

# ICSA Member case studies



## Donald McPherson FCIS Company Secretary, Alliance Trust PLC

### What is your current role?

I am currently Company Secretary at Alliance Trust PLC, a FTSE 250 listed company and the largest generalist investment trust by market value on the London Stock Exchange.

### What other roles have you held prior to your current one?

I have previously held senior company secretarial roles with General Accident (now part of the Aviva Group), Halifax and Scottish Power.

### What are the main responsibilities of your job?

As Company Secretary, I attend all key board and committee meetings, giving me a unique perspective of what is happening across our business and how our board of directors debate issues, offer constructive challenge and reach decisions to take the business forward. The days when the company secretary who spoke in the boardroom would be told, 'You're here to write, not to talk', are long gone! The company secretary has to act as trusted advisor to both the non-executives and the executive management team, and ensure that good governance practices are followed.

Another aspect of the variety is the range of people and cultures who I deal with. Although I've always been UK-based, my work has taken me to the US, continental Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, and I've had opportunities to engage with law-makers and regulators in all of these regions. I've also had the privilege of working with some of the key decision-makers in UK business.

### What is a typical working day for you?

The trite answer is that there is no such thing as a typical day – and that is one of the best things about my job!

### What is your educational/training background?

I graduated LLB (Hons) from the University of Edinburgh in 1983, qualifying as a Scottish solicitor in 1986. I qualified as a Chartered Secretary in 1993 and I am a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (FCIS).

### What skills and qualities are required for your role?

Having a legal qualification, has certainly been useful to me but is by no means essential, and most company secretaries I talk to have come into the role 'by accident' one way or another. What is more important is the ability to remain objective, supporting your colleagues but also being clear about where the boundaries are and helping them find ways to work within those boundaries. Directors of companies tend to be busy people, and it's important to be able to get to the heart of any issue quickly and come up with pragmatic solutions.

### Which elements of your role do you most enjoy?

Working with people across our business who have a real passion to excel in whatever they do.

### Which elements of your role do you least enjoy?

Writing up minutes!

### How do you see your career developing?

I'm doing the role I set out to achieve – Company Secretary of a FTSE 250 plc – and for me the next stage is about making best use of the experience I have gained along the way. →

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**Donald McPherson FCIS**  
Company Secretary, Alliance Trust PLC



## What advice would you offer to a graduate or a current student studying the scheme?

Three pieces of advice:

- Think of your qualification as the start of your learning, rather than the end of it – always grab opportunities to learn new skills and broaden your experience.
- Don't be afraid to get involved in discussions on commercial issues where you have a broader insight to offer.
- Don't try and keep your business colleagues at arms-length – you are all part of the same management team but be prepared to speak up when you disagree with the route they are taking on any issue.

## How has your training helped you carry out your role?

I did take the decision to undertake the Chartered Secretary qualification early in my career and that has been invaluable in building on my knowledge beyond legal issues into a broader range of management disciplines. Studying for the qualification at the same time as working full-time and with a young family was a very different proposition from life as a student but, for example, reading the theory behind corporate finance in the evenings at the same time as being involved in corporate transactions during the day really brought the learning to life. Thankfully, ICSA has recognised the cross-over between it and other professions such as solicitors and accountants, and the Chartered Secretaries Qualifying Scheme (CSQS) takes account of shared skills by reducing the number of modules to be undertaken by individuals with these qualifications and relevant experience. CSQS is internationally recognised and, as I've explained, does open the doors to the boardroom of our largest companies, as well as many other career options.

## What do you think are the particular benefits of becoming a Chartered Secretary?

The great attraction of the company secretary's role is the variety. If I explain that I am responsible within Alliance Trust for human resources and facilities, in addition to heading up the company secretarial and legal teams, that should give some idea of the scope. One minute I am looking at the implications of the latest FSA regulation on executive remuneration, the next how to develop the future leaders within our business, and then how we promote energy efficiency across our offices.

## What made you decide to become a Chartered Secretary?

I had always been interested in law as a career and after finishing my degree, I followed the usual route of a one year post-graduate diploma in legal practice before a two year traineeship with a small Edinburgh legal practice, which undertook traditional chamber practice – conveyancing, executries – and court work. I enjoyed the direct client contact in that firm almost from the first day, unlike much larger firms where trainees were kept very much in the back office.

After qualifying, I came to the conclusion that private practice was not for me and started to investigate in-house legal roles. So I became a company secretary by accident – when I contacted General Accident they didn't have any vacancies in their in-house legal team but were looking for someone to support the company secretary. The more I found out about what the role entailed, the more it interested and appealed to me.

## Would you recommend the ICSA qualification to others?

Yes, definitely. ■