



Mills & Reeve LLP

A perfect blend of ingredients gives a true flavour of the legal lifestyle

Those in the know may be hailing London as the new culinary capital of the world, but life in the Big Smoke is certainly not to everyone's taste. Just as some will prefer the lamb balti on Manchester's Curry Mile to that found in the Square Mile, some lawyers prefer to sink their teeth into the choice cuts of legal work outside of the capital. So it is for those at Mills & Reeve, the majority of whom ply their trade outside the M25.

Garnering more plaudits than Gordon Ramsay, the firm has scooped LC.N's Best Work Placement Scheme – Regional Firm award for the past three years and clearly understands the importance of keeping things fresh on its annual vacation scheme. The firm has offices in Birmingham, Cambridge and Norwich, each of which takes 10 successful applicants for a two-week placement every year. While some larger competitors open their doors to scores of students throughout the summer months, Mills & Reeve has opted for a highly selective approach to ensure that the whole firm is bubbling over with enthusiasm at the prospect of meeting their potential future colleagues and offering them a veritable smorgasbord of legal experience. If you are lucky enough to become one of these charmed few, there is certainly no danger of being met with either apathy or, worse still, a mountain of photocopying.

Perhaps more importantly, the firm sets itself apart from competitors through the structure of the scheme itself. Brian

Marshall, a partner in the firm's corporate department who has now held the role of training principal for over six years, sees the firm's hands-on, practical approach as its principal strength: "We are aware that on other vac schemes, there is a lot of 'chalk and talk'-style lecturing. The students attend a large number of seminars, with senior counsel telling them what the firm is about or how to be a good lawyer. We actively try to move away from that towards participation, so that they get through right in to the inner sanctum as if they were trainees and experience the firm from the inside, rather than being kept at a distance."

Mills & Reeve's graduate recruitment team is well aware of the value of the summer placement scheme, both to budding lawyers in the final throes of their educational careers and to their own recruitment policy. Indeed, 75% of those offered training contracts with the firm last year had previously completed a vacation scheme. "First and foremost, our vacation scheme gives students the opportunity both to discover whether a career in the law is for them and to show us what they can do," explains Brian. "Ultimately, the key thing to remember is that the vacation scheme is our preferred method of recruiting trainees. We get to see the students at close quarters for two weeks, in addition to the initial interview process. This is an extremely reliable recruitment method, because you get a much wider set of inputs from across the firm about a candidate's suitability."



The secret of the vac scheme's success is that it mirrors the various elements of a training contract and gives participants a true flavour of life with the firm. Over the two-week period, students can look forward to gaining genuine experience of four different departments in two-day 'mini-seats'. Vac schemers can expect to be thrown in at the deep end in any of the firm's myriad of specialist departments.

Natasha Bingle, who is now coming to the end of her training contract at Mills & Reeve, took part in the scheme during her final year at Exeter University. "I completed seats in private client, employment, property and regulatory health," she recalls. "I was involved with real cases and enjoyed the client contact. In private client, I attended a client meeting in relation to the drafting of a will and helped to schedule deeds. In regulatory health, I worked alongside a partner researching case law including research related to consent for treatment. My time in regulatory health was fantastic – it was just so interesting on a human level, because the cases all related to patients and real-life issues."

Natasha can pinpoint winning a place on the scheme as a turning point in her legal career. "At uni you tend to focus on the theoretical side of the law, whereas the vacation scheme lets you see it put into practice. For example, it gave me an insight into dealing with very technical documents so I could immediately see the importance of attention to detail. The firm takes the

time to find out what you are interested in. When we were given tasks, someone would take the time to explain the background and how your work fits into the bigger picture."

With over 400 applications received last year and only 10 places available in each office, the application process is just as rigorous as for those applying directly for a training contract. "In fact, there is no difference at all between the two applications. Both comprise aptitude tests, an interview and a group exercise," outlines Brian. "It is about finding the best candidates and this can be tricky, as the grades and levels of experience are always fairly consistent. At the interview stage we are looking for those who can look beyond the most obvious answers. We expect candidates to go further than simply visiting the website and pulling out facts. It is vital for applicants to give us the correct answers while also distinguishing themselves somehow from the other candidates."

Fiona Medlock is the graduate recruitment manager and has been with the firm since 1985. She is the first point of contact for students and ensures she is always onsite at the various offices at the beginning of each scheme. With seven years' experience of managing the recruitment process, she understands that by treating vac schemers just like first-year trainees, she can ensure that they get the most out of the experience. "On the first day, we run an induction that includes IT training and a tour of the library so

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that they can work as efficiently as possible and get stuck in. They also get their own email account so everyone feels included and part of the daily running of the firm.”

It is this inclusive and welcoming environment that persuaded Natasha to pursue a career with the firm. “I did another vac scheme in the City, but Mills & Reeve stood out because the people in the office were just so friendly; plus the buddy system worked very well.” Upon arrival, all students are partnered with a buddy, who provides a support system over the course of the placement. The buddies also take charge of the social activities for wannabe trainees. As a current trainee who qualifies into the commercial department in September, Natasha has now seen the buddy system from both sides. “On my vac scheme, we went for a meal with the trainees, explored the delights of Birmingham City Centre as part of a treasure hunt and there were several informal drinks. As a trainee, you see the real value of this system from the other perspective. The vac schemers certainly seem to be much less daunted by the social events because they know that they can always go and find their buddy.”

Having sampled the delights of more than one office, Natasha feels that she chose well and certainly has no desire to swap places with friends at City firms. “Now I have spent two years as a trainee in both the Birmingham and Cambridge offices, I know that I made the right choice by joining Mills &

Reeve. During my training contract, I have been involved with so many interesting projects and activities. My professional highlight would be project managing a sale and purchase transaction from the initial client instruction, drafting the actual agreements right through to completion. I am qualifying into the commercial department because I really enjoy drafting documents. I should get to do lots of technical work and have plenty of client contact.”

Natasha has also taken full advantage of the extra-curricular side of the firm, which encourages a multitude of activities designed to get to know your colleagues. “On a social level, there is so much going on. I have really enjoyed the Mills & Reeve charity challenges. Last year we climbed Helvellyn in the Lake District, followed by a 20-mile cycle and an eight-mile canoe, all in one day. This year I took part in the Cambridge Chariots of Fire race – a relay race where each of your colleagues runs 1.7 miles through the centre of Cambridge. Amazing to think that this all came about due to a two-week summer work placement!”

For further information visit
www.mills-reeve.com
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By **Tom Gillett**