



Robert Meaton & Co Solicitors

Meetin' Robert Meaton, the charismatic leader of this award-winning bijou firm

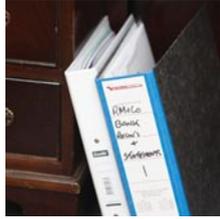
“Dynamism, commitment, verve; a go-getter!” Engaging founder and senior partner of his eponymous firm, Robert Meaton knows what he wants in a trainee – although some might say the list of qualities is a perfect description of the man himself. Robert’s diverse background (as a pilot in the RAF, and a solicitor in private practice and in-house) gives him a wealth of varied experience to pass on. And his bijou firm is receiving lots of attention: in 2010 it received 217 applications for just one training contract – a staggering number for a small firm, and testament to its powers of attraction.

The two-partner practice, founded in 2005 and located in the heart of Manchester, offers a wide range of legal services to commercial and private clients in areas that include employment, commercial property and personal injury. Sam Jackson, one of the current trainees, explains why he decided to apply: “I always wanted to work for a small, local firm. Robert Meaton & Co was just that, but in the centre of Manchester, so it seemed ideal. I emailed in a CV and covering letter, and then got a call to come in for interview a few weeks later.” Claire Symons, now a newly qualified solicitor, is also a fan of the smaller firm. “I initially discovered Robert Meaton & Co on the Law Society website and then had a look at its own site to find out more. I really liked that Robert had worked both in-house and in private practice.” She was also impressed by the forward-thinking approach to its online presence: “The firm’s website was

one of the first I’d seen with a case management area that allows clients to track the progress of a file. I thought it was really innovative and I was impressed.” Indeed, the firm is proud of its technology-driven online services and does not just cater for clients, but is also extending these services to third parties such as accountants and surveyors – making it one of the first firms in the country to do so.

Having almost drowned in a tidal wave of applications this year, Robert is more certain than ever of what he hopes to receive: “The most important thing is an attention-grabbing covering letter. I want to hear from the person why they’re different. I read a lot of boring letters; I don’t need to know what A-levels you got or what senior school you went to. I need to know the university you’re at now and the subjects you’ve done.” He will not be impressed by anything generic – “it needs to be particularised to this firm” – and is keen to learn about you and your interests: “What kind of person are you? What can you bring to the party? My most recently appointed trainee wrote a brilliant covering letter which told me a lot about him and I was immediately interested. In fact, I kept him in the pile despite our person spec not being met completely.”

And while it might seem obvious, you must check your applications before submission. Errors will not be tolerated, says Robert: “All applications are read



scrupulously. There were some absolute howlers this year! If they are full of spelling and grammatical mistakes, they will be binned – you won't even get past the first sift. Lawyers are wordsmiths, so without those basic skills, you are not going to make it."

So, you've impressed with a captivating and error-free CV; the next stage in the process is a scintillating interview. "I spend an hour with each person," explains Robert, "chatting a bit about the firm and then putting them in the driving seat and asking them to sell themselves to me. Some people are a bit shocked, while others are great and get it straight away. The aim is to try to bring out what their hopes and aspirations are." Joe Gilliat, now eight months qualified, gives his impressions of the interview process: "It was just Robert and me, and it was quite relaxed and informal – as opposed to being grilled by a group of panellists across a table, as can happen at other firms. After an explanation of his background and a bit about the firm, he asked various questions about my CV, what I wanted to do and why I wanted to work there." Sam was also relieved to discover that it was "more of a chat than an interrogation".

Similarly, Claire found the interview an indicator of what working at the firm would eventually be like: "Compared with some others I've had with panels and exercises and intimidating questioning, this was a welcome change. Robert was very nice and friendly, and not at all stuffy! I got the feeling

that if I worked here, he would be very approachable, which is so important when you're training – you need to be able to communicate with the people you work with and not be afraid to ask questions. There seemed to be a very relaxed atmosphere throughout the firm."

Something that all three mention as being unique to Robert Meaton & Co is the chance they were given to chat with a current trainee at the end of their interview. Robert says that he doesn't pry into what is discussed: "I want them to feel they can talk at their own peer level and ask whatever they want, and the trainees to feel that they can be totally honest." Sam recalls chatting with a trainee – in this case, Claire – who gave him a different perspective on things. Claire herself recalls asking "what it was really like to train there, about the work and level of supervision, and how everyone got on". Now he is qualified, Joe says he makes sure to speak to each candidate honestly about what it's like to work at the firm: "They seem to really appreciate it, and they go away with a fair impression of the place."

Ultimately, the decision of which lucky candidate will get the prized position is Robert's, but he takes a consultative approach. "I like to have input from the newly qualifieds, the trainees and the office manager, and usually we arrive at a consensus. Because we're small – just 14 people in all – we need to think about the whole team. Whoever I hire needs to fit in –

“At interview, I got the feeling that if I worked here, Robert would be very approachable, which is so important when you're training”



“You get a very thorough interview here, with a fair chance to put yourself across at your best”

there’s no room for prima donnas!”

Unusually, there is a relatively short period between offer, acceptance and arriving fresh-faced for day one of the training contract. “With the economic outlook not so good over the past few years,” explains Robert, “we didn’t want to offer something to then have to withdraw it, as some firms that hire two years in advance were having to do.” The warm and relaxed reception extended to interviewees is mirrored when the trainees arrive. Claire, Joe and Sam all felt that thanks to the firm’s small size, they were able to settle in and get to know their colleagues quickly.

In addition, all three mentioned that being one of only two or three trainees at any given time means that they have been exposed to a broad range of work right from the outset. They each had the opportunity to run their own files at a stage that their contemporaries at larger firms could only dream of. Sam says: “You have a lot of involvement right from the beginning. I now have a couple of my own files, although I am always well supervised. On the one hand, you’re not spoonfed; but on the other, you’re not abandoned in the middle of something you can’t handle.” Sam particularly enjoyed submitting his first bill of costs on his very own financial mis-selling file. Claire says: “People are very approachable – you’re not told to just get on with it. And it is better to have your own files because you get to know the clients, talk to opposing solicitors every

day and communicate with counsel.”

There is no formal seat system at the firm, so again there is a chance to dip into a wide range of areas and matters. “You just do a bit of everything, so you get a really broad experience,” says Joe. “You are allowed to take a file from kick-off to closure. I think that’s much better than doing odds and ends on lots of different files. This way, you get to understand the process much more clearly.” Robert summarises: “A sense of ownership is vital for the trainees – you don’t get the whole picture otherwise. And they always rise to the challenge.”

But it’s not just work – being part of a close-knit team means that the good times and important events are marked as well. Robert says: “We have our own five-a-side football team that plays against other firms. And we go out for drinks together, although I don’t always go because they probably want to have a moan about me! But that’s the spirit we try and engender. We always have a bit of a party when someone qualifies. That person has strived for six or seven years, so you’ve got to make a fuss and validate the achievement.” Joe agrees: “Gaining qualification after a long, hard slog was a great feeling. And Robert takes everyone out for drinks and a meal to celebrate, so that’s really good – your efforts are appreciated!”

Robert thinks that the warm response to the firm’s recruitment practices is because candidates are given a real chance to shine. He explains: “I spend a lot of time on the process. You get a very thorough interview here, with a fair chance to put yourself across at your best. I do make allowances for nervousness and a person will often grow in confidence during the interview.” Unsuccessful candidates are always given feedback and reassured that in having made it to interview stage, they’re in a select group already.



And more broadly, the firm is founded on openness. Robert says that if he had a door (which he doesn't), it would always be open. "We are a happy, friendly firm. I'd be concerned if I didn't hear laughter going on!" Sam comments: "There's always support – you can work alongside colleagues or be as independent as you'd like. And there's a nice range of work as well, both private and commercial. It has definitely lived up to my expectations – I'm enjoying it!" Claire adds: "You quickly feel confident about advising clients. Some of my friends who are at much bigger firms find themselves in very specific seats, where they may not pick up on some issues because they don't get to see the bigger picture. It's fantastic training."

Hospitable recruitment practices, great training, interesting work and a family atmosphere: no surprises why Robert Meaton is at the top of its (his!) game.

By **Isla Grant**



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Method of application: CV and letter

Application deadline: Apply by 31 March 2011 for training contracts commencing in 2011

Method of selection: Interview

Work areas

- Commercial property
- Company & commercial
- Employment
- Landlord & tenant
- Licensing
- Litigation
- Personal injury
- Residential conveyancing
- Wills & probate

Offices

Manchester

What trainees said:

"Because it's a small firm, you get to learn a lot more about a lot more, and everything moves quickly. It's great."

"The firm takes the view that it's difficult to learn if you don't take responsibility for your own files, so as trainees, we run our own files from an early stage."

"The interview was very informal and friendly – a welcome change!"