

LC.N AWARD WINNER 2012 BEST RECRUITER – LARGE CITY FIRM

Those old enough to remember '80s proto-boy band New Kids On The Block – currently reliving their heyday together with former rivals The Backstreet Boys in reunion super-group NKOTBTB – might recall that in their second single, they announced their quest for future partners with “The Right Stuff”. At about the same time, new UK firm SJ Berwin was doing something similar in legal circles. The decade marked the start of a period of rapid growth that has made SJ Berwin one of the youngest law firms in the country’s top 20 earners. Here, at least, the search for ‘the right stuff’ is still a hit, and this year the firm added the TARA for Best Recruiter – Large City Firm to a growing string of accolades.

Weaving together each thread of the recruitment process into a cohesive whole takes a dedicated team – and quite a bit of help from everyone else. “Nurturing future talent is something that the firm as a whole takes very seriously,” explains commercial litigator Nicola Bridge, the firm’s graduate recruitment partner and an erstwhile SJ Berwin trainee herself. “We get a lot of people involved at a fairly senior level, and all of our recruits – on vacation schemes and training contracts – have plenty of contact with those people, which makes for a very positive experience.”

In addition to the usual round of university law fairs, the firm hosts presentations at several selected institutions. “We aren’t trying to give students the hard sell,” says Nicola. “We’re simply saying that if you join a litigation team in the City, this is the sort of thing you could be doing.” To ensure that these are as well attended as possible, the firm appoints ‘campus managers’ – these tend to be second-year law students who have shown an interest in SJ Berwin. The campus managers help to advertise the firm and may even be given a small budget to organise social events. By partnering directly



with students in this way, the firm can tap directly into the top talent at the country's best universities and make them aware of all it has to offer.

Like many other big names, SJ Berwin leans towards vacation schemes as its preferred recruitment channel, although the door is still very much open for traditional applications. "I know that a lot of firms seem to be recruiting entirely from vac schemes," says Nicola. "We definitely think it is the best avenue for candidates to take, because it gives them the opportunity to check us out at the same time as we are looking at them, but we don't want to scare others away. We are aware that there may be career changers out there, or other people who can't do the work placement, so we still recruit through the direct interview process and there are always spaces left."

Application forms for both methods are available on the firm's website, which previous applicants have praised for their streamlined, straightforward format. The next stage for vac scheme candidates is to attend an open day, which includes a tour of the building and a practice interview with a senior associate and a member of the graduate recruitment team. Once again, the process is designed to make things as simple as possible for applicants.

"You can see that they have really thought about how it works," says first-year trainee Ofei Kwafo-Akoto. "I'm sure that throughout the day there were lots of people being interviewed, but while I was in the office I never felt like I was just one of a progression of people. That helped me to feel much less nervous."

Applicants who claim one of the coveted places are invited to choose three or four of the firm's areas of expertise, and the graduate recruitment team do their best to accommodate these interests. The new arrivals, each shadowing an associate, can expect to be given a taste of real ongoing work in the

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department, while presentations from different practice groups give a sense of the bigger picture.

"The graduate recruitment team did a really good job," recalls Marco Toracca, another first-seat trainee. "In the summer schemes, which last two weeks, it may be a little easier to plan, but in our week over Easter there was a very good balance between a couple of hours of presentation from each department in the morning and the rest of the day doing some kind of trainee work."

Ofei was also impressed by the level of organisation and preparation behind the placement – proof, he feels, of the firm's commitment to ensuring that vac schemers make the most of their limited time there. "They really do try to pack in a lot," he explains. "What most impressed me was that when I arrived, all the fee earners who I was working with knew that I was coming and they all had work ready for me to do. I've heard stories from people at other firms of having nothing to do or being given bits of work as and when they came along, but I felt that here they'd actually put some thought into what I was going to do."

Marco and Ofei would both agree that this careful planning of their days on the vac schemes was matched by the social events in the evening – again, the firm seems to have struck exactly the right balance. Each shared an impression of being given relaxed opportunities to meet with people at all levels of the firm, and a sense of being made to feel welcome.

The vac scheme closes with an assessment session, including a longer two-partner interview, a case study and a critical reasoning test. Candidates are also encouraged to venture their opinion of the firm and feed back on the placement programme itself. "That's one of the things I really like about SJ Berwin," says Marco. "They always encourage us to give input, so it's not just a one-way process."



As trainees, we sit down every three months and discuss the work we are doing, the responsibility we are given and where we would like to go. It was similar on the vac scheme.”

At this point, the two streams of vac schemers and direct applicants merge, as the latter attend a similar interview and complete the same case study and critical reasoning test. A crucial deciding factor at this stage is the oft-cited Holy Grail of modern legal recruitment: commercial awareness.

“It is definitely something that we look for,” says Nicola. “We want well-rounded individuals who take an interest in the outside world and who, it is apparent, will have views on what is going on in the world of business. An awful lot of candidates look great on paper: they’ve all hiked up Mount Kilimanjaro and captained their sports teams. But often, when you meet them in the flesh, they don’t quite measure up. The rapport that you build up in an interview is really important – you want to see candidates who have prepared well, but at the same time aren’t just regurgitating what they think you want to hear.”



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Nurturing future talent is something that the firm as a whole takes very seriously

SJ Berwin

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Method of application

Online application form

Application deadline

Apply by 31 January for vacation schemes in 2013. Apply by 31 July 2013 for training contracts commencing in 2015

Method of selection

First interview followed by second interview with partners and tests

Work areas

- Banking
- Construction
- Corporate finance
- Employment
- EU & competition
- Financial services
- Intellectual property
- Litigation
- Media
- Real estate
- Reconstruction & insolvency
- Tax

Offices

Berlin, Brussels, Dubai, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, London, Madrid, Milan, Munich, Paris, Shanghai

What trainees said

“First-class graduate recruitment team – approachable, responsive, well informed and genuinely interested in you.”

“The firm produces a very helpful *PLUM* magazine, which is written and edited entirely by trainees, and so is really quite honest about what the firm is like.”

“The process was thorough and fair. Definitely the best one I experienced.”

“The graduate recruitment team at SJ Berwin is truly fantastic – always helpful, friendly and extremely efficient.”

“The recruitment team is very friendly and I always found them very approachable and helpful.”

“I was really impressed by the interviewers. They asked insightful questions rather than the generic competency questions asked by some firms.”



As many of SJ Berwin’s future trainees now study for the LPC together at BPP, it is easier for them to keep in touch, and a number of events hosted during the year help to make the Queen Street Place office feel like home turf well before the official start date. As well as purely social occasions – making full use of the firm’s impressive roof garden and riverfront views – the firm arranges lectures and talks that are designed to shed light on possible seat choices during the training contract.

One of the graduate recruitment team’s biggest successes has been to give students the option of a trainee mentor during their LPC – someone to turn to for advice about their studies or some straightforward answers about everyday life at the firm. The scheme has proved so popular that it has been extended: once the training contract starts, new recruits can keep the relationship going – or even opt for a new mentor from a different team – to support them as they progress.

This continuous “nurturing of future talent”, in Nicola’s words, and the time and resources devoted to building a workforce, clearly help SJ Berwin in putting its case to attract new talent. As Ofei has found, the firm more than makes good on its promises.

“Having done a law degree, I had left the law and was working in publishing,” he explains. “I got the training contract and the firm supported me through the LPC. Now they are offering trainees a chance to do a master’s in law. I started in



January, and it lasts for the whole two years of the training contract. The fact that the firm is prepared to support that kind of development is something that I take as a very good sign about my prospective employer. They really are prepared to invest in people, and I like that.”

By Rowan McIntyre

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