Executive Exchange with Kelly Young

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In this new edition of our quick-fire Q&A, *AsianInvestor* catches up with Kelly Young, CEO at Acadian Asset Management.

NAME: Kelly Young

TITLE: CEO

COMPANY: Acadian Asset Management

Kelly Young joined Acadian in 2009 and became CEO in 2023 after serving as executive vice president and chief marketing officer, overseeing global client service, business development and product strategy. She previously led Acadian Asset Management UK and managed European client relationships, following senior roles at SGAM Alternative Investments, Northern Trust Global Investments, and Barclays Global Investors.

A member of Acadian's board of managers, executive management team and executive committee, Young holds a Bachelor of Science in economics and business finance from Brunel University, is a CFA charterholder and member of CFA Society Boston, plus also holds the CAIA designation.

From chartering a boat down the Mekong to navigating Asia's cultural nuances, Young has learned that leadership is a marathon, not a sprint. She prioritises relationship-building to break down barriers, whether through shared meals in Asia, early lessons in teamwork at Visa's euro launch, or embracing agility in fast-moving markets.

What's the most exciting adventure you've had?

I once chartered a boat and travelled down the Mekong River from Vietnam into Cambodia with my then-partner. We had a captain, but there was a major language barrier — so for the first part of the trip we were mostly just hoping we'd actually found and boarded the right boat.

It turned out to be an incredible experience. The scenery was stunning — lush riverbanks, tiny villages, all manner of freshwater fish, birds and other wildlife everywhere — and no Google Translate back then to help us navigate anything.

Arriving in Cambodia felt especially surreal. Passport control was basically a tiny riverside stop surrounded by chickens and speedboats. It was chaotic, slightly confusing and completely unforgettable.

If you could instantly become an expert at one random skill, what would it be?

I'd love to be a world-class Latin ballroom dancer — specifically tango. Not just reasonably good either — I mean full "Dancing with the Stars" professional level. There's something incredibly impressive about people who can do that effortlessly. It's such a combination of athleticism, confidence and artistry.

When working across Asia, what cultural nuances have most surprised you, and how have they influenced your leadership style?

Relationship-building comes to mind as even more paramount than I expected. Across much of Asia, clarity often comes from context, tone and relationships rather than just words.

Trust isn't just a "nice to have" — it's foundational to getting things done. Investing time in informal conversations, shared meals (you will realise how important lunches and dinners are, plus there is just so much great food in Asia!), or just showing consistency over time has a real impact on how teams collaborate.

I've become more observant, more deliberate about inclusion and more comfortable with ambiguity. I try to create the conditions where people feel comfortable giving honest answers.

What was your first job and what did you learn from it?

My first real job was a summer position at Visa in 1999, working in the single currency conversion unit before the euro officially launched. The team was focused on promoting the new payment systems and helping businesses prepare for the transition.

One of the coolest parts of the job was helping with a small Visa-sponsored exhibition at the British Museum about the history of money. We got behind-the-scenes access to incredible artefacts — including Roman coins you definitely don't expect to be handling as a summer intern.

But the biggest lesson was understanding how organisations really work. It was the first time I realised that even in a temporary role, what you do affects everyone else around you. When there's a launch date looming, you roll up your sleeves and make it happen. It taught me accountability, teamwork and how even a small role fits into something much bigger.

If a movie was made about your life as an investment executive, who would you want to play you and why?

Kate Winslet would be my first choice. Partly because she's British, around the same age and we even had similar hair during the *Titanic* era — but mostly because she is intelligent and outspoken about body positivity and ageing naturally, gracefully and confidently, as well as protecting young women in the entertainment industry.

I'd also accept Renée Zellweger — but only if she uses her impeccable *Bridget Jones* accent. Fun fact: the final scene of *Bridget Jones's Diary* was filmed across from our old London office, so we could actually see the filming location from the window.

From your experience, what three capabilities are absolutely critical for succeeding in Asia's diverse markets?

Asset management is ultimately a people business, and finding the right people who can think globally and yet navigate locally is perhaps the most critical ingredient for success within Asia.

The heterogeneity across Asia is intricate, with each country having its own finance micro-climate (regulatory, investor preference, market structure and stage of economic development). There are lots of opportunities, but only people with deep local market knowledge will be able to capture investment opportunities best.

Strong stakeholder management skills are also critical, as credibility in Asia requires a long time to build via trust, consistency and cultural sensitivity. Long-term partnerships often matter as much as investment performance in building a sustainable franchise.

Agility and disciplined execution. Asia's markets can evolve quickly, driven by policy changes, geopolitical developments and rapid technological innovation. Teams who can pivot fast and respond to changing client needs without losing sight of long-term investment discipline are well placed to achieve growth in Asia.

If you could go back in time, what career advice would you give your younger self?

Believe in the journey — and remember it's a marathon, not a sprint. Early in your career, you often don't have the humility to realise what you don't know. Then somewhere in mid-career, you can swing too far the other way and lose confidence in what you *do* know.

At 25, I thought I knew everything. At 35, I thought I knew nothing. At 45, I finally started thinking, "Actually… I might have this." If I could go back, I'd tell myself to find that balance sooner — confidence mixed with humility.

If the stock market had a theme song, what would it be?

It probably depends on the market cycle, but right now I'd go with *"Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now"* by Starship. It has exactly the kind of optimistic, slightly overconfident energy that markets can have during a strong run — especially in tech. It feels very fitting for the current moment while also throwing back to a simpler time.

What's the most valuable lesson you've learned from an investment that didn't pan out?

Honestly, the biggest lesson was from an investment I *didn't* make. I should have invested in equities much earlier instead of leaving money sitting in cash accounts. In this industry, we spend so much time talking about the magic of compounding, and I just didn't apply that magic to my own life soon enough.

Now I sound very middle-aged telling younger people this, but if you're 21 or 22, invest whatever you can — even if it's just a small amount every month. Your money is never going to work harder for you than when you have a 40- or 45-year time horizon ahead of you.

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