



Gavin Hammerschlag, a new partner at Arnold Bloch Leibler: "Every morning, I have to wake up and practise and work on my speech." PHOTO: LOUIE DOUVIS

# 'My stutter was not going to hold me back'

## Willpower

Michael Pelly

Three years ago, Gavin Hammerschlag tried a new speech therapist.

The new Arnold Bloch Leibler partner was thinking about what he would say at his wedding and did not want his stutter to get the better of him.

He also wanted to make things easier for himself at work.

"Obviously I have a stutter and I'm conscious of that and in this game, first impressions matter ...

"I'd never met the therapist and she was pretty blown away when she asked what I do and I said: 'I'm a lawyer at a corporate law firm, ABL.'"

"[She said] 'Why have you chosen that as a career when it's so client-facing? You're on the phone, you're in meetings, you have to conquer a room – and so much of that is speech.'"

Mr Hammerschlag has been at the firm for only eight years – he joined in 2012 – and at 33 is one of the youngest new partners in the latest The Australian Financial Review Law Partnership Survey.

He presents as confident and capable on a Zoom call. His stutter is noticeable, but not severe. As the interview goes on – and he gets on a roll – it fades away.

The wedding "went well" and he expects his speech will keep improving. "It's like my gym. Every morning, I have to wake up and practise and work on my speech ... I try to get better."

He can even see an upside in having to deal with a problem he's had all his life. "It makes me more careful with my words ... before I speak I have to think."

## I had to make a choice – either I get over that fear or I don't.

Gavin Hammerschlag, law partner

Mr Hammerschlag could have easily chosen another career. His father – Ivan Hammerschlag, the founder of Freedom Furniture and The Athlete's Foot – thought he might follow him into the family business. A commerce-law degree at university hinted that he was keeping his options open.

Eventually, the law won over both father and son.

"A lot of people think of law as a safe career – that it's a marathon, not a sprint. I like the business of the law ... the opportunity to grow with a client."

One of those – buy now, pay later outfit

Zip Co – came to the firm as a \$50 million company and is now a \$2.5 billion juggernaut. Internet retailer Ruslan Kogan is another client of the firm.

"It's the firm's next generation of clients. Traditionally, ABL has had established clients and they've been a large source of work for the firm. In the past five years, we have seen that next generation come through and we were able to grow with them."

As a corporate lawyer in Sydney, Mr Hammerschlag's name can lead people to make another connection: to "The Hammer", aka Justice David Hammerschlag, the long-time corporations list judge at the NSW Supreme Court.

"At university, the very first lecture I did, they took a roll call and when they got to my name, it was, 'Are you related to the judge?' [The answer is no.]"

"When I have a meeting now, if it's legal, it's the same question. If it's a business matter, it's 'Are you [the retailer] Ivan Hammerschlag's son?'"

Mr Hammerschlag is glad he did not take an easier option.

"I used to be afraid to do public speaking and my job requires me to speak every day. I had to make a choice – either I get over that fear or I don't. I was passionate about my career in the law and my stutter was not going to hold me back. It hasn't – well, I hope it hasn't."