



Ashurst LLP

Finding the one: Ashurst has the secret to a long and happy relationship

Love may be blind, but when committing your future to a law firm it is best to go in with eyes open. As with all solid and lasting relationships, personality is key to keeping the flame alive beyond those heady honeymoon days. But for those without first-hand experience of the City's top law firms, the idea of distinct differences in personality between the key players may seem rather abstract. When the time comes to apply for training contracts, most wannabe lawyers will have spent sufficient time swotting up on their prospective employers to have a basic grasp of each firm's particular strengths and market position, but few have any real handle on a firm's true identity. However, those of you who delve a little deeper will surely find your efforts rewarded when you find the perfect match for your own character and ambitions.

"There is no doubt that law firms have their own culture and that some firms have gained a reputation for being stuffy and aggressive," explains David Carter, who has been the partner responsible for graduate recruitment at Ashurst since 2002. "Our culture does not arrive simply as a by-product of providing legal services. We have a culture that primarily looks at how we treat each other and how our team treats other people. We think it is important to nurture and protect that culture."

As a four-time winners of LC.N's Best Recruiter – Large City Firm award, Ashurst clearly understands the difference between a

carefully cultivated public image and a genuine culture grown organically through intelligent recruitment. David believes that if they strive to be honest with candidates and treat employees well, good publicity will look after itself: "I try and help people understand why, by coming to Ashurst, they are giving themselves the opportunity of doing something slightly different. We compete with the very biggest firms without compromising our ideals. We also have very good word of mouth: people who have been in contact with the firm always seem to rate us highly and feel compelled to pass that on."

For Jessica Higginson, a trainee in her first seat with the firm, it was this open and affable culture that ultimately made it easy to choose Ashurst over her other potential suitors: "I was looking for a large City firm with international prospects and with a high profile and impressive client base. At the interview, I really clicked with the partners and I simply felt there was some chemistry. As a firm, Ashurst seems to recognise the importance of personality and understand that the best way of seeing what a candidate is like is actually getting them in and having a good chat."

David can confirm just that: "We have found that the most effective way to choose between a large number of excellent candidates is through the personality-led elements of the recruitment process, and we have let it evolve to reflect that. We do interviews; we don't do tests. We have kept



all the elements that show us in our best light and allow the applicant to do the same. What you really want is people to relax and do their best.”

With over 2,800 applications this year for 50 places – something of a record even for this City heavyweight – this is easier said than done. Stephen Trowbridge, the graduate recruitment and development manager, has worked alongside David for six years and has a similarly pragmatic approach: “One of the reasons we don’t use aggressive testing methods is because we’re not interested just in how someone performs on the day. We’re recruiting people who are going to start working for us in two to three years’ time. The person we make an offer to is not the person who is going to walk through the door on day one of their training contract. We’re really looking for people who have the potential to become the kind of trainees – and the kind of lawyers – that we want in the future. They may not be the people who do the slickest presentation or get the highest test score on an interview day. We’re looking to really get to know the candidate: what makes them tick, how they think and how they apply themselves. The rest will come.”

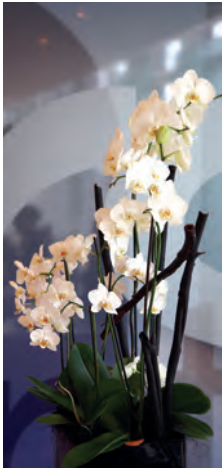
For those who plan a little further ahead, Ashurst’s vacation schemes have become a prime recruiting ground and a golden opportunity to get a foot in the door. The firm offers a two-week scheme at Easter (for non-lawyers) and a two or three-week scheme in the summer. David explains the

rationale: “If we offer you a placement, we are looking at you with a view to giving you an offer of a contract. The vacation scheme is in effect a three-week interview. You will be sitting with some of the partners from our trainee interviewing committee. These individuals are very good at knowing who they would give a job to after 40 minutes, so it is even better for them to have two or three weeks with a candidate to see if they are the right fit.”

Jonathan Firmston joined the firm through the vacation scheme route, having first come across Ashurst when studying at Exeter, where the firm sponsored the university tennis team. Eighteen months down the line, Jonathan feels that the culture is exemplified by the way that the departments are structured, so that even the newest recruits are fully utilised and highly valued: “From the start, you are shown that you are part of a team. Just as instructions are passed down through the ranks, there is a lot of feedback that can be passed back up too. Some transactions involve hundreds of documents at different stages of drafting or which are being shown to the lawyers, a process which trainees are very involved in. Trainees passing information to the senior lawyers should not only be reactive but proactive in spotting issues – it has to be a team effort.”

While this might sound like someone simply paying lip service to the trainee handbook, Jonathan’s working diary to date confirms that plenty of responsibility

“I try and help people understand why, by coming to Ashurst, they are giving themselves the opportunity of doing something slightly different”



“From the start, you are shown that you are part of a team”

entrusted to the best candidates. “In my private equity seat, I flew to Guernsey on my own to complete a deal,” he recalls. “Initially we spent a week getting all the documents ready in London. I then flew over and held a number of board meetings with the various directors. As a trainee you know the deal quite well, so I was able to answer most of their questions and talk them through the papers that they were signing. I then came back to complete the document process in London, visiting the client and the other side without the supervision of a partner or a senior associate; so that was quite a responsibility, but very rewarding.”

Equally impressive is the degree of support that trainees can expect from Stephen’s team, who are always on hand for impromptu counselling sessions. “We’re essentially the human resources department for current trainees, so we are always there to lend an ear and offer support and guidance to trainees who have any problems,” says Stephen. “Thankfully, this doesn’t happen very often, but it’s important to be honest about it. Trainees can find things a little overwhelming initially and some will always come to me for a chat and tell me how useless they feel. This couldn’t be further from the truth and I work hard to reassure them that everyone feels like that from time to time – including me!”

The human side of the firm is ultimately what makes Ashurst stand out from the crowd and is strengthened by the close

bonds between partners, trainees and everyone in between. Jonathan mentions a departmental ‘away day’ that he attended as a prime example of Ashurst’s special brand of camaraderie: “The entire global department came together for the weekend at a smart hotel in the centre of Berlin. You are there to work, but there is a lot of fun to be had too. It is a very relaxed affair and generally the partners have the most fun out of everyone! I think that sums up the firm, actually: we are a top firm and everyone is extremely good at what they do, but they are also able to have fun.”

David’s approach to life at the firm certainly seems to suggest that an alliance with Ashurst is likely to withstand the test of time: “We try very hard to enjoy our lives and to enjoy the fact that we are lucky to be doing things that are interesting, intellectually challenging and at the forefront of the sphere that we choose to operate in. We encourage our assistants to think of themselves as the future trustees of this firm.”

For further information visit www.ashurst.com or telephone **020 7638 1111**.

By **Tom Gillett**