



Farrer & Co LLP

As English as cucumber sandwiches, the key to the Great British Farrer & Co's lasting success is three centuries with people at its core

As much a part of the British establishment as the clients it serves, Farrer & Co may be knocking on past 300, but it's by no means stuck in the past; these days, this venerable legal institution is as famous for serving entrepreneurs and international media groups such as *The Economist* as it is for the prestigious private clients for which it first became known.

Legal outfits of this calibre don't get to, and stay at, the top of their game without looking after their people and Farrers is no exception - borne out by consistently high retention rates and recent accolades at the Training & Recruitment Awards (TARAs). "Our secret is that we put people right at the centre of the firm in terms of importance," elaborates recruitment partner Jonathan Eley. "So we value every single person who works here, be they a secretary, trainee or partner." And this isn't just spin, confirms trainee Victoria Stratton: "Trainees are not made to feel like just 'the trainees'; they're regarded as a vital part of the firm and are consulted on matters you wouldn't imagine they would be."

With this kind of staff-centric focus, it's unsurprising that the firm is fast becoming a bookies' favourite at the TARAs; this year it was named Best Recruiter - Medium City Firm, while last year it picked up Best Trainer. Jonathan is delighted that Farrers is winning recognition for its training and recruitment,

given the energy that he and the team pour into making it a success. "We invest a great deal of time and care into our recruitment and training, so it's great to know that it pays off. We try very hard to make sure that the whole process is reflective of the firm's attitude of valuing those who work here." Another of the current crop of trainees, Helen Reid, agrees: "I think you can tell a lot about a firm from its recruitment process; if it is a pleasant experience (which it was at Farrers), it reflects very well on the firm as a whole and fills you with confidence about the future you could expect there."

Farrers goes to great lengths to attract the right people because it hopes these individuals will become the next generation of partners. "Trainees represent the future of the firm and we really do aim to keep as many as we can," says Jonathan. "It makes complete sense from our perspective, because we invest so much time and money in them. If we can keep them, nurture them and develop them into good partners who'll want to take over responsibility for running the firm themselves, the system is working - and that, by and large, is what tends to happen." A look at the firm's current band of partners attests to the truth of this: more than 60% of them trained with the firm - Jonathan included.

The dozen or so "future partners" carefully hand-picked each year have one



thing in common aside from the usual stellar qualifications and achievements: they are not legal automatons, but individuals with “engaging personalities”. Jonathan explains: “We like people who have outside interests. We are looking for people who are well-rounded and interesting, who have more than just a checklist of certain character traits, academics and experiences.” To find these gifted individuals, the firm deliberately keeps things simple, to allow maximum time for getting to know each potential new recruit. The straightforward application form and two-stage interview prove popular with candidates, who find them a welcome break from the psychometric tests, mind-bending psychoanalytical questions and high-stress assessment days favoured by many firms. “The simple process was a really nice change from others I’d been through,” says Helen. “The whole thing seemed to be designed more to enable the recruiters to get to know me and work out what kind of trainee I’d be than it was to trip up or intimidate me.”

Catching candidates out is, in fact, the last thing on the minds of the recruiters, as the whole process is designed to quell interview nerves and allow candidates to shine. First interviews - which are generally conducted in August and early September by a trainee recruitment team member or a partner - focus on getting under the skin of each potential new recruit and mainly involve running through their CV. Those who impress

at this stage are then invited back for a second, more formal interview with two partners. Round two involves giving the candidate some background about Farrers, asking a few legal and topical questions and working through a case study. Although case studies are a bugbear of many interviewees, the exercise at Farrer’s was - for Helen - one of the most enjoyable elements. “It was collaborative rather than adversarial,” she remembers. “It wasn’t a question of me telling them the answer - we worked through it together, analysing the facts and legal issues stage by stage.”

The benefits of putting candidates at ease during their interviews are twofold: it lets the firm see them at their best and makes them more inclined to accept an offer should one be made. “I was totally sold on Farrers after my interview,” says Helen. “It was much more friendly and relaxed in comparison to the experiences I’d had with other firms (I interviewed at five in total). I actually remember looking at the partners who were interviewing me and thinking that I could see myself in their shoes in the future - if you can do that in your interview, it’s a pretty good sign you’ve found your match.” This instinctive feeling of having found ‘the one’ works on the recruiter’s side of the table too, according to Jonathan: “Successful candidates tend to be the ones whose interviews overran because we enjoyed chatting to them so much. You get a kind of buzz coming out of certain interviews, when

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you feel you’ve got to know the candidate really well and would like to have them as a colleague.”

For the chosen few offered a training contract at Farrers, the care and attention extend all the way into their training contracts and beyond; and nowhere is this more evident than in the firm’s approach to seats. First, to facilitate exposure to as much of the firm’s diverse practice as possible, six seats are on offer rather than the usual four - a system that proves popular with trainees. “I’m glad I was able to experience lots of departments because I’ve ended up qualifying into an area that I really didn’t expect to. I think that ends up being the case for a lot of people, actually,” says Helen. Second, trainees’ seat choices are taken incredibly seriously by the firm; it not only allows them a ‘wildcard seat’ (a priority seat of their choice), but also goes to extraordinary lengths to put every individual in their first choice of department. Trainee recruitment manager Donna Davies wins particular praise for her ability to juggle trainees’ competing demands. “She’s amazingly good at putting everyone in the seats they want and keeping everyone happy. I’m pretty sure she even loses sleep over it!” says Helen.

With so much time and effort lavished on trainees, it’s unsurprising that they are keen to stay on when they qualify. Helen - who will shortly join the tax team as a newly qualified solicitor - is a case in point: “I’m very happy

here. Farrers has completely fulfilled, if not surpassed, the expectations I had (and that wasn’t easy because they were pretty high!). From speaking to friends and comparing our experiences, I feel so lucky to be in a firm that treats its people so well. I’ve heard about the way some firms allow their lawyers to be disrespectful to trainees and treat them like general dogsbodies, but that just doesn’t happen here. Everyone here goes out of their way to make it a nice place to work; to me, making an effort to be nice to your colleagues and get along together just doesn’t seem like rocket science!” So for those who want be treasured while they’re trained, Farrer & Co is definitely worth a punt.

By Claire Butler



Farrer & Co LLP

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Method of application: Online application form

Application deadline: Apply by 31 July 2012
 for training contracts commencing in 2014

Method of selection: Interview

Work areas

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

Offices

London

What trainees said:

"I found the recruitment process very thorough; I really felt that the interviewers wanted to know all about me, rather than just about what was on my CV."

"The whole recruitment process was well organised and was made much less stressful thanks to the HR team. The team were always friendly, honest and approachable throughout the recruitment process. They also ensured that all future trainees were involved in firm social events and had several opportunities to meet fellow trainees as well as partners and solicitors at the firm before starting at the firm in September. These events were always really well attended and a lot of fun, and made the transition into Farrers much less daunting than it may otherwise have been."

"The recruiters really tried to get the best out of you."

"The people here are genuinely friendly, genuinely interested in you as a trainee, and genuinely keen to see you grow into a good solicitor."