

# How I Made Practice Group Chair: 'Delegation and Trust in Your Team Are Critical,' Says Friven Yeoh of Skadden

By ALM Staff

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**Friven Yeoh, 53, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, Hong Kong and Singapore**

**Job title:** Head of Skadden's international litigation and arbitration group in Asia

**Practice area:** International litigation and arbitration

**Law school and year of graduation:** London School of Economics and Political Science, 2001 (LL.M.); University of Melbourne, 1997 (LL.B.)

**How many years have you been at your firm?**

Joined in October 2024

**What made you pick your practice area?**

What drew me to international arbitration was its unique intersection of law, strategy, and global dynamics. I was fascinated by how legal disputes transcended borders—it isn't just about applying the law—it is about understanding different legal cultures, languages, and how businesses navigate complex legal frameworks in multiple jurisdictions. The intellectual rigor and strategic thinking required in arbitration—where there are no jury trials, where the parties choose their own decision-makers, and where procedural flexibility is critical—appeals to me. It's a field where legal advocacy merges with diplomacy and commercial insight.

At Skadden, we act on high-stakes, often existential disputes, which require us to collaborate

with colleagues and clients from around the world. That global perspective, combined with the ever-evolving nature of arbitration, keeps the work both challenging and rewarding.

**How did you develop your expertise in your practice area?**

My experience in international arbitration has evolved through a combination of deliberate focus, mentorship, and exposure to complex cross-border disputes over the years. I started my career with a strong interest in international law and cross-jurisdictional issues. I made a conscious effort to work on matters that had an international dimension—whether commercial disputes or investor-state arbitrations. I sought out opportunities to be involved in cases seated in different arbitral hubs, governed by different procedural rules, and argued under different substantive laws. That diversity of experience was invaluable.

Mentorship also played a significant role. I had the privilege of working with some of the most experienced practitioners in the field,



Courtesy photo

Friven Yeoh of Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom

and observing how they approached strategy, advocacy, and procedural nuance helped shape my own approach.

In parallel, I stayed engaged with the evolving jurisprudence and procedural developments. Writing, speaking, and staying active in arbitration circles helped reinforce that expertise.

### **Why did you want to become a practice area leader?**

Becoming a practice leader isn't so much about title as it is about vision and responsibility. Over time, as I gained more experience and worked on increasingly complex international arbitration matters, I naturally developed a strong sense of where the practice could grow—both in terms of client service and team development.

I wanted to help shape a practice that not only delivered first-rate legal work, but also cultivated a collaborative and forward-looking culture. Being a leader means constantly ensuring we have the right people, approach, and strategic outlook to consistently meet those challenges.

It was also important to me to create opportunities for younger lawyers—to mentor, guide, and open doors for the next generation of practitioners. International arbitration is a field that rewards deep expertise and nuanced thinking, and part of being a leader is investing in that long-term development.

Ultimately, I wanted to help build a practice that reflects excellence, integrity, and innovation—values that define not just our work, but how we work together.

### **What skill sets do you need to be an effective practice group leader (i.e., knowing more about the practice, hiring, business development, financial management, etc.)?**

To be an effective practice group leader, I believe you need a combination of legal, strategic, and interpersonal skills—it's not just about being a good lawyer; it's about being able to guide, inspire, and elevate the entire team.

Strategic thinking is key. You need to have a clear sense of where the practice is heading—both in terms of client needs and market trends—and align your team's capabilities and focus accordingly. That includes identifying growth areas, managing resources effectively, and making smart decisions about which matters to pursue.

Strong communication and leadership skills are also essential. You have to be able to motivate and mentor people across all levels, give clear direction, and create an environment where collaboration and trust are the norm.

In addition, it's essential to have a clear view of how the practice is performing. That includes understanding pricing structures, managing budgets, ensuring matters are staffed efficiently, and monitoring profitability—all while maintaining the highest quality of work.

Being a practice leader means wearing multiple hats—legal expert, strategist, mentor, and business manager. It's that combination that ultimately ensures the success and resilience of the practice over time.

### **How do you balance client work with management work?**

For me, it starts with discipline and prioritization. Client work will always be a core part of what we do—it's where we deliver value, build trust, and stay close to the evolving needs of our clients. But effective leadership also requires carving out intentional time for managing the practice and ensuring operational efficiency.

I've learned that you can't do everything at once, and you don't need to do everything alone. Delegation and trust in your team are critical. We have incredibly talented lawyers and staff, and part of leadership is empowering others to take ownership—whether it's leading a pitch, managing a matter, or contributing to the growth strategy.

I also try to integrate both roles where possible. For example, client conversations often surface

strategic insights that shape the direction of the practice. Likewise, mentoring junior lawyers through a matter is both management and client work—and it reinforces the culture of excellence and development that we value.

Ultimately, balance doesn't mean splitting your time evenly; it means being intentional about where your time adds the most value—to clients, to the team, and to the long-term success of the practice.

**How does having a practice leadership role give you a sense of the broader strategic vision of the firm?**

Being a practice leader gives you a front-row seat to how the firm operates on a macro level—across practice areas, regions, and industries. You're not just focused on individual matters; you're thinking about how your practice fits into the firm's global strategy, and how we can contribute to its long-term growth.

At Skadden, the emphasis has always been on collaboration, innovation, and delivering exceptional service on the most complex, high-stakes matters. As a practice leader, you see how those principles translate into firm-wide initiatives—whether it's expanding in key markets, investing in technology, or building cross-practice teams to serve clients holistically.

It also gives you a clearer sense of where client demand is heading—how dispute resolution intersects with regulatory trends, shifting industry outlook, cross-border M&A, and geopolitical risk, among others. That broader perspective shapes how we position our international arbitration practice, how we recruit and develop talent, and how we align our goals with the firm's strategic priorities.

**What other roles or experiences help you in this current role?**

Serving on tribunals and committees of arbitral institutions has been invaluable. It keeps me connected to thought leadership, policy

developments, and where the field is heading. That broader exposure helps me anticipate trends and steer the practice in a way that stays ahead of client needs.

Internally, being involved in mentorship and talent development—from associate training to recruiting—has shaped how I manage teams. You learn how to listen, how to build trust, and how to develop others in a way that aligns with firm culture and values.

**What are key priorities for your practice area?**

Our key priorities in the international arbitration practice are closely tied to the evolving needs of our clients and the broader global landscape.

First, delivering exceptional client service remains our core focus. Clients turn to us for complex, high-value disputes that often span jurisdictions, legal systems, and industries. Ensuring that we continue to provide strategic, commercially informed advice—and win results—is paramount.

Second, we're focused on building deep sector knowledge and staying closely aligned with—and even getting ahead of—market trends, so we can help clients navigate business and legal risks, and resolve disputes effectively.

Third, integration across practice areas and regions. Many arbitration matters intersect with investigations, regulatory enforcement, public international law, sanctions, or M&A. A key priority is seamless collaboration with other Skadden teams globally, so we can offer holistic and strategic solutions.

Finally, we're focused on innovation and efficiency—leveraging technology and refining our internal processes so we can continue to deliver top-tier results in a cost-effective and agile manner.

**Is succession planning a part of your role as a practice group leader, and if yes, how so?**

Yes, succession planning is an important part of my role as a practice leader. It ensures the

long-term stability, continuity, and success of the practice. This involves identifying and developing the next generation of leaders within the team, providing them with the right opportunities to grow, and aligning their development with the strategic direction of the practice.

Succession planning also includes mentoring, facilitating exposure to significant matters, and encouraging leadership in client relationships, business development, and internal initiatives. By doing so, we build a sustainable pipeline of talent and maintain client confidence that the practice will continue to deliver consistent, high-quality service over time.

**Is there anything that surprised you about the role?**

What surprised me most about being a practice leader is how much of the role is about people, not just strategy. You expect to spend significant time on business planning, client development, and case oversight—and that's certainly true. But what I've found equally critical, and often underestimated, is the importance of listening, coaching, and supporting your team.

**How has the role given you insights into client needs?**

Being a practice leader gives you a broader and deeper perspective on what clients truly value—not just in terms of legal outcomes, but in how we deliver our services. Clients demand far more than technical excellence—they want trusted advisers who understand their industry, anticipate risk, and provide practical, strategic solutions. In my role, I spend more time engaging with senior decision-makers, not just on individual disputes, but on long-term risk management, arbitration strategy, and how dispute resolution fits into their broader business objectives.

You also gain insight into how client expectations are evolving—whether it's around responsiveness, transparency on fees, or the efficiency of our processes. That feedback loop is critical, and part of my role is ensuring that the way we operate—from how we staff cases to how we communicate—reflects those expectations.

Finally, leading a practice gives you a clearer view of patterns across industries and geographies. You begin to see common themes in client concerns—regulatory shifts, geopolitical risk, or cross-border enforcement—and that helps us tailor our advice and prepare our team to deliver not just legal support, but strategic foresight.

**Is there any other advice you'd share for those looking to become a practice leader?**

I would say, first and foremost, think like a leader before you have the title. Leadership isn't something that suddenly begins with a formal role—it's built over time through how you take initiative, support your colleagues, manage relationships, and approach your work.

Second, develop a broad view of the practice. It's easy to focus narrowly on your matters, but leaders need to understand how the practice fits within the wider firm, how it aligns with client needs, and where it's headed. Stay curious about the business of law—not just the technical side.

Third, invest in people. Leadership is fundamentally about building and sustaining a high-performing team. That means mentoring, being available, and helping others grow. If you make the success of your team a priority, leadership opportunities will follow. Leadership is a long game. It's about building trust, consistency, and a track record of judgment—all of which take time.