

LC.N AWARD WINNER 2013 BEST TRAINER – US FIRM IN THE CITY

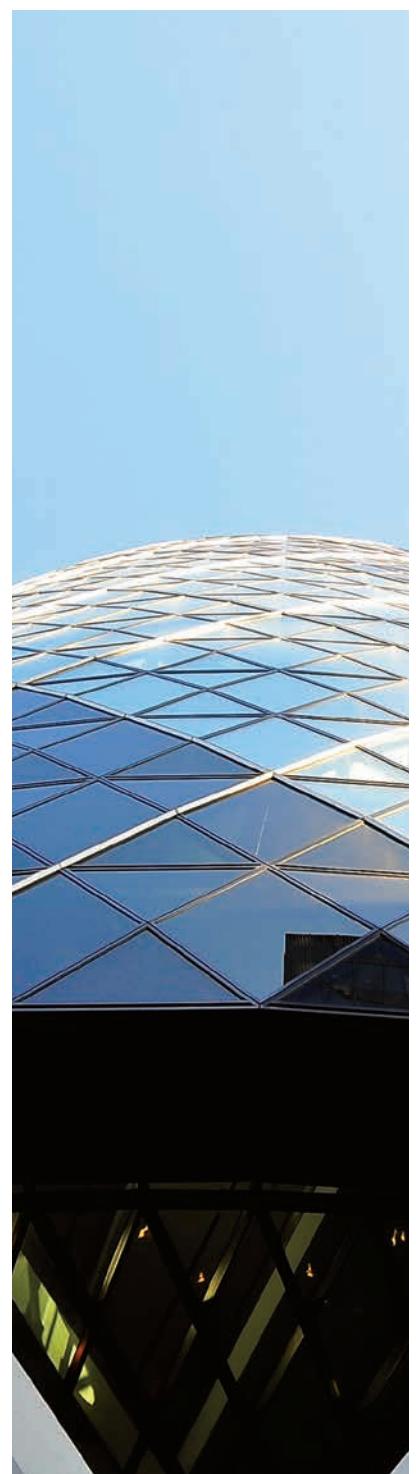


If you ask anyone who has travelled to the United States what America is like, the most common answer you are likely to receive is, "Large." Yanks love the expression "Everything is bigger in the USA" and for the most part, it's true. Whether you are talking buildings, cars or even dinner, everything tends to come a few sizes larger on the other side of the pond.

It is therefore interesting that while Kirkland & Ellis is certainly a large law firm by anyone's standards, it is the firm's relatively small intake that is one of the main attractions of its training contract. Indeed, the London office of the US legal titan, housed in the iconic Gherkin (30 St Mary Axe to the postman), is also of modest size, ensuring a friendly, collegiate environment. Another attraction is the heavyweight instructions which it attracts, on a par with those handled by the very best City firms – a fact that was not lost on William Gwyn when he applied for a training contract at Kirkland.

"I wanted to join a US firm primarily because of the smaller team culture on offer, but also due to the fact they have very high-quality corporate and commercial work, and Kirkland really stood out as offering all of those things to me," explains William, who has just qualified into the debt finance team. "I really felt that UK firms couldn't satisfy my desire for high-quality, corporate finance work without going to the Magic Circle and I wanted to avoid that, because as a trainee you can end up being one of 150 new faces and it can be very hard to get to know people well. Whereas as a trainee here you get to know everyone at the firm – even in the teams you have never worked in. The firm has a really close-knit culture."

Like all Kirkland trainees, William completed four six-month seats during his two-year training contract. While at least one stint in corporate is compulsory, regular



liaison with the graduate recruitment team ensures that trainees end up in their preferred seats as often as possible. “There is a lot of informal communication between the trainees and Kate Osborne and her team in graduate recruitment,” says Rajinder Bassi, the firm’s graduate recruitment partner. “She’ll know which departments they are interested in and try to cater to their needs. Obviously that’s not always possible, but if we can’t we try to accommodate them in the following seat.”

Kirkland’s approach to the training itself is based very much on the idea of learning by doing. Although there is also a full training programme of presentations and seminars – given by partners from the various different practice groups at the firm – trainees are expected to get stuck into the day-to-day work of the firm from the word go.

“While we put a lot of effort into ensuring that the right balance is struck in the formal training programme and ensuring that the lectures are pitched at the right level, to be frank, that is the relatively easy part of it,” claims Rajinder. “For a trainee, the best way to learn is by sitting with someone, watching them handle conference calls and meetings, watching them do transactions and helping them with the deal or case. That’s one of the key selling points for us in terms of our training contract. Our trainees are part of a small group and get involved in the job straight away, learning as they go, rather than being lost in a much larger team looking on from a distance at what is going on.”

Second-year trainee Naomi Tarawali agrees. “They really throw you in at the deep end,” she enthuses. “Some people might not like that, but personally, I find it a better way to learn. Looking back, I learned an absolutely huge amount in the space of six months in my banking seat – mostly by being told what needed to happen and giving it a

go. You get involved immediately; people pull you into the things that they are working on and take the time to explain to you where you fit in and how your piece of work fits into the overall picture. Then, the more confident you get, the more you are allowed – and are able – to do. I think it’s quite refreshing, because it’s perhaps more merit based than other firms.”

It goes without saying that with such a high level of responsibility placed on these young shoulders, it is vital they feel able to turn to their colleagues and others within the firm for support. “I think probably the best thing I can do is to compare my experiences with those of friends and other firms, because trainees do talk to each other,” says Naomi. “It seems to me that we have an atmosphere here that encourages you to interact with people senior to you in a more relaxed way than you might find elsewhere. They’re more than happy for you to go to them and ask for help, and they are willing to spend the time and teach you.”

In order to ensure that nothing is being missed, there are two assessments in each seat. After three months, the trainees sit down with Kate Osborne or another member of the graduate recruitment team, plus the trainee’s supervisor, to discuss how they are finding things and mull over input from those attorneys who have been working with them. There is then an end of seat assessment with both Kate and Rajinder, where they will go through all the feedback from the past six months.

The team also seeks regular feedback from the current crop of trainees, as well those who have recently qualified, on how they think the training contract suits their needs. Armed with this information, the firm is constantly tweaking its processes and procedures to ensure that it is doing everything it can to give trainees the best possible start to their careers at Kirkland.





"Feedback is taken very seriously and is acted upon as quickly as we can, where we can and where it is appropriate to do so," says Kate Osborne. "We recently had a meeting with all the trainees and it was suggested that we move some of the core skills required of a trainee – such as research, putting together documents and how our systems operate – to the forefront, so that they are more confident when they actually land in their seats. Our trainees are pretty much treated as junior associates from day one, so we need to equip them with the skills that will help them achieve their aims."

Of course, the firm has its own reasons for maintaining such high standards on the training contract. "The programme is still relatively

***“ “
We try to
distinguish
ourselves with
a constant
focus on high-
quality work
in a smaller
setting,
with greater
responsibility
and familiarity
with colleagues
across the
firm – it’s
much more
personalised***



new at Kirkland and the reason we brought it in is because we wanted to develop the best Kirkland lawyers we can," Kate acknowledges. "There is always a risk in recruitment, and while the attorneys we recruit laterally generally come from the top Magic Circle and City firms, nothing beats your own home-grown talent. They know the firm and our clients inside out, and that's invaluable when they get to senior level and make partnership. We keep the intake numbers low so that we are able to offer the best training and retain our trainees on qualification. This year, we've offered associate positions to everybody and we expect that will continue in the future."

In order to land a training contract at Kirkland, hopefuls are encouraged



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Method of application

Online application

Application deadline

Apply by 31 July 2014 for training contracts commencing in 2016

Method of selection

Interview

Work areas

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

Offices

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

What trainees said:

"You are made to feel like part of the team, and the work you are given reflects this. I have been lucky enough to work on a large variety of different matters, and have been given tasks that go far beyond what I would expect to be doing as a trainee."

"The time given to you as a trainee and as an NQ from senior associates and partners is quite amazing. Even during busy periods, people will always welcome you in for a chat and it is a culture which promotes early responsibility – no one minds having lots of responsibility if you feel supported. The responsibility and culture makes it very easy for you to get used to good quality work, so when 'normal' trainee work does come your way it can be frustrating – but when it does, you are generally so involved in the deal you don't mind. Which is far better than being dragged into something you had no involvement in to do the rubbish bits (which rarely happens here)."



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to apply for a vacation placement prior to interview, as this gives both the firm and the applicant the chance to assess each other over a prolonged two-week period. However, Rajinder says the firm fully understands that not everyone can get themselves on a vac scheme and also accepts direct applications for interviews.

"I wouldn't want to say that someone who was not on a vac scheme would not get a training contract, because that is not the case," she underlines. "However, I think that most students recognise that doing a few placements is a sensible approach, as it gives them a better feel for the type of firm that would suit them – for example, a US firm or a UK firm, a small firm or a large firm and so on. Likewise, we get a better sense of the students if they are spending a fortnight with us rather than a round of interviews. While I would say that the vac scheme is important, candidates should certainly not be dissuaded from applying if they have not managed to get on one of our vac schemes."

Likewise, she stresses that the firm is not looking for a particular personality in its applicants, although their attitude to the task ahead is important. "The people at this firm are all very different," she says. "The common thread, however, is their ambition, desire to succeed, willingness to take on responsibility and to learn – to push themselves and be challenged at the highest level."

If you think that is what you are after, then this could just be the firm for you – or so William believes. "If



you're looking for a firm that has the ability to offer high-quality work and is willing to get its trainees involved from day one in real work, while also maintaining a friendly, sociable working environment, I think you can't really go wrong with Kirkland," he sums up.

By Rowan McIntyre

KIRKLAND & ELLIS