



**Five Minutes With...Robert Christoffel, Saul Ewing
International Tax Review**

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Someone asks you at a party what you do for a living. What do you say?

I am a tax lawyer at Saul Ewing in Washington, DC where I help my clients, mostly companies but also individuals, makes sense of the US federal and international tax rules that apply to them.

I help structure their business operations and M&A transactions in a tax efficient manner, meet their tax compliance obligations, and negotiate contracts in a way that limits their tax exposures and risks.

Talk us through a typical working day.

After waking up, I first check Outlook on my phone for any important emails that came in overnight on ongoing transactional matters. These can sometimes move very fast and require swift attention.

If there are no immediate fires to put out, I get ready (including getting my son ready for school) and make my way in front of my computer – either at home or the office. At Saul Ewing, we still have a very flexible remote work policy.

I then have my first cup of coffee (followed by many more throughout the day), work my way through my unread emails, address anything urgent as necessary, and take a glance at the latest tax news (downloading important articles for a closer read later).

My main tasks on a typical workday can be summarised as reviewing and revising draft agreements of all kinds, researching and analysing complex tax issues, and advising my clients on the latest tax matters. All while keeping in mind their business strategies and goals as well as their overall economic environments.

At the end of the day, I either get to build Legos with my son, find time to actually read the articles I downloaded earlier in the day, or relax watching my favorite sport: ice hockey.

What are you working on at the moment?

A mix of transactional matters, including a couple of business acquisitions, some real estate development joint ventures, and an equity buy-out that is part of a long-term business succession plan, as well as a number of complex cross-border advisory matters.

What is the most exciting aspect of your role and what is the most stressful?

I get to directly interact and work with very impressive individuals, such as business leaders of well-known companies, startup entrepreneurs with ingenious ideas and inspiring professionals from a broad range of industries.

Obviously, working on high-profile deals can be immensely exciting but quite stressful, especially when the fuse for anything is extremely short. But that essentially is the life for most transactional attorneys.

Tell us the key characteristics that make a successful tax professional.

Genuine interest in and curiosity about systems of taxation, and a true desire for lifelong learning. Tax law does not stand still.

Having a knack for comprehending business concepts, economic interconnections, as well as financing and corporate structures is also helpful.

Ultimately, you also have to enjoy working with people. Even when your clients are companies, you are advising and interacting with many groups of people, from the in-house tax team to the client's accountants, to its C-suite members.

Your ability to explain to clients complex tax issues and concepts, such as the gist of convoluted provisions of the Internal Revenue Code and the Treasury regulations, or the purpose and effect of cryptic tax language in agreements, in plain, easy to comprehend language is crucial.

What is the most common misconception about your work?

Many think that what we do as tax lawyers is mainly complicated math, but generally that is not the case.

Instead, just like most other lawyers, we analyse the applicable law, apply the relevant facts and circumstances, draft, review and edit agreements and other documents, and explain that to our clients and advise them on the best path forward.

What or who inspires you?

Legendary German tax professor and the most influential tax scholar of modern times, Klaus Tipke, who passed away in 2021 at the age of 95.

I was fortunate to meet, be inspired by, learn from, and work with him during my time as a post-graduate lecturer and research assistant at the University of Cologne's Institute of Tax Law.

He devoted almost his entire life to the advancement of a principled, fair and just system of taxation and to the idea that to lead a meaningful life one has to contribute to social well-being and promote dignity and justice in society.

If you weren't a tax professional, what would you be doing?

I would try to run my family's wine estate, located in Germany's beautiful Mosel valley, which focuses on high-end riesling wines and which has been in my family for generations.

Though this business has become extremely difficult due to various factors, in particular climate change, labour shortages, market conditions, and investment costs.

However, the satisfaction from manual labour in the vineyard overlooking the Mosel valley, when the sun is shining and a light breeze hits your face, and then later trying the final product, is immeasurable.

Any advice you would give your younger self?

Stay the course! It will all work out great, so enjoy the ride.

It was not always easy for me when I had to decide whether to stay in Germany and pursue my tax career there or take the risk and immigrate to the US where, to some degree, I had to start all over again.

Tell us what makes tax cool!

Being a subject matter expert, whose expertise is sought by the extremely smart but more generalist corporate colleagues who claim they don't understand tax, is what makes my practice cool. At least from a tax nerd's perspective!

Also, tax permeates every aspect of business and life, so as a tax lawyer you can get involved and offer help at all stages of these cycles.