

# Mills & Reeve LLP

## Like Christmas, Mills & Reeve's garlanded vac scheme comes but once a year – but it's worth waiting for

Around the time of year when the temperature soars and the ice cream vans tinkle, an air of excitement pervades the Birmingham, Cambridge and Norwich offices of national legal practice Mills & Reeve. The office buzz is partly down to the promise of summer festivities and holiday adventures, but mainly it's because a trio of eagerly awaited annual vacation schemes are about to kick off. Each June and July, the firm opens the doors of three of its six offices to 30 hopefuls eager to make an impression on recruiters and be deemed worthy of joining the firm's ranks.

This choice of scheduling may well be partially responsible for Mills & Reeve's success in the Best Work Placement Scheme – Regional Firm category for the last four years on the trot. Concentrating its efforts into a dedicated summer programme, instead of having schemes dotted throughout the year, means that the annual placements have become something of a calendar highlight. Graduate recruitment manager Fiona Medlock, who has been with the firm since 1985, explains: "Everybody is geared up to receiving the vac schemers. Staff know that they are not going to be troubled all through the summer or at every single holiday, so they really look forward to them coming – they're fresh faces. I never have to ask around for helpers or seek out people to act as supervisors, because everyone is falling over themselves to get involved."

One clue as to why staff are so keen to lend a hand is the high number of future colleagues who are selected from the placements (between 50% and 70% of the trainee intake). Training Principal Brian Marshall explains that the firm favours this method of recruiting because, time and again, it gets the right people through the door. "To be honest, it's a much better way of evaluating candidates than our training contract interview process," he reveals. "We get to see people at close quarters for an extended period of time and we can get wider input and comments on candidates from right across the firm. It's therefore a much better way to assess whether people will fit in here." In fact, work placements serve to highlight the danger of offering training contracts on the back of just an assessment day, where recruiters have had limited face time with hopefuls. "It's interesting how much we can change our minds by the end of the fortnight," muses Fiona. "Sometimes we find that people turn out to be totally different from what we expected."

With the majority of trainees selected through the placements, it's only right that winning a place on the scheme is as tough as securing an offer of training. Those after a slice of the action complete an online application form in January and, if they make the shortlist, they'll be invited to attend an assessment day during the Easter break. Personality is what the process is designed



to explore and those who reveal a can-do attitude, willingness to get involved and confidence without arrogance will score highly. But a string of desirable character traits do not, in themselves, an ideal candidate make – the firm seeks that indefinable X factor too. Fiona struggles to pinpoint exactly what this is – “But I definitely know it when I see it,” she laughs. Meanwhile, Brian’s acid test for this rather nebulous quality is: “Could I leave this person in a room with a client while I go off and do something else?”

But candidates who break the mould or think they don’t quite fit the Mills & Reeve ‘type’ shouldn’t give up hope of securing a place – the beauty of the work placement is that the firm can try out a variety of people before committing to take them on. “We are quite liberal about who we let onto the scheme,” explains Brian. “We’d take more of a chance on someone coming for a placement than we would on someone applying for a training contract. We don’t – or we certainly hope we don’t – take any chances with people we’ve recruited from the assessment day.”

During the fortnight, Brian and Fiona look closely at how well people handle their new role – in particular, how well they interact with clients and their temporary colleagues. Getting on well with everybody in the firm, regardless of seniority, is vital. But fawning over senior staff members is a guaranteed turn-off; so too is showing off legal

knowledge at the expense of following instructions to the letter. Brian says: “If I’ve asked a candidate to do something fairly banal, for example check a document for accuracy, what I’m looking for is someone who can take it entirely at face value and come back with work that’s 100% correct.”

Mills & Reeve’s quadruple victory at the LC.N awards may also be down to the structure of the vac scheme, which mirrors the various elements of the training contract and gives participants a true flavour of life with the firm. Candidates do mini-seats in four different departments and handle ‘real’ work of the kind that would be given to trainees: tasks could include legal research, preparing and checking draft documents, attending court and client meetings, and serving proceedings. Brian insists that treating vac schemers as if they were trainees is the best way both to select the best and to afford candidates a proper insight into training at Mills & Reeve. “I think some firms work really hard to give people on their placements lots of talks and made-up exercises, treating them quite differently from the way we do. Although we certainly do put on talks and run social events, for the bulk of the time being a placement student here is essentially what you could expect to be doing if you were to get a training contract. I don’t think people will be under any illusions of what it’ll be like.”

Also fundamental to its success is the effort that Mills & Reeve makes to embrace

“**One of the things that particularly struck me was the ethos not to let people get too stressed or over-worked – people here are always looking out for each other in that respect**”



**“I never have to ask around to find supervisors because everyone is falling over themselves to volunteer”**

the temporary recruits for their fortnight as office fixtures. Upon arrival, students are greeted at the door by Fiona, who is in charge of overseeing each placement and monitoring progress. After an induction – where students are given a personal email address, IT training and a tour of the library – the nervous hopefuls arrive at the location of their first seat. There they are welcomed by their new colleagues, who have already been briefed on who they are, as Fiona circulates mini-resumés of the candidates in advance of their arrival in each department. To help put vac schemers even more at ease, the firm assigns them their very own “buddy” – a trainee who will remain on hand throughout the two weeks to answer questions and generally help them to make the most of the experience.

The inclusive and welcoming environment is what ultimately persuaded Jacqui Blick – a current Mills & Reeve trainee – to pursue a career with the firm. She explains: “During the two weeks, I found everyone to be extremely supportive and there was always someone on hand to help. One of the things that particularly struck me was the ethos not to let people get too stressed or over-worked – people here are always looking out for each other in that respect.”

Now ensconced in the firm as a trainee, Jacqui is convinced she made the right choice in choosing Mills & Reeve. “The training here is exceptional,” she affirms. “There are people I know at other firms who

don’t get anywhere near the level of responsibility I do, but equally there are those I know who get far too much and spend half the time feeling completely out of their depth. That’s not the case here, as I get a good level of responsibility but feel completely supported at the same time.”

When asked whether she would recommend training here, Jacqui responds with a resounding “yes – I’ll recommend it to anyone who’ll listen!” But why take her word for it? If you apply for a place on the award-winning work placement scheme, you could find out for yourself.

By **Claire Butler**

**MILLS & REEVE**



**Mills & Reeve LLP**

Francis House  
 112 Hills Road  
 Cambridge CB2 1PH  
 T 01223 222336  
 E graduate.recruitment@mills-reeve.com  
 W www.mills-reeve.com

**Method of application:** Online application form

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

**Work placement scheme deadline:** Apply by 31 January 2011 for summer placements in 2011

**Method of selection:** Assessment centre and interview

**Work areas**

- Agriculture
- Arbitration, ADR
- Banking
- Charities
- Commercial litigation
- Commercial property
- Company & commercial
- Computer & IT
- Construction
- Corporate finance
- Corporate tax
- EC & competition
- Education
- Employment
- Energy
- Environment
- Family
- Insolvency
- Insurance/reinsurance
- Intellectual property
- Media & entertainment
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Multimedia
- Private client
- Projects & PFI
- Sports & leisure
- Telecommunications

**Offices**

Birmingham, Cambridge, Norwich, Leeds, London, Manchester

What trainees said:

*“The approach of almost all members of staff to vac-schemers was fantastic. Social events were laid on and we were made to feel part of the firm for the two weeks we were here.”*

*“We were included in the firm’s summer party and fully included in all aspects of work life.”*

*“I was impressed by the firm’s culture of openness and felt comfortable approaching trainees, senior solicitors and partners alike for advice.”*

*“My placement was a stimulating opportunity to put into practice some of the theory of my law degree.”*