Practice Leader Insights From Broadfield's James Duncan

By **James Duncan** (August 10, 2026)

In this Law360 U.K. Expert Analysis series, practice group leaders share thoughts on keeping the pulse on legal trends, tackling difficult cases and what it takes to make a mark in their area.

In this installment, James Duncan, Broadfield's head of U.K. funds, discusses how his journey to team leadership has had more twists than a Netflix thriller, how Brexit created a labyrinth of compliance, and why lawyers who thrive will be the ones who see change as both a challenge and an opportunity.

The Experiences That Have Shaped My Approach to Leadership

James Duncan

My journey has had more twists than a Netflix thriller — mostly driven by economic earthquakes and tech revolutions. I qualified as a solicitor in New South Wales, Australia, in 1993, cutting my teeth as a corporate lawyer on dotcom initial public offerings during the boom — or bubble — depending on your vintage.

In 2001, I moved to London to ride the same wave, which promptly crashed on arrival. London was full of Australian lawyers at the time, most of them on contracts. When the bubble burst, many packed up and went home.

Fortunately, I had a U.K. passport and wasn't sponsored, so when my firm was surprised to find me still at my desk, I had to reinvent myself — fast. One door closes, another opens — if you kick it hard enough. I pivoted to U.K. defense privatizations, even bagging a low-level security clearance.

These were sprawling, multistakeholder projects that taught me how to work in large teams, manage competing interests, and translate legal risk into language that clients and the government actually wanted — or didn't want — to hear.

When there was nothing left to privatize, hedge funds became the thing — fund managers breaking away from investment banks to set up their own shops. A very different breed of client. Then 2008 happened. Every cloud — in this case, a Category 5 hurricane — has a silver lining.

Post-global financial crisis, the government couldn't keep funding social housing the old way, so housing associations started securitizing their portfolios and tapping the capital markets. I knew nothing about social housing. I stayed in it for 17 years.

The sector threw everything at me: Heavy regulation, tenant-focused governance, corporate finance, compliance, institutional investment and stakeholder management on an industrial scale. It was a masterclass in leadership, whether or not I wanted one.

Looking back, there is a thread through my career, perhaps not golden, but at least visible. It has led me to Broadfield, where I now head the institutional funds practice, advising international clients on cross-border investments with coordinated legal and financial support across jurisdictions. The alternative investment world suits someone who has spent a career adapting.

The Most Challenging Matter I've Worked On

You're asking me to pick just one? Every deal has its own brand of chaos.

Complexity comes from all directions: law changes mid-deal, clients need answers yesterday, you're working away from home for weeks — once, months — and life doesn't pause, with young children, aging parents, the works.

I was on secondment at Bank of America in London when the global financial crisis hit over the infamous long weekend of Oct. 10-13, 2008. It genuinely felt like the entire banking system might not survive until Monday. Watch the 2011 film "Margin Call" if you want a sense of the atmosphere, though it doesn't capture the gallows humor in the office.

But the prize for sustained complexity goes to Brexit.

The U.K.'s withdrawal from the single market created a labyrinth of compliance, structuring, governance and duplication that would make Franz Kafka weep.

At the time, transitional arrangements with every European regulator were different, poorly signposted and cobbled together in haste. Understanding them required a combination of detective work and patience, with time not on your side.

Another silver lining: Lawyers and compliance teams had to collaborate like never before. For many clients, this was existential; hard decisions about where to operate, who to employ, what clients to serve, and how to structure. It wasn't just legal work: Freedom of movement ended, qualifications weren't automatically recognized, and setting up European Union operations required serious capital.

I spent a lot of time advising clients — often headquartered outside Europe — who were understandably frustrated that the U.K. had brought this chaos on itself and them. Different legal systems, compliance cultures and a pervasive atmosphere of "what now?" It continues to this day.

Navigating political upheaval at the highest levels is exhausting, but it does create leadership opportunities. Clients need steady hands when the ground is shifting.

Current Developments Shaping My Work

Artificial intelligence. Obviously. It's reshaping how we find information, process it and explain it to clients.

It's a brilliant tool, but you need to understand how it works, especially the gap between its pattern-matching and its confident-sounding prose. That's when you catch the hallucinations. And it does hallucinate.

That's just AI as a research assistant — before you even get into document automation, playbooks and process redesign. The law of AI will be a fascinating territory. Rocky, but fascinating.

I've seen this kind of disruption before. I started work at 18, doing my law degree by articles, similar to today's solicitor apprenticeship, just as the Apple Inc. and Microsoft Corp. revolution was taking off. I was lucky enough to work on High Court cases in Australia involving Apple's mouse and graphical user-interface patents, Microsoft's software and firmware patentability, so-called shrink wrap licensing and online contract formation. That was my intellectual property phase.

Heady days. The lesson? Embrace technological change. The current AI wave will be just as rocky, just as fascinating and full of opportunities we can't yet see, just as the personal computer revolution was.

Staying curious about technology, both as a tool and as a subject matter, has kept me employable through every market cycle. Even if intellectual property turned out not to be my calling, it taught me to pay attention.

A Lawyer Who Has Impressed Me

I'm impressed by any lawyer who knows more than I do, which is a long list.

When you are junior, everyone seems to know more. Experience teaches you that knowledge isn't the same as quality. Be prepared, understand what your client actually wants — a skill in itself — stay pleasant and collaborative, and you'll always be in demand.

I deal with a lot of in-house counsel, and I've been in their shoes, both at a large Australian insurer and on secondment at a U.S. bank. What impresses me is how they juggle everything from resourcing, advising across the organization, employment fires, compliance shifts, competition law training, governance structures to M&A strategy — the full consigliere role.

It's a remarkable leadership role. In-house lawyers are often unfairly seen as back-office blockers, or worse. It takes real courage and conviction to do it well, often without recognition, and these days, with considerable personal risk.

My Advice to Junior Lawyers as the Profession Evolves

If you've read this far, you've probably spotted the theme.

As lawyers, we live in a world of constant change. Our job is to identify it, analyze it and help clients turn compliance into opportunity.

I asked AI to summarize why lawyers matter in times of previous change. It said:

> Lawyers were absolutely essential to the Industrial Revolution. They acted as the architects of the modern capitalist infrastructure, transitioning the legal system from a slow, localized craft into a specialized engine for corporate growth. Without them, the massive scaling of factories, railways and global trade networks would have stalled under outdated feudal laws.

Not bad for a hallucinating robot.

Change is constant and rarely convenient. My advice is to stay curious, ask "why?"

relentlessly — much of law makes no sense until you dig — and get comfortable leading in uncertainty. The lawyers who thrive will be the ones who see change as both a challenge and an opportunity.

James Duncan is a partner and head of U.K. funds at Broadfield.