



Kirkland & Ellis International LLP

The Can-Do attitude: a new breed of trainee at Kirkland & Ellis International LLP

Back in the 1950s, US President Dwight Eisenhower said that “the plans are worthless, but planning is everything”. Sixty years on and the White House’s current incumbent would be wise to heed his predecessor’s counsel. The much-hyped ‘Obama effect’ might not yet have reversed the country’s fortunes, but the signs confirm that he is learning on the job; he appreciates that knowledge equals power. As Obama himself has said, “In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity - it is a prerequisite.”

The value of knowledge needs no explanation to top global law firms either - least of all to the decision makers at Kirkland & Ellis, whose prudent planning when it comes to recruitment and training have left this fellow Chicago luminary in rude health. Despite the recent challenges presented by a turbulent market, a canny eye on the future has seen the London office - the hub of the firm’s international operations - grow to over 100 lawyers this year. This rapid expansion in a competitive market can be attributed not only to some high-profile lateral hires, but also - perhaps more importantly - to a grassroots expansion through the continued development of its nascent, but highly esteemed, graduate programme.

While no one can claim to have foreseen the extent of the difficulties that City law firms would face as a result of the global

downturn, some can boast more judicious preparation than others. “All Kirkland offices focus on four core areas: corporate, restructuring, intellectual property and litigation,” outlines Rajinder Bassi, graduate recruitment partner for the firm’s London office. “Obviously, in the last few years, many firms saw a drop-off in corporate work, but our corporate group remained strong. Furthermore, because we have such strong restructuring, litigation and IP practices, the economic downturn hasn’t really affected us in the same way as other firms. We are very well hedged and that has really helped us to continue to perform well and expand in spite of the difficult economic situation.”

Rajinder joined the firm six years ago, having previously spent time at two other major international law firms, and was soon one of several voices calling for the firm to launch a graduate training programme. “Up until then, the firm had been taking on NQs from good, strong City law firms,” she recalls. “We certainly weren’t unhappy with the lateral associates we had hired, but rather felt that we had reached a critical mass and that ultimately it would be beneficial to train our own people.”

From the outset, they were well aware that success depended on having the right graduate team in place: “There was a sense that we needed to pool the collective knowledge of the partners. Many of the Kirkland & Ellis partners in London have experience of working at other firms and, as



a result, had opinions on what works and what doesn't when it comes to a trainee programme. We also needed a graduate recruitment professional with experience from other firms, so we could get a further sense of how we could set up a successful graduate programme. That person was Kate Osborne."

Kate arrived at Kirkland in 2007 and wasted no time in promoting the new scheme at the top universities. "As we were setting up from scratch, we were asking a lot from that first group. We needed individuals who would relish the fact that they were breaking new ground. They were vital in helping to shape and develop the training programme. This year we are doubling the number of trainees and that is a testament to the quality of that first intake. They proved to the partnership the true value of the programme."

However, graduates wishing to join the ranks of this global financial powerhouse need to demonstrate more than just a gung-ho attitude. "Above all, we are looking for entrepreneurial candidates," Kate confirms. "As a relatively small office, this is not the place for trainees who want to be part of a 100-strong intake, and there is no chance of coasting along and falling below the radar. With a small group of trainees, you are likely to be the only trainee on a deal - perhaps even the only trainee in a department. As a result, the level of work that you are going to get will be head and shoulders above that of

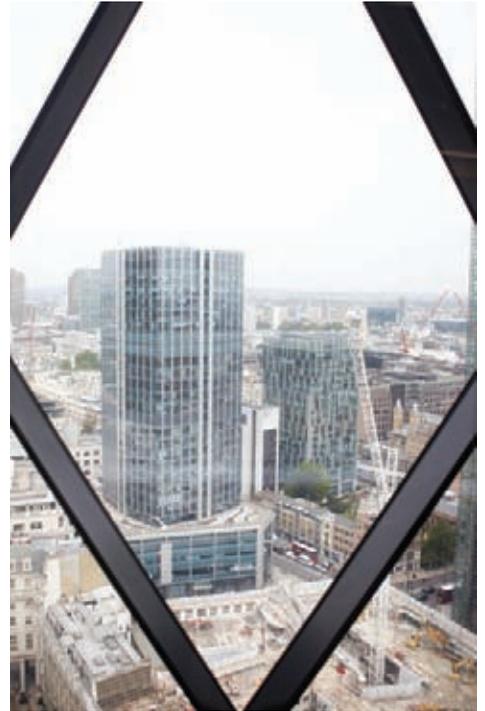
friends or colleagues in other City firms. We work on broadly the same size deals as other firms in the City, but where they might staff a team with 10 trainees, we could have one."

Rajinder explains how Kirkland has achieved this more streamlined approach: "We only take those who want to be at the forefront. I think certain law firms have a habit of pigeonholing people into very narrow roles. Here you can take your career by the scruff of the neck and, if you are ambitious, bright and capable, you will be given more and more responsibility. That is a key structural difference in the way we operate and the right candidate can benefit greatly from that."

Phil Kurek was just such a candidate, invited to join the team in that initial wave of recruitment back in 2007 after completing the inaugural summer vacation scheme. Originally from Austria, Phil read law at Cambridge and first encountered the Kirkland brand on a flyer he collected at the university's law fair. "Initially, I was drawn to the firm because of the simplicity of the application process," he confesses, "but was ultimately very excited by the idea that it was a completely new scheme."

Now a newly qualified associate, Phil can testify that his experience has been notably different from that of his contemporaries at larger competitors. "The one thing that really struck me about this place is that there is no such thing as a trainee task - perhaps because they have never had trainees

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before. It is always interesting when new people join us from other firms, particularly magic circle firms, as they are used to certain tasks being done by certain people. Here, everyone does everything and there is no expectation that certain tasks are done by trainees, or indeed that partners are somehow above getting their hands dirty.”

“One of the reasons I picked the firm was because I thought that it was a meritocracy,” he continues. “They sold it to me on that basis and I have certainly found that to be true.” Phil’s first seat was in the private funds group and he soon realised that he was to play an integral role on the team. “Private equity funds transactions usually take between three and six months. I was lucky to arrive at the beginning of a transaction that spanned my entire time in the department and literally closed the day I finished my seat. I remember I worked on some fund transfers, which is where you transfer interest from one fund to another. It is a relatively simple process, but gave me experience of drafting documentation and liaising with the client. In the end the associates were able to pass all the fund transfer work to me and that became my ‘thing’. It was very exciting to have my own area of responsibility from the word go.”

Flushed with that early success, Phil has since built up his list of responsibilities over his relatively short time with the firm. By the

time he reached his final seat, he realised that he was not being treated any differently from more senior colleagues: “You find yourself doing the same kind of work as first and second-year associates. In fact, on one recent deal I found myself in the situation where I was leading certain aspects and instructing fully qualified associates how they could best assist me.”

This summer will see Phil join Rajinder’s team and qualify into the international litigation and arbitration department. All five of Phil’s contemporaries will qualify into a mix of corporate, litigation and private funds seats at Kirkland, one of which is in Hong Kong - quite an achievement for the firm during a period of relatively low retention rates across the board. This does, however, represent something of a U-turn for Phil, who had always assumed that the firm’s internationally recognised private equity department would be his ultimate home. It seems that his experiences under Rajinder’s watchful eye have caused something of a rethink: “I wonder if that had anything to do with the fact that we sent him to serve documents in Curacao,” jokes Rajinder, “which I believe was one day’s work, then two days on the beach.” And with perks like that, can we see why he changed his mind? Yes We Can.

By Tom Gillett



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Method of application: Online application

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

Method of selection: Interview

Work areas

- Arbitration, ADR
- Capital markets
- Commercial litigation
- Company & commercial
- Corporate tax
- Competition
- Debt finance
- Funds
- Intellectual property
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Restructuring

Offices

Chicago, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles,
Munich, New York, Palo Alto, San Francisco,
Shanghai, Washington DC

What trainees said:
“One of the only firms I interviewed at where there was an ‘adult’ approach to the interview method. There were no stupid questions, no tests, just a down-to-earth series of interviews which were all transparent and intending on discovering more about me and whether I would fit in and develop well within this environment.”