. I had no clue. And I think probably... I want to laugh and say, I fooled somebody out there who submitted my bio for one of these things. But I think... One thing we didn't touch on when we talked about women verse men and what not, that I wanted to handle was, I think women tend to think they're always under-qualified. And I think there are studies that say this, that men always think they're overqualified, women think they're under-qualified.

Meredith Smith:

And the minute I saw this, I was like, "I do not deserve this." It was the typical, "I was so under qualified for this", but it feels great. And, honestly, I work so hard. This job is so challenging, but again, I have a great team and if I didn't have a great team, there's no chance I ever would have even probably been considered for this. But how do I define success? There's different answers to that, depending if I'm answering just in the professional context or the life context. And for me, ultimately, it's really balancing personal and professional in a way that works for me. It's hard, but my family life is tremendously important to me.

Meredith Smith:

And my professional life is really important to me. So, trying to balance those the best way you can, you'll never balance them perfectly. But balancing them and being my best self at home and being my best self in the office is probably how I have defined that. And I want to enjoy my job. I like going to work. I like what I do, enjoying my job is huge. Having the people on my team enjoy their jobs and be engaged. I think that's a huge sign of success, is if you're motivating your team and engaging your team and growing them and they feel rewarded. I take that responsibility. It's a huge responsibility and I take it very seriously. So that's a jumble of things I think about, but the root of it is people, ultimately.

Kim Phan:

Well, thank you so much for those insights. Last question for today, knowing what you know now, through your whole career and the last three or four years at Stash as the GC, what advice would you give to those in our audience who are also women in finance, who are trying to carve their own way, trying to find their own personal success. What advice would you give to them? Or in the alternative, what advice would you have given yourself five, 10 years ago, as you are looking ahead to your career and where you would end up today?

Meredith Smith:

Yeah, I would say one... One thing I would tell myself is just be curious. Just absorb everything, read as much as you can. It's just every moment is really a learning opportunity. And I think there were, especially at a law firm, it's hard, right? There's so much work. And, I remember those times where, you'd be on a deal and an employment issue would come up or an intellectual property issue would come up and you'd be like, "Oh, thank goodness. I can send this to our specialist", right? You have those little chunks of specialties that you'd be like, "Oh, thank goodness. I could just forward this email, and get the right answer." And it's things like that where it's just... You don't ever have to be the specialist, but understand what the issue is. Read how the person got there.

Meredith Smith:

So really absorbing every moment like that. Because especially when you go in-house. You better believe me, the things that I pitch to the specialist at SNC, those really niche areas, the tax, the employment, the IP, it's the stuff that comes up every day. And I'm always like, "gosh, I wish I had listened to..." Have really dug in so I could at least have understood the issue. So being curious, I think, is a big one. Networking. Every person you meet... You may cross paths with, again, I'm a huge... I don't want to burn any bridges, certainly. I want people to associate me with a positive experience. Every person, every panel you're on, every meeting you're in... Network like crazy, not just for career prospects, but just, you never know... And I have all sorts of people who I've made connections with, who give me advice and mentorships and things that I think relationship building is just so important.

Meredith Smith:

And the last thing I might tell myself is it's okay to make mistakes. I made some big mistakes. Substantive issues, but also managing people. I'm not at all perfect. And there are certain things that I haven't gotten right in the past that I would just say, "it's okay, you're not going to get everything right." You're still learning. I think everybody is always learning. And I think the most important thing is you'll make mistakes and you'll learn from them. And I think being direct with people being transparent with people saying, "I messed up." That's what it's about. Nobody's perfect. And at the end of the day, it'll be okay. So I think making mistakes and learning from them is a big one as well.

Kim Phan:

Well, thank you so much for all these valuable insights. It's special guests like you that make our women and finance series so successful. And it's been our pleasure to have you with us today. To all of our listeners, I hope you also found Meredith as exciting and as interesting as I personally do. Please, of course, feel free to come back frequently and listen to more from the Ballard Spahr Business Better podcast. And I will wrap it up today with a thank you to both Meredith and to all of you.

Meredith Smith:

Thanks, Kim.

John Wright:

Thanks again to Kim Phan and Meredith Smith. Make sure to visit our website [www.ballardspahr.com](http://www.ballardspahr.com), where you can find the latest news and guidance from our attorneys. Subscribe to the show in Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify or your favorite podcast platform. If you have any questions or suggestions for the show, please email [podcast@ballardspahr.com](mailto:podcast@ballardspahr.com). Stay tuned for a new episode coming soon. Thank you for listening.