



# Burges Salmon

## Bristol-based Burges Salmon scales dizzy heights to reach seventh heaven at the TARAs

We are fast running out of superlatives to describe the recruitment team at Burges Salmon. In the eight years of the LC.N Training and Recruitment Awards, they've landed the Best Recruiter – National/Regional Firm gong a stunning seven times - the last six on the spin - and the firm's growing standing as a leading UK law firm is testament to the success of its strategy to secure and retain top-class talent.

It should come as no surprise, after such a glittering run, that the firm takes recruitment extremely seriously. But while there is a dedicated team spearheading this effort, it is the fact that everyone at the firm understands the importance of the process and plays a part in helping make potential new recruits feel welcome that helps to set Burges Salmon apart from its rivals.

"The support that we get from the rest of the firm makes a real difference," says recruitment officer Natalie Colton. "At open days and assessment centres, the whole firm knows people are coming in and makes a real effort to welcome them. Everyone, from trainees up to partner level, is really involved in the process. They realise that if we don't put the effort in now, the firm will suffer for it in a couple of years' time."

All this effort has paid handsome dividends and the resulting pool of talented lawyers it has produced has seen Burges Salmon grow organically from a regional powerhouse to a law firm of national and international stature, which now considers

itself a direct competitor to anything London and the rest of the UK has to offer.

"We feel we can stand shoulder to shoulder with any firm," claims Natalie. "We're obviously proud we are in Bristol, but we want people to apply to us because of who we are and what we do, not just where we are. Candidates should come here because we have fantastic work, fantastic lawyers, and they can fit into our collaborative culture and help strengthen the team."

One of the first opportunities for aspiring team members to get a taste for the firm is at one of the law fairs that Natalie and her recruitment crew visit at the very beginning of each recruitment cycle. Those interested can then choose one of two routes to a potential training contract: either embarking on the traditional application form/interview process or trying to land a place on a vacation scheme.

Vacation scheme applications must be submitted before the end of January and, according to Natalie, competition is getting more intense every year. She expects to deal with between 700 and 800 applications in the next recruitment round, of which 100 will be selected for two open days at the firm's offices in Bristol. There, the potential trainees will meet current trainees, associates and partners, have lunch and take a tour of the new office building. There are also a number of exercises in areas such as negotiation skills, as well as a partner interview.



While this close-up-and-personal interaction may sound daunting, the firm goes to great lengths to help those on its open days feel relaxed – and not just because it’s trying to be nice. “While we have a well-deserved reputation as a friendly firm, it is because we put a lot of emphasis on making sure that people feel comfortable throughout the process,” explains Natalie. “That is because we’d rather get the best out of candidates than see how they perform under huge amounts of pressure. We want to see the real person and give them a chance to shine and show us what they can do.”

Just as the open days give the firm a chance to get to know applicants a little better, it also gives the applicants a chance to get a feel for Burges Salmon, see whether they are the right firm and decide whether the attraction is mutual.

“In many ways the recruitment process is very much a two-way street,” says Keith Beattie, one of firm’s team of recruitment partners and a member of the projects practice group. “While candidates may not feel it at the time, we are also trying to sell the firm to ensure we attract the best people. We recognise that those we might like to offer a training contract to may well be in the fortunate position of having multiple offers. So we need to make sure they have a full picture of what it’s like here at Burges Salmon, what it’s like to be here as a trainee, to qualify here and to be here long term.”

After the open days, 40 students are invited to take part on one of the four two-week vacation schemes that the firm runs over the summer. These allow potential recruits to develop a taste for different practice areas, attend talks and enjoy a number of social events. Once again, attention to detail from Natalie and her team is key, from sending out Bristol A to Zs to those attending, to asking all firm members if they have any spare rooms or flats to rent out, so that those travelling to Bristol will feel at home.

“The vac scheme is incredibly well organised,” says Kate Osborne, a second-year trainee who took part in one of the work placements before her final year studying law at Bristol University. “It’s also very well tailored to the individual. You are given a current trainee as a mentor and they seemed to have a lot in common with me. Now I’ve been a ‘buddy’ myself, I know how much attention is paid to matching you with someone that has similar interests or a similar background.”

At the end of the vac scheme, all of the applicants will then go through the interview process with those applying via the traditional route. Direct applications must reach the firm by the end of July and numbers received tend to be similar to those for vacation schemes. Once again, these are whittled down, with all applications being carefully considered, and 100 people are invited to assessment centres at the firm’s

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offices. These are similar in structure to the open days, but last only half a day and don't have the partner interview at the end. From the assessment centres, 35 to 40 people are invited back for a formal partner interview.

While at first sight it might appear that those applying through the vac scheme might be favoured at interview, as they have spent more time at the firm, Keith Beattie is keen to point out this isn't the case. “The vacation placement can work both ways,” he says. “It's true that within the scheme we spend a lot of time telling people what the firm is like, what its strategy is; but the flipside is that we would then expect them to have thought about that and understood it properly. A direct applicant who has to rely on information that's been made public and make their own thoughts on how we might interact with the market may offer a different answer, but it could be just as good, if not better.”

An understanding of the business world in which commercial lawyers operate is becoming key to the selection process for many firms these days and Burges Salmon is no exception. But what does this actually mean in practice? “I would expect people, if they're coming to interview, to at least be aware of the main stories from the business sections, to show that they have prepared,” says Keith. “But we would also like them to show that they're capable of understanding and thinking independently. So for any

particular deal, they might understand why it was happening, what was in it for the parties involved and what legal issues may arise as a result. An understanding of the challenges and pressures facing different types of law firm in the current marketplace would also impress.”

Another key reason for Burges Salmon's winning streak is an appreciation that the recruitment process doesn't stop with the offer of a training contract. Natalie and her team go to great lengths to remain in touch with successful applicants, so they continue to feel part of the firm. There is an annual New Year lunch, to which all future and current trainees are invited, and birthday and Christmas cards are sent. This level of communication has been particularly important in recent years as the financial crisis has led to worrying times for some law students.

“One of the things that really stood out for me about the whole process happened after I had accepted my offer,” recalls Kate. “It was the attitude of the firm during the credit crunch. It really struck a chord with me. At the time, future trainees were very vulnerable and the effort put in to make sure our fears were allayed was excellent. I felt secure during the rest of my studies, while I had contemporaries who didn't know where they stood.”

As a final word to anyone contemplating applying to Burges Salmon, Kate is unequivocal: “All I would say is come and



meet the people. Come to a presentation evening or go and visit our stall at a law fair and you will very quickly see what is different from other firms, just through meeting the people who work here.”

By **Rowan McIntyre**



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**Method of application:** Online application form

**Application deadline:** Apply by 31 January 2012 for vacation placements and by 31 July 2012 for training contracts commencing in 2014

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

#### **Work areas**

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

#### **Offices**

Bristol

What trainees said:

***“The firm stood out as being different by being human.”***

***“I found the recruitment process thoroughly enjoyable, despite the nerves! It was clear that the firm wanted to get to know the real ‘me’, and not just my ability to do the job. Even my high expectations of the firm have been surpassed by its friendliness and attitude towards its staff, even in tough economic times.”***

***“The recruitment team is friendly, well informed and exceedingly approachable.”***

***“The recruitment team impressed me with their speed of response and friendliness.”***

***“The recruitment process was great. The firm really opened itself up on the vacation scheme and allowed me to get a real feel for what it would be like to work there. No one was too busy to take time to answer my questions. The recruitment team themselves were also extremely approachable and very good at keeping in contact after I had accepted the offer of a training contract.”***