



# Farrer & Co LLP

## This prestigious London firm takes a very modern approach to its training contract

Few firms have the distinguished history of Farrer & Co. Over the course of three centuries it has represented such celebrated clients as Charles Dickens, banker Thomas Coutts, Her Majesty The Queen and the British Olympic Association.

Given this, you might think that the lawyers at the firm inhabited some sort of rarefied environment, with partners seldom descending from their ivory tower to spend time with new trainees who have yet to stalk the corridors of power.

In practice, things couldn't be more different. One of the principal reasons that Farrers has earned such a sterling reputation is its ability to forge strong relationships which, like the firm itself, can withstand the test of time. And that quality is not just outward facing: it is no accident that Farrers has one of the best staff retention rates in the business.

"It sounds like a cliché, perhaps, but it's true," says David Ball, the firm's head of learning and development. "At Farrers, there is a real understanding that in a law firm, people are the most important asset the firm has. That applies whether you are looking at someone who is a trainee on their first day, a partner who has been at the firm for a number of years or someone in a non-fee-earning role. I think this is something that the firm has done very well for a very long time."

It should come as no great surprise, then, that the training team strives to

convince trainees of their importance in the Farrers ecosystem from the very outset. This begins by letting them know whether they are successful as soon as possible after interview and then maintaining a constant dialogue until they officially come on board. During the intervening period, prospective trainees are invited to a number of events: there's a trainees' Christmas lunch each year and the firm's summer party, as well as a host of other informal events which offer a chance to mix with current trainees and other staff at the firm.

And once the training contract starts, this inclusive attitude continues, from regular contact with the management board at quarterly breakfast meetings to the type of work the trainees get involved with from day one. "What we pride ourselves on, more than anything, is trying to make the trainees feel as though they are part of the firm from the moment they walk in through the door," says training principal James Price, who is also a partner in the firm's disputes and media team. "They are not seen as some sort of photocopying or proofreading resource. They tend to play significant roles within teams. I hear time and again that the levels of responsibility here are much greater than those of trainees at other firms.

"Giving trainees significant responsibility at an early stage of their careers might seem brave to some, but through the training the firm provides, we make sure they are up to the challenge," James



continues. However, the firm remains vigilant to the needs of its newbies at all times.

“One of the most important factors for us is the amount of time, care and attention that we give trainees when they get here,” explains training partner and IP and commercial lawyer Anthony Misquitta. “We keep close track of them during the training contract, and if there are any issues or problems, we are able to identify them at a very early stage during a seat and ensure that appropriate action is taken.”

There are plenty of mechanisms in place to make sure the training process is running as smoothly as possible. James and Anthony each oversee a year’s intake of trainees and follow their progress very carefully throughout their two years. During each seat, trainees are assessed twice by their training supervisor for that particular seat – once halfway through the four-month seat and once at the end. The point is that, particularly with the mid-seat assessment, there is still time to fill any gaps. The supervisors then report back to James or Anthony, who will regularly meet up with the trainees to chat over coffee and run through how well things are going and whether there are any problems. During those chats, the training partners will try to glean which areas of law the trainee has experienced and which might have been missed. Throughout the process, trainees are given an opportunity to say where they might like to spend their next seat.

Another feature of the training contract at

Farrers is that it is designed to guarantee that tomorrow’s lawyers get the most they possibly can from their training contract and experience as many areas of the firm as possible. This is achieved not only through an unusual six-seat rotation, but also by providing supplementary training to make sure they see the whole picture. “Even though we run a six-seat system, you still can’t see every possible area of the firm in two years,” says David. “We put a lot of emphasis on knowing how all areas of the firm operate, as it helps us give the most rounded service we possibly can to our clients.”

Although, as mentioned earlier, a keen eye is kept at each assessment on the direction in which each trainee is developing, around April in the second year the focus of discussions falls more on where trainees will sit their final seat and thus the team they might qualify into. Of course, there are commercial considerations for the firm to take into account, but such is the planning within the firm that trainee retention rates are generally high.

“We talk in April a lot more about jobs and qualification,” James elaborates. “And of course, that is always dependent on the business case – is there recruitment available in the area they’re looking at? We’ve been very lucky in that last year we took on 100% of our trainees and this year we took on 90%. I think a lot of that is to do with the work that we in the training team put in, trying to work out where is best for

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particular individuals and working with them to help with their selection.”

It also might have something to do with the time that is spent on ensuring that trainees gel as a unit and identifying all the different pieces of what, it is hoped, will eventually become a finely tuned machine. If this is done correctly, the trainees will enjoy their first two years at the firm a lot more.

“Our recruitment and training blend into each other,” explains Anthony. “If you get your recruitment right, then you’re building yourself happy trainees. What we always take a great deal of care to do is to put together a cohesive intake of trainees. What we certainly don’t want is 10 identikit candidates coming through the door on that September morning. We want a range of skills; we want a range of personality types; but what we really want is an intake that we think will get on and be harmonious, and I think that’s what we’ve done fantastically well over the years.”

This is one of the key elements to Farrers’ success, believes Anthony, but there are also other aspects of life at the firm that set it apart from the crowd. “I think one of the things we do very well is in the breadth of work we offer, and that’s a function of what Farrers is,” he says. “A trainee will go from a seat working for wealthy private individuals to a seat working for an international bank and then to a seat doing defamation work for the *News of the World*. So the scope of the work is very interesting and exciting.

“I also think that the trainees appreciate the amount of contact that they get – first with the partners in the team, and then also with the clients; and that’s a function of the collegiate atmosphere of Farrers. We are a much bigger firm now than when I joined, but it’s still the case that a trainee joining one of our teams will get to know all of the partners in the team very early, and those partners and the assistants will frequently take the trainees along to client meetings and introduce them to the clients. I like to think that by the time they finish their training contracts they are fully functioning as solicitors, able to handle their own files and caseloads.”

By **Rowan McIntyre**

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**Method of application:** Online application form

**Application deadline:** Apply by 31 July 2011 for training contracts commencing in 2013

**Method of selection:** Interview

**Work areas**

- Agriculture
- Arbitration, ADR
- Banking
- Charities
- Commercial litigation
- Commercial property
- Company & commercial
- Computer & IT
- Construction
- Corporate tax
- Defamation
- Employment
- Family
- Intellectual property
- Media & entertainment
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Private client
- Sports & leisure
- Telecommunications

**Offices**

London

What trainees said:

*“As a trainee, you are encouraged to work with people at all levels of the firm, which allows you to experience a wide variety of client matters. This is both motivating and an excellent opportunity to learn.”*

*“In line with the firm’s Career Development Framework, there is a strong emphasis on support both from supervisors and the training team throughout your training contract. You are given the confidence to develop your skills as a solicitor in preparation for qualification.”*

*“One of the best things about Farrers is how approachable the partners are – they are very easy to talk to and they really appreciate the important role played by trainees.”*

*“The people are so helpful and knowledgeable. My supervisors have been great and really take time to ensure that I understand the task in hand.”*