

TRANSCRIPT *It's Not All Billable* - Episode 1

Jonathan Bench: So Kato, we're here recording what we're calling episode zero, the foundation episode for *It's Not All Billable*. This is your brainchild—though I know you'll disagree—so I'll kick it to you first. Where did this idea come from, why make it a cross-border podcast, and what do we hope to achieve?

Kato Aerts: Of course. The only thing I don't agree with is that it's my brainchild—it's ours. That's something our listeners should know.

You and I met at AIJA, the International Association of Young Lawyers. One of the great things about this association is that it brings together young lawyers from all over the world. What you quickly realize is that your life is incredibly similar to someone living on the other side of the world. You work in similar law firm structures, you have similar goals, and you face the same challenges—both professionally and personally.

That's true whether you're in Europe, the United States, Asia, or anywhere else. We talked about this many times, and from those conversations grew the idea of launching a podcast where we discuss things that are not all billable.

What does it mean to be a young lawyer? What does it mean to try to build a career? What challenges do you face? I've always had very engaging conversations with you about these topics, and I thought they could be relevant to a broader audience.

The goal of this podcast is to make our audience feel as heard and seen as we did at AIJA, and to connect lawyers across borders around shared experiences.

Jonathan: Kato, you and I have known each other for about three years. You've played a prominent role at AIJA, and I came in more as someone unknown. Maybe you can give some background for listeners. What are we trying to accomplish with this podcast, coming from different countries and legal systems but finding so many commonalities?

Kato: We discovered that although we live on different sides of the world, we lead very similar lives. That surprised me at first. You have a family with young children, I do as well. We're both trying to build our careers as lawyers and are still relatively early in that journey.

We face similar challenges, and it's been incredibly helpful to talk about them with someone outside your own firm or country. It feels safer to discuss topics like business development, HR issues, managing teams, and balancing professional and personal life.

Those conversations have been ongoing for years, whenever we met at AIJA conferences around the world. From there grew the idea of sharing these discussions with a larger audience.

And yes, the fact that you have a perfect podcast voice helped shape the idea.

We're in a profession where clients dictate our daily lives, and that's part of what makes the job exciting. But it also resonated with me that we rarely take time to reflect on how we grow in our careers. This podcast creates space to do exactly that—talk about what it means to be a young lawyer, the challenges we face, and how to overcome them, with someone who understands but also has enough distance to offer perspective.

Jonathan: It's interesting to think about the path of a lawyer. Are you still at your first firm?

Kato: No, I started at another firm in Antwerp before joining Lydian, but I've been at Lydian for over ten years now.

Jonathan: I'm at my third firm in thirteen years, including a short stint on my own. When I started law school in 2008 and graduated in 2012, the economic climate was very difficult, especially in the U.S. legal market.

I assumed that going to a good law school and getting decent grades would make finding a job easy. That wasn't the case. It was my first reality check—I realized I had to find my own way and couldn't rely solely on credentials.

Kato: My experience was different. I found a job before graduating, which was common in Belgium at the time. My first reality check came when I actually started working. I realized I knew nothing.

They gave me assignments—draft a petition, write a letter—and suddenly writing didn't come easily at all. What do you say? What do you leave out? What's the strategy?

That learning curve was steep and stressful. I had sleepless nights worrying about emails and details. Over time, I found more peace in the job, but those feelings are normal, especially if you're a perfectionist.

This job teaches you that even when you do your best, there will be days you feel like a failure—and that's part of it.

Jonathan: I had to learn to be a perfectionist. I'm naturally fast-paced and comfortable with chaos, but slowing down and refining work product took effort. I had to learn what I do well, what I can improve, and what I'll never be exceptional at.

A big part of career satisfaction is figuring out what energizes you. I want people to enjoy coming to work, to find something—billable or non-billable—that keeps them engaged. This job is stressful, and enjoying parts of it matters.

That leads to a question about imposter syndrome. Everyone has it. If you have imposter syndrome, it means you're learning and you're not the smartest person in the room—and that's a good thing.

How did you experience that? What did you bring to the table early on, and what did you feel you lacked?

Kato: Imposter syndrome is something everyone experiences, but not everyone talks about. Especially partners should talk about it with associates.

I struggled most with confidence. Being a lawyer means advising people, and at 23, I didn't feel like I knew best. What helped was experience—seeing similar cases again and again.

That confidence doesn't come from intelligence or grades, but from time and exposure. You grow into it if you stick with it.

My natural skill set is connecting with people and making clients feel heard and seen. That becomes increasingly important over time, especially in business development. It's not emphasized enough early in a legal career, but it's crucial.

If you stick with the job, you become the lawyer that matches your personality, and clients respond to that.

Jonathan: Clients have to know you, like you, and trust you before they'll hire you. That's especially true in business law. I'm curious how that resonates for you as a litigator.

Kato: I fully agree. Trust builds through responsiveness and reliability, even with small questions. In litigation, trust is critical. Clients need to feel you're on their side, even when you manage expectations or explain risks.

The “liking” part is often underestimated. At conferences, everyone has an elevator pitch and a list of cases, but that doesn't stick. What sticks is the human connection. Legal skills are a prerequisite, but personality is what makes you memorable.

Jonathan: Do you feel like you've made it in your career?

Kato: That's a tricky question. Ten years ago, if you told me I'd be a partner at a big firm with this kind of work and client portfolio, I would have said that's the dream.

And yet, there's always more. I'm happy and grateful, but it's not finished. I think we all need to cultivate a stronger sense of accomplishment in daily life.

I live by two values: continuous improvement and generosity. No matter where you are, you have to keep improving. And generosity—with your time and effort—guides decisions.

So no, I don't think I've "made it." And if you ask me at 65, I'll probably say the same. That's the beauty of life.

Jonathan: That resonates deeply. Learning and giving back cut across all careers. The most successful people I know are always learning and always giving back. When people stop doing either, they lose satisfaction and limit their impact.

Kato: I agree completely. Work is part of a happy life if you approach it as a way to grow and develop. It's tough, and boundaries matter, but working hard while caring about others determines long-term happiness.

What values have guided you?

Jonathan: I try to be the mentor I didn't have. When someone asks for help, I try to be present. Sometimes that means fixing a problem; sometimes it just means listening.

I want to make a difference every day—not just for my family, but for someone else. That helps me sleep at night, exhausted but satisfied, and excited to do it again the next day.

I think this is a good place to wrap this episode. I'm excited about what we're building—learning from each other, from guests, and sharing insights about the parts of our careers that aren't all billable.

Kato: I couldn't agree more. That's the perfect description of this podcast. I'm really looking forward to this journey with you and with our audience. Let's kick it off.