

# Reed Smith

## Boardroom with a view: a picture-perfect training contract for those with the loftiest of ambitions

The London skyline is being transformed as a new generation of skyscrapers spring up around the capital, seemingly marking the rosy dawn of a post-recession era. These green shoots of recovery may be forged in steel, concrete and glass, but those looking heavenward for promising economic signs can surely take the steady progress of megatowers such as The Shard as a clear signal that things are looking up.

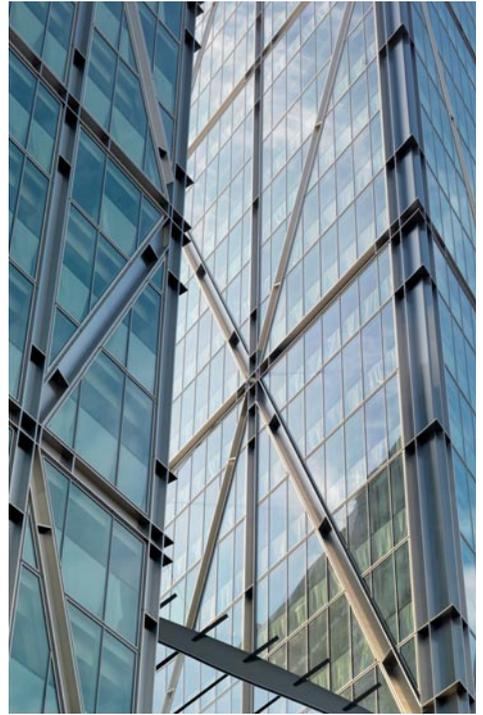
Those seeking to scale the heady heights of the legal industry – particularly high achievers with their hearts set on the City – would likewise do well to crane their necks for inspiration. Last year, Reed Smith took up position as the loftiest law firm in the City when it moved to the upper floors of the imposing Broadgate Tower on Bishopsgate, becoming the first incumbents of the Square Mile's latest architectural marvel. As one of the top international outfits, the firm is well acquainted with the sensation of regarding its competitors from an elevated position.

"The view from our offices is exceptional," enthuses Mark Johnson, a newly qualified solicitor with the firm. "From my desk I can see the Gherkin, Canary Wharf, the Olympic Stadium and all the way down to Queen Elizabeth Bridge. On the other side of the building, you can see Wembley, the BT Tower and as far as Terminal 5." However, Mark is quick to point out that the panorama outside his window was not his main reason for applying for a training contract with the firm. "It does make

for an excellent atmosphere in the office, but that would be a rubbish reason to make a life-changing decision," he chuckles. "However, if, like me, you are looking for a firm with an excellent professional reputation and high-quality work in a broad area, you will certainly find that here."

It is fair to say that Mark's decision to enter the law was more life-changing than most. Having graduated from Royal Holloway in 1998 with a degree in geography, he joined the Navy and sailed off to see the world and protect queen and country. He rose quickly through the ranks, serving as a navigator and warfare specialist, and ultimately achieved the ultimate ambition of his naval career: commanding his own ship. But it was after hitting a milestone birthday that Mark took time to take stock and decided to refocus his career path on the law.

The idea of navigating the training contract application merry-go-round from a ship harboured in a distant cove may seem more romantic than beavering away in a student bedroom, but Mark still had to contend with the same challenge as all other candidates: making his application stand out from the crowd. "I completed all the forms online while I was still out at sea," he explains. "As an older applicant, I tried to play to my strengths in my applications and applied to firms with strong shipping practices." Clearly still in full military mode, he was immediately impressed by firms that adopted a no-nonsense approach to the recruitment process. "When choosing who to



apply to, I went for those who seemed to be asking logical and straightforward questions. I was happy to explain why I wanted to be a lawyer or what I could offer the firm. I was completely put off by those organisations that favoured ridiculous or avant-garde questions. I remember one in particular that asked applicants to describe the inside of a ping-pong ball. I knew straight away that they would not be a suitable match for my personality.”

And Mark’s unconventional career path cut a dash at Reed Smith. “Diversity is key for us,” stresses Lucy Crittenden, graduate recruitment manager for the firm in London. “There is no standard applicant or blueprint for the perfect trainee. We are very open-minded about applicants’ choices of degree and university, as long as they can demonstrate a strong academic record, as well as being very open to second-career lawyers. Mark is a great example of that.”

The London office focuses its recruitment on the quality of potential trainees in each round, rather than an annual quota. However, with over 900 applicants this year, making the grade is certainly no mean feat. “Excellent academics and some interesting work experience are a must these days,” Lucy says. “But to really stand out, I would say that you need to prove to us that you really understand what a career in the law will entail and why you are suitable to face those specific challenges. Good research is vital. It is shocking how many applicants don’t know

that we have nearly 1,600 lawyers in 22 offices. If you haven’t even explored our website properly, we know immediately that you are not committed to joining the firm.”

Partner Terry Green splits his time between his duties as head of the real estate finance practice, a senior role within the insolvency and restructuring practice, and his position as UK training principal. While this must involve an astonishing amount of work, he nonetheless places great importance on ensuring that his is the first friendly face that potential new recruits meet during the milk round. He works closely with Lucy during the application process and, with the final say as to who joins the team, knows exactly what potential trainee must do to impress. “Commerciality is one of my principal considerations,” he says. “After all, we are giving our clients commercial, as well as legal, advice.” To the untrained eye, this might appear to be a difficult trait to detect during a relatively short interview, but Terry confirms that a sound understanding of the business world is in fact relatively easy to determine. “You can tell by the way someone answers the questions and by their confidence. You simply ask yourself: are they precise? Are they focused? Are they answering the questions with pertinent examples?”

Once through the door, trainees can expect a truly superior level of supervision and training, a fact underlined by the firm’s victory in the Best Trainer – Large City Firm category this year. Terry explains that the

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secret to success is actually rather simple: “We are evolving and progressing all the time to ensure that the scheme is working properly and is well balanced. Our objective is to help our trainees to become the best lawyers they can be.”

Aside from the direct training provided by a committed team of trainee supervisors, all working in close contact with Terry, trainees also benefit from participation in the Reed Smith University – a firm-wide initiative open to all fee earners and staff. This virtual university offers a wide range of soft skills and career development courses, and is run in conjunction with the Wharton Business School – the first partnership of its kind between a leading international law firm and a top-ranked business school.

Mark kicked off his training contract working in the corporate department, with a specific focus on clients from the life sciences industry. He soon learned that, much as during his time in the military, talent and hard work were quickly rewarded with responsibility. “The trainee supervisors really push you to get you the work you want to do,” he recalls. “I sat in several board meetings for one of the largest charities in the UK. I was taking minutes for the meeting, but there were some extremely high-profile individuals in that room. It was fascinating to hear the conversations going on at that level and to begin to understand where the legal input is required.”

However, perhaps the most exciting and

headline-grabbing element to the Reed Smith training contract is the unparalleled access to secondments, both in overseas offices and with clients. “We are very proactive in terms of secondments and always looking for new opportunities,” enthuses Terry. “We currently have one trainee in Dubai, one in Abu Dhabi and another in Piraeus, Greece. We send trainees wherever we have English-qualified lawyers, in line with the regulations imposed by the Solicitors Regulation Authority. The trainees always learn so much from the experience. As we speak, there are also Reed Smith trainees sitting with lawyers at some of our key clients. There really is a very diverse range of opportunities.”

Like all old seadogs, Mark is still lured by the siren call of the waves and he headed to Piraeus for a six-month secondment. “I was lucky enough to be there for the whole summer,” he recalls. “You are given a very pleasant flat in Piraeus – the harbour area of Athens – overlooking the sea. It is a small team of UK-qualified lawyers out there, so you get chucked right in at the deep end. I remember I was fully involved in case management and there is plenty of contact with clients. All that with an ocean view – what more could you ask for?” While an Aegean seascape in the height of summer may trump even the spectacular vista from the London offices, the Reed Smith training contract certainly appears to be a spectacular sight to behold.

***By Tom Gillett***



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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:** Assessments and  
interview

**Work areas**

- Advertising & marketing
- Antitrust & competition
- International arbitration
- Asset finance (including aviation)
- Banking
- Commercial litigation
- Commercial property
- Company & commercial
- Computer & IT
- Construction
- Corporate finance
- Corporate tax
- Defamation
- Employment
- Energy, trade & commodities
- Environment
- Insolvency
- Insurance/reinsurance
- Intellectual property
- International arbitration
- Life sciences
- Media & entertainment
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Multimedia
- Non-profit organisations
- Real estate
- Regulatory
- Shipping
- Telecommunications
- Transport (aviation, rail)

**Offices**

Abu Dhabi, Beijing, Century City, Chicago,  
Dubai, Falls Church, Hong Kong, London, Los  
Angeles, New York, Munich, Oakland, Paris,  
Philadelphia, Piraeus, Pittsburgh, Princeton,  
Richmond, San Francisco, Silicon Valley,  
Washington DC, Wilmington

What trainees said:

*"I have had access to a huge amount of quality work already. Performance, appraisals and feedback are looked on closely."*

*"The initial training was well structured and a great introduction to the firm. HR are happy to respond to any training requirements you may have, dependant on business needs."*