



WHAT'S THE STORY?

Once an opera singer, now CFO of Sky News Australia, Sarah Alder FCCA says that her job is to translate the numbers for a business with some big technology calls to make

When Australia's prime minister Julia Gillard decided to announce she would hold a leadership ballot for the ruling Labor Party – a move that resulted in her deposition – she did it in a one-to-one interview with Sky News Australia rather than with ABC 24 News, Australia's publicly funded, round-the-clock news channel. And while Gillard lost her job, Sky News gained in reputation. 'It shows how far Sky News has come,' says Sarah Alder FCCA, the 37-year-old CFO at Australian News Channel, and responsible for Sky News Australia's financials. Her eyes shine with pride.

Sky News, Australia's first dedicated television news channel, began production in 1996; it is now available in more than three million homes in Australia and New Zealand on the Foxtel and Optus and SkyTV pay-TV networks. Its success drove the ABC to start its competitive free-to-air 24/7 news channel three years ago, a move that Alder still finds 'invigorating'. She explains: 'The direct competition has been good for us. As a company we have risen to the challenge. It pushed us in our investment and in our striving to define the brand. We see ourselves as the place to come to for breaking news and we like to think that 99% of the time we are ahead of the ABC – even if it's not a level playing field in terms of resources, due to the ABC's public funding.'

Australian News Channel is a privately owned three-way joint venture between Nine Entertainment's Nine Digital division, Seven Media Group and British Sky Broadcasting. The former pair are Australian businesses while the latter is part-owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, for which Alder has worked in the past.

Listening to Alder in Sky's Sydney headquarters, embracing change to the point of self-denial is the only way to survive as a CFO in the media industry. 'Media has gone through an enormous amount of structural change in the past years,' she says, 'and it's still ongoing. In subscription TV we have the challenge that technology changes so fast. What do new delivery mechanisms such as IPTV [internet-delivered TV] mean? Is the traditional business model of satellite TV going to be challenged by new players coming into the market? How much content ought to be delivered via the internet?'

Today, Sky News also delivers content across a range of digital media platforms, including 3G mobile, podcasts, SMS and online. Alder stays on top by spending a lot of



2006 – PRESENT

CFO at Australian News Channel, responsible for Sky News Australia.

2006

Senior manager at Franks and Associates, a provider of outsourced CFO and accounting services, Sydney.



2004–06

Financial accountant at News Limited's head office in Sydney, in the group finance department, leading an IFRS implementation project and working on a number of financial accounting, tax and shareholder investment-related projects.

2003

Internal auditor at Australasian wealth management company AMP.

2003

Financial accountant at Lumley Life, Sydney.

1999–2002

Auditor in insurance and investment management at PwC, London, UK.

1994–98

Honours degree in French from the University of Hull, UK.

time talking to Sky's CEO and the company's engineers. 'A big part of my role is to have a handle on the broadcasting and IT side of the business and the capital spending that goes along with it, plus dealing with the operating costs of maintaining our environment, since we are heavily IT-related, and the cost structure changes so quickly.' She also needs to be 'extra circumspect' when selling or buying TV rights for years to come, trying to anticipate changes so she can protect the product.

But what drives a Brit with a degree in French and full training as an opera singer into accounting for a »

AUSTRALIAN NEWS CHANNEL



BASICS

- * An equally owned joint venture of **Nine Digital** (a division of **Nine Entertainment**), **Seven Media Group** and **British Sky Broadcasting**.
- * Owns and operates **Sky News Australia**, the leading pay-TV channel in **Australia** and **New Zealand** for 24-hour news, available in 3.4 million homes and locations.
- * Launched its news service on **19 February 1996**, becoming the first **Australia-produced TV news channel**.
- * **Delivers content across all digital media platforms, including 3G mobile, podcasts, SMS and online. Produces a wide range of digital news services, including Sky News Australia, Sky News New Zealand, Sky News Now for mobiles, Sky News Podcasts and Sky News Online.**
- * **Began broadcasting Sky News Active, its on-demand interactive TV news service, in 2004. In 2008 launched the Sky News Business Channel and in 2009 the Australian Public Affairs Channel (A-PAC).**
- * **Is led by chief executive officer Angelos Frangopoulos, who has worked at British Sky Broadcasting, the Nine Network and Prime Television Canberra.**

complicated media entity in Australia? Alder throws back her hair and laughs heartily before answering: 'I have always had a taste for unusual mixes; in school I did not only French, but also maths and physics. In those days you could either do the languages or natural sciences, so I had to break the mould to do both.'

She loves music but also numbers and so went to train as an auditor in PwC's London offices, dealing with investments and insurance. 'At the beginning there was a fair bit of number crunching, but at a more senior level it can be fascinating. I see myself as a translator for the business, understanding what the business wants to do, translating it back into financials, and at board level you move it back into words to get your ideas across. It's so much more than just numbers. Accounting is the bloodstream of the business

WORKING IN AUSTRALIA



TIPS

Australia has a strong reputation for the quality of its financial reporting and follows International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS). However, there are a few local specifications that professionals need to be aware of if they want to work here, says Sarah Alder.

Even after the harmonisation of the Australian rules with IFRS in 2005, some local differences remain. Alder explains: 'Generally, there may be a number of choices of how you can apply an accounting standard. In some instances the Australian Accounting Standards Board has limited those options. And they have overlaid disclosure requirements for public companies with the requirements of the Australian stock exchange – the specifics of the listing rules here.'

For IFRS jurisdictions such as the UK, she says, 'it would not be hard for someone if they do their homework. It's all similar in nature and should not put anybody off working here.'

and I am a kind of a doctor, taking the pulse.'

To do that, she heads a team of seven. In the past, it was not always easy to recruit the right staff: 'The qualification and skillset were not always commensurate with what you were having to pay.' Since then the availability of candidates has improved dramatically, thanks to Australia's strong economy. 'A lot of Australians who were working in London have returned and since many people are suffering from the economic doldrums in Europe and the US plenty of talented people decided to do something different and have come to work in Australia. There is no shortage of brain power.'

Being based in one of the strongest economies in the world, companies such as Sky News do not have to offer special packages to lure people to Australia. 'We have great food, great weather, great beaches, low-density population and people value that,' says Alder.

Foreigners even more than Australians themselves, Alder thinks, appreciate the quality of life. The locals often complain about the cost of living or the real estate prices in Sydney. 'Maybe because of the geographic isolation Australians don't compare themselves that much with the rest of the world and do not realise how good we have it here, at least compared with the economic woes in the UK, Europe or the US.'

As a result, Alder has mainly hired locally so far. Recruiters



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might advertise abroad but Sky News does not. It's simply not necessary. Although Alder's team is fairly diverse her people nevertheless have French, British and Chinese backgrounds and have worked in Europe, the US and in Australia. 'We have that international dynamic,' she says. 'It's good for the team; it creates a richness and a breadth of experience and a communality. That, by the way, is typical for Australia.' She has had nothing but good experience with such candidates in the past few years, she says.

Alder arrived in 2002 from London, together with her husband. 'I assimilated very easily, even if the Australian workplace can be a bit more direct. English people can sometimes be a bit confronted by that but it suits my personality, I feel really comfortable here.' Alder has a lot to say about the local 'no nonsense, get the job done' attitude. 'In accounting, calling a spade a spade helps enormously.'

Professionally, for British-trained accountants especially, working in Australia is not too much of a change. 'The environments are not too dissimilar, with a common language, and a shared history.'

Life and work are good in Australia, Alder feels. And even if Julia Gillard had to give her famous speech on sexism and misogyny in Australia, she herself has never run into gender-related trouble. 'I don't see myself as being defined by my gender. I was

the youngest of four, with three older brothers, so I am very comfortable in the company of men. I maintain a confidence in my abilities as an individual and just get on with my job.'

She adds: 'While there is clearly still a current issue with the level of representation of women in business at a senior level, particularly on boards, there are good men out there who do support women in business. I believe that with this type of support, along with women believing in themselves because of what they offer as individuals, things will continue to change.'

And when it comes to the race against the ABC, sometimes Alder's team wins, sometimes it loses. Last year an independent board told the government that Sky News was better placed than the ABC to run Australia's foreign TV services, Australia Network. The contract went nevertheless to the ABC, which was the only other bidder for the A\$223m contract. ■

Barbara Bierach, journalist based in Sydney