

LC.N AWARD WINNER 2013 BEST TRAINER – LARGE CITY FIRM



It is hard to pigeonhole originality. When establishing their practice in postwar Chicago, Messrs Baker & McKenzie were among the first lawyers to recognise the potential of a global outlook, and set out to turn their partnership into a truly international business. Since then, Baker & McKenzie has steadily expanded to become the biggest law firm on the planet, employing over 4,000 lawyers in 74 offices spread across 46 countries. That many other firms have since followed this approach just shows that imitation continues to be the most sincere form of flattery, yet Bakers still proudly sits apart – from the Magic Circle, from the stable of globetrotting US firms and from pretty much every other legal services operation around.

"The legal press has always struggled to find a box for us – I have seen us called a London firm, an international firm and a US firm, all of which can be justified to an extent," reflects Simon Porter, partner and training principal at Bakers' London office. "We can confidently say that we are in the top 10 in the London market, but we are also the original global law firm and part of the global elite. You will find it difficult to find another firm that operates in as many jurisdictions as we do."

With such a formidable profile, you might assume that the firm's scale might prove overwhelming to many trainees when starting out. According to graduate recruitment and development officer May Worvill, however, this could not be further from the truth at Bakers. "I have been here for over 18 months now, so I'm settled in and can honestly say that the Baker & McKenzie marketing and recruitment material really lives up to the reality of what the firm is like, which is not the case with all employers. It's a friendly, nurturing and collaborative environment in which to work."

How is it possible to cultivate this kind of atmosphere within





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such a vast international network? Simon explains: “Our London office manages to combine the personal client service and more collegiate culture of a small to medium-sized firm with being part of a wider international powerhouse. This means that we work at the highest level on multi-jurisdictional transactions, but maintain our valued and distinct identity.” The firm’s policy of recruiting a small trainee intake each year helps to maintain this ethos. “It ensures that our trainees get the individual support and access to quality work that you might not ordinarily associate with a firm of our size,” says May.

A lot of time and resources can therefore be dedicated to each trainee, each of whom is overseen – from vacation scheme to qualification – by a dedicated, world-class graduate recruitment and development team, with May and fellow officers Rebecca Ryalls and Faye Tracey led by the tireless Jacqui Bernuzzi. As you would expect, the process is nothing less than rigorous and thorough, with trainees subject to an additional layer of screening in the form of an online situational judgement test as of this year.

However, SOAS graduate and second-seat trainee Olamide Bada found the reality of the recruitment process to be far from intimidating. “It was quite tough,” she acknowledges, “which is understandable, considering the high number of applications that the firm receives every year. I did an online application accompanied by a cover letter, followed by a telephone interview, which sounds daunting, but was actually quite informal. I then attended an open day involving a negotiation exercise, plus a one-to-one interview with an associate, which I quite enjoyed. The process culminated in an interview with two partners, in which we discussed a case study for which I had been given time to prepare. The partners offered me help and guidance through the process – which was very welcome, considering that I didn’t know then what I do now – and this meant that even the partner interview was more enjoyable than I thought it would be.”

Indeed, the process is designed to be as transparent as possible, with a focus on the candidate’s skills. “Potential trainees need to have intellectual ability and the quickness

to use it on their feet. This is what our case studies are designed to test – there are no trick questions,” explains Simon. “However, the interview is not just about answering the questions that you have prepared for; you need to be able to respond to other points that the interviewer may raise. We also like to see candidates who have done interesting things outside work and their academic achievements. This is all part of assessing whether candidates will be able to engage on a personal level with our clients.”

Once the raw potential has been identified, future trainees embark on a fast-track LPC at The University of Law, specifically tailored to prepare them for life at Bakers. The firm also takes care to keep in touch with future trainees from the point at which they accept training contract offers to the day they start at the firm. “My offer was accompanied by an invitation to a drinks reception that was held a few weeks later,” says Olamide. “It was good to meet the other people in my LPC and training contract intake. The firm also kept in contact throughout the LPC by inviting us to talks run by the different departments.” There is also



an annual ‘end of exams’ celebration, as well as new joiner drinks and a networking event following completion of each seat during the training contract.

Once they start, trainees undertake four seats over the course of the training contract, rotating every six months. “One of those seats has to be in our corporate department,” explains May, “while trainees also need to experience contentious work in accordance with SRA guidelines. Other than that, there are several options of practice areas to sit in, as well as the potential of going on a client or overseas secondment. In terms of client secondment opportunities, trainees can spend time at one of a number of big-name banks and IT companies – those placements are always hotly contested!”

Olamide is one of those applying for an international secondment for her final seat. This kind of opportunity was always a big draw for her, she explains: “My first impression when doing my research ahead of applying was that Baker & McKenzie seemed to enjoy a lot more global presence than other firms, with offices in more jurisdictions than pretty much anyone else. I was a student at SOAS, which is obviously

a very international and diverse university, and this really caught my attention because I wanted to work for a law firm with similar characteristics. Secondment opportunities are open to everyone and I’m certainly hoping to be granted one.”

Her first year at the firm has also been a fantastic training experience. “My first seat was in corporate,” Olamide explains. “It involved a lot of M&A and corporate finance, which I enjoyed. I’m currently in my second seat, which is in the structured capital markets team – a sub-group in the finance department. There is a lot of client contact and with that comes responsibility. If something goes beyond my authority or current level of knowledge, I am able to discuss this with one of my associate colleagues, but before that there is the opportunity to engage with clients and handle what I can myself.” This freedom is facilitated by the fact that each department meticulously prepares new trainees for the demands that will be placed on them. “There is at least a week of induction dedicated to preparing trainees for the role that they will be assuming in the team whenever they move seats,”

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Method of application

Online application form

Application deadline

Apply by 31 July 2014 for training contracts commencing in 2016

Method of selection

Application form, situational judgement and verbal reasoning test, telephone interview and assessment centre

Work areas

- Banking
- Charities
- Commercial property
- Company & commercial
- Competition & EU law
- Construction
- Corporate finance/mergers & acquisitions
- Corporate tax
- Dispute resolution
- Employment, pensions & incentives
- Energy & natural resources
- Environment
- Insolvency/restructuring
- Insurance/reinsurance
- Intellectual property
- Media & entertainment
- Multimedia
- Private client
- Technology, media & telecommunications

Offices

Over 70 locations in 46 countries

What trainees said:

"The culture of the firm really impressed me on my vacation scheme and this hasn't differed from my experience on the training contract. There is an open-door policy and people are very welcoming, friendly and approachable."



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confirms Simon.

The support on offer does not dry up after this period; the firm makes sure to maintain an effective balance between giving trainees responsibility and the room to develop and being there to provide guidance and more direct instructions when necessary. "I have a lot of partner contact," says Olamide. "I'm regularly given tasks by partners and am always welcome to pop into their offices if I have any questions about the task, as a result of the firm's open-door policy."

The firm also never stops looking to improve. The graduate recruitment and development team works with the partners to review training regularly, ensuring that it remains fresh and relevant. "We want to remain one of the leaders in the field of recruitment and training, so as well as keeping an eye on the market, we also take into account feedback from our trainees – which we ask for every six months – when considering where improvements can be made," explains May.

It is clear that after so long at the top of the pioneering pyramid of international law firms, the Bakers original model remains unsurpassed, both in terms of sector-leading

training and as a global presence in commercial legal services. "Others have worked on our example, such as DLA Piper and Norton Rose," says Simon. "Those firms have rapidly expanded following mergers over the last three to five years, but we have been growing steadily for over 50. We are truly international, and all our offices work hard to share knowledge and remain integrated as a single firm with a common purpose. Today's commercial clients need a single law firm that can handle all their legal matters in every jurisdiction in which they do business, and we are experts at providing that. We are well placed to remain one of the very top global firms over the next 10 to 20 years."

By *Josh Richman*

BAKER & MCKENZIE