

LC.N AWARD WINNER 2012

BEST TRAINING PRINCIPAL (LARGE TRAINEE INTAKE) – RICHARD WEBB



It's not easy being a trailblazer. There's all the advance work required, and the unnerving sense that you're out there on your own – but some of us revel in the thrill. This year, for the very first time, LawCareers.Net introduced an award for Best Training Principal, in recognition of those individuals who provide inspiration and leadership to the next generation of lawyers. Based on nominations by trainees and NQs, this year's worthy winner – and early adopter – in the 'Large Trainee Intake' category was Richard Webb of Cobbetts.

Richard graduated with a law degree from Nottingham University, trained with a small firm just outside of Manchester and joined national firm Cobbetts just six months after qualification, in 1989. He has no compunction in claiming, after 22 years at the firm, to be “part of the furniture”. He heads up the banking and finance litigation team and has recently been appointed business group leader for dispute resolution across all of the firm's offices. Also the partner in charge of Cobbetts' debt recovery business, Incasso, and – of course – training principal, it's clear he has many hats to wear.

Richard has worn the training principal hat for some 12 years; it means that he has ultimate responsibility for the recruitment and training of Cobbetts' trainees. “It's a many and varied role,” he explains, “including pastoral care, talking to the trainees about the direction that their careers are going in and providing guidance to help shape their futures in line with the future of the firm. I'm there at every end-of-seat appraisal, but I obviously see them much more than that on an informal basis.”

Louisa Dentith, learning and development manager, works closely with the well-oiled machine that is the graduate recruitment team, which includes graduate recruitment manager Katherine Elam. Louisa comments on Richard's ability to balance his firm-wide responsibilities



with his training role: “Richard has a great handle on how the firm works and on what trainees need to do in our business to be successful. He is very senior, but he has such an easy manner and always has time for the trainees. He has regular reviews with them about their development, which complement the courses that we run. They all feel comfortable chatting to him because he’s just so approachable. You don’t get that in every firm.”

Third-seat trainee Sean Monk is in total agreement: “Despite his recent appointment, Richard still finds the time to meet with us and speak at events. He is very approachable for somebody that is so senior within the firm. And he’s held in very high regard, which I think is testament to his people skills.”

One of the many things that attracted Sean to Cobbetts at the outset were the representatives whom he met on campus: “They gave a warts-and-all account of what it was like to work in law, with the overriding impression being that everyone at Cobbetts works hard and is happy to do so.” Having secured his training contract, he was further impressed by the firm’s LPC+ at The College of Law in Manchester. Cobbetts was one of the first to sign up to the bespoke course, and the decision to do so was very much driven by Richard. Louisa outlines the benefits for both the firm and future trainees: “The LPC+ is great for the trainees. They learn together and work as a team to deliver a business project so by the time they join the firm, they really do know each other. The natural competitiveness between trainees is lessened because of their friendships and their strong network, which helps them to feel supported during the training contract. From a more strategic point of view, not only does the LPC+ make the trainees more productive in the business from day one, it has longer-term benefits in that the strong relationships formed at trainee level continue throughout

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the trainees’ careers, helping with cross-referral of work. Knowing, liking and trusting one another really helps with business development.” Sean confirms this: “It was great doing the LPC+ together and having significant involvement from partners, giving real-life context to what we were doing in the classroom. You get to meet everybody before you start and you’re not fazed by talking to senior members of the firm.”

Another important initiative designed to help trainees gain the full set of lawyerly arts is the Cobbetts Young Professionals (CYP) scheme. “We launched CYP about eight years ago,” says Richard. “Our trainees and junior lawyers organise events throughout the year, building contacts with peer groups among accountants, surveyors, banks and corporate clients. It’s been very successful and unique when compared to other firms.” Louisa adds: “The idea is that the trainees reach out to other professionals in the region through various activities and events. It’s great for refining their own business development skills and starting to think about forming a network of contacts – we also hope that it brings a return for the firm in the future.”

The firm also runs Get Networked for its Manchester trainees and newly qualified solicitors. “It encourages them to go to external networking events,” says Louisa. “They then come back to the office and get help from a partner to set up meetings with any new contacts.” Sean concurs: “We’re helped to get out there and go to events with peers in different sectors to develop those connections from an early stage. Compared to trainees at other firms, we’re very well supported.” Trainees are also “urged to have a great deal of interaction with clients, formally as a part of the provision of advice but also at the broader level of business development”, says Richard.

With a five-month, five-seat system in place, trainees have ample



opportunity to experience different practice areas. Currently in the banking department, Sean charts his progress so far: “The seamless integration on the LPC+ – where we met each other and our supervisors, and used the same documents and precedents that we use at the firm – meant that the transition from classroom to office was made much easier. What’s more, with the buddy scheme, you have a current trainee to go to with your ridiculous questions!”

Louisa explains that the trainees are very much a part of the team, from day one: “The quality of training here is great – it’s even acknowledged as such by other firms, who consistently rate our trainees highly. And trainees aren’t just another pair of hands – they are involved with interesting work in a supportive environment, which makes a big difference. The firm is ambitious and striving to be recognised – that ambition gives everyone the chance to contribute and put ideas on the table.” Sean is a good example of someone not afraid to make suggestions for improved systems: “Richard in particular is very receptive to ideas that we have, including ways to improve the LPC+ and to go about attacking graduate recruitment in different ways. For example, my intake of trainees was invited into the firm to discuss how to use LinkedIn to better promote ourselves and the firm. Not one of my ideas has been shot down yet; you really feel that you’re listened to.”

Attendees on the firm’s vacation schemes are also part of the conversation. “We hadn’t run vacation schemes for a number of years,” says Richard, “but I was very keen to restore them when I took over as training principal. They’ve become more refined and sophisticated as the years have gone by, in line with the needs of both students and the business. It’s a hugely important part of the recruitment process; around three-quarters of our trainees are recruited from the schemes. We actively seek feedback from students



on the schemes and we’ve made a number of changes over the years based on those comments. We’re always keen to hear from people.”

And while he makes no claims for IT supremacy, Richard recognises that harnessing new technology is important: “We are very active on Facebook and on Twitter, and we’ve even done interviews via Skype with students who are travelling around the world. Using these forums is hugely important, given the generation that we’re trying to attract.” Added to which is an awareness of the need to keep up with professional changes: “The Legal Education and Training Review has been on our agenda for a couple of years. Through good links with The College of Law, we’ve been thinking about how we may have to alter our schemes in the future. We’re alive to some of the issues about broadening access, looking at apprenticeship schemes, and paralegal and CILEx qualifications.”

Richard reveals what he perceives as the secrets to the firm’s success in the recruitment and training arena: “The feedback we get about the firm from students and trainees is that there’s a genuine feel of camaraderie and team spirit that is immediately obvious when you come to the firm. People are here to support you and want to see you develop as a person and a lawyer. The values we talk about are genuinely lived out. Plus, at the end of the day, trainees get quality work and great client contact too.”

Louisa summarises what many have expressed about Richard’s pivotal role: “He has such a strong commitment to the process and would give up any of his time to help a trainee. He really helps shape their careers. He’s very visible as well; if there are drinks or an event happening, he’s always there.” As someone who is benefiting directly from having such a dynamic mentor, Sean is in a perfect position to comment: “Richard is the person that every trainee looks up to. He’s

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Method of application

Online application form

Application deadline

Apply by 31 July 2013 for training contracts commencing in 2015

Method of selection

Assessment centre and interview

Work areas

- Banking
- Business recovery & insolvency
- Charities
- Commercial
- Real estate
- Company secretarial services
- Construction & engineering
- Cooperative and mutual services
- Corporate
- Dispute resolution
- Employment
- German team
- ICT & media
- Intellectual property
- International services
- Licensing & regulatory
- Litigation services
- Pensions
- Planning & environmental
- Private client services
- Property finance
- Public markets
- Public services
- Social housing
- Taxation

Offices

Birmingham, Leeds, London, Manchester

What trainees said

“Richard Webb is a fantastic training principal. He is approachable and personable. Richard is always willing to help trainees out with any queries or questions they may have. I wouldn't think twice about giving Richard a call or popping to his desk to get his opinion on something. He is extremely good at providing direction for trainees, whether you are looking at your next seat, your training contract or your career.”

“While Richard is friendly and approachable he is also exceptionally

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good at his job, and as such provides the perfect role model to those embarking upon their career in law. He makes time to listen to concerns or queries and offers reasoned, sound, practical advice. Richard's happy, positive outlook makes him a pleasure to work with.”

“Excellent training principal. Very approachable and actively seeks out new initiatives for trainees at the firm. Always extremely helpful and provides good guidance.”

“He is approachable, well respected and genuinely cares about the progress and the welfare of trainees.”

“Richard is a wonderful training principal. He is very approachable, friendly and inspirational. He is easy to talk to and is very open and honest whenever he speaks to us. He's a very level-headed and sensible man and I look up to him very much.”



been involved with the firm and the trainees for such a long time, but he still has such passion and energy. He makes sure that we're looked after and that Cobbetts is everything that a trainee could hope for.”

The final word must go to the man of the hour – when pressed on why he thought he'd won this award, Richard is bashful: “I am delighted to have received the award and embarrassed by some of the written observations, which were terribly kind! My view is that it's about relating to people. I strive to always find the time to talk to trainees and those who are aspiring to join this fabulous firm and this outstanding profession.” Richard Webb – making trailblazing look easy.

By Isla Grant

