



# Covington & Burling LLP

## An award for Best Recruiter equals double success for this US firm.

Covington & Burling LLP, one of Washington DC's most august and established law firms, set up shop in London in 1988. The move was intended to serve a small number of international clients requiring the firm's regulatory expertise in Europe. But the London base grew exponentially and expanded into other practice areas. Several years ago the office was ready to take on its own trainees, under a system designed by senior lawyers Richard Mattick and Louise Nash. In 2005 the firm won a LawCareers.Net award for its training and it now proudly boasts a sister award for Best Recruiter – US Firm in the City.

The firm's training award recognised its commitment to sitting trainees with partners to expose them to the highest level of work. While a number of other firms across the City employ the same technique, Covington's partner commitment is – unusually – mirrored in the recruitment process. "It's reflective of our flat structure," says Grant Castle, the head of graduate recruitment and training principal (and partner with a heavyweight food and drug regulatory practice). "For example, I typically have my trainees working on litigation matters, white collar crime, some internal investigation/enforcement matters, commercial, transactional matters, as well as my regulatory practice. In doing that it's not unusual for my trainee to work for six other partners during the seat."

Jane Anthony, first-year trainee, relishes this flexibility. "I think you get out of the

training contract what you put in. If you are prepared to work hard and take on responsibility, a variety of interesting work and responsibility will be given to you," she says, adding that it's a trend seen across US firms in London where, although office size is generally smaller, clients are just as prestigious as those served by the magic circle. Grant, who trained at a magic circle firm before moving to Covington, says, "Being on speaking terms with everyone within the practice area regardless of their position wasn't my experience when I trained."

The other difference, of course, is the firm's practice, which is unlike almost every other firm in the City. As one of the traditional Washington firms, Covington has a well-heelled regulatory, policy and appellate litigation practice. It has since diversified and offers a full range of corporate, litigation and other services, but remains pre-eminent in regulation. "I think that's quite unusual," says Grant. "Most of the big City firms focus on mainstream corporate and financial services work. We have a very proud tradition of excelling in regulatory, policy and advisory fields, which we will always have. While continuing to build on our strengths in these areas, we have expanded our relationships with our clients and have developed successful corporate, litigation, commercial and other practices, which means we are able to offer trainees a full-service experience with a difference. I think this matters to people keen on avoiding the



cookie-cutter approach to law.”

Grant looks out for candidates who have a demonstrable interest in this unique practice, together with the proactive attitude necessary to make a success out of the flexible training contract – and his firm’s recruitment strategy echoes this type of search. At many other City firms, interviewees usually meet only HR staff in the first round; at Covington, Jane was interviewed by two partners straight away. Then, in her second-round interview, she debated terrorism legislation with a partner and a pair of associates. “It was thoroughly enjoyable,” she says. “I didn’t notice the time passing at all. It was like discussing politics with my friends in the pub!”

Grant is pleased to hear that an interviewee found it such an informal process. He works hard to ensure the firm’s approachable atmosphere is transplanted into the interview room, especially when partners are involved, to give candidates a true impression of the firm. “Because of our flat structure,” he asserts, “trainees have to be comfortable working with people at all levels and we all need to be comfortable working with them.” While the firm has developed this canny recruitment strategy to suit its training process, it continues to develop, although Grant has systems in place to keep any changes in check. “Everyone involved in the process (and that’s most people in the office!) gets together to talk about the candidates we have interviewed. We inevitably also discuss possible improvements to our recruitment programme. We’re constantly exchanging ideas.” One potential addition is the introduction of some form of reasoning test, used to delve further into the way candidates’ minds work. “If we do go down that route, it’ll only be after most of the fee earners are subjected to it,” Grant adds.

Emma Richardson, the member of the HR team responsible for graduate recruitment, reveals another important aspect of the interview day: interviewees are always invited to lunch with trainees, junior associates and even partners. “It’s yet another dynamic to the process,” she notes. “It’s a good opportunity for the candidates to come in and



get a real feel for the firm. And it provides junior associates and trainees with a chance to take a look at the candidates as well.”

For Covington, recruitment is so important to its business model that having a range of people involved in the process is essential. “The single most important thing we do is make sure we hire the right people, whether they’re trainees or associates or lateral partners. We also want them to be certain that we are right for them. It’s really only by meeting us that people can be certain of the firm’s culture. With senior lateral hires, that will mean meeting a lot of us,” says Grant. He recently interviewed a potential lateral hire from another firm who had already been seen by a number of partners from the San Francisco, New York and London offices. “We obviously don’t expect our trainees to meet so many of us but we still need to be satisfied that we are right for each other,” says Grant. That’s why the firm involves partners at such an early stage and exposes candidates to lawyers from a range of levels. Usually, a single candidate will see between six and nine partners or senior lawyers as part of the two-round interview process, which involves a debate on a topical issue and a range of associates and trainees will come to the lunch. All are consulted for their opinions on whether candidates are likely to be a good fit. “Often the comments are about the way candidates interact with each other as well as with members of the firm,” he notes. “That’s incredibly valuable.”

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Because Grant and his colleagues take recruitment so seriously, they expect the same effort from candidates. During the recruitment drive for the 2009 intake, Grant interviewed a “bright and engaging” candidate who had not only “spent time learning about the firm and the way we approach training, but had also taken time to scrutinise a deal that I’d worked on”. Shortly before the interview, Grant had conducted regulatory due diligence on a biotech company that his corporate colleagues were listing on AIM. In addition to reading about the deal and the press coverage, she had also thought about the commercial and regulatory issues involved. “She was able to ask insightful questions on a particular issue that we had spent some time thinking and worrying about,” he recalls. “It was particularly interesting because she wasn’t a law graduate and because a lot of what I was saying was challenged. I felt like I’d been given a grilling!” Grant was on the phone to the star candidate the following morning to offer her a training contract. “She set herself apart from the rest,” he says. Combine an excellent academic record with genuine interest in business and commercial awareness, then top it with entrepreneurial spirit and the desire to succeed – and you have a perfect Covington trainee.

Creating the correct blend of six such trainees with the firm’s other characters is nothing less than alchemy. While the most



important part of the process is finding the finest ingredients (a recruitment award confirms that the firm excels here), it’s also essential to mix them together correctly. So to support the firm’s personalities and its collegiate, friendly atmosphere, trainees are assigned a buddy upon arrival, usually a mid-level associate who can address any concerns. (Reflective of the firm’s flat structure, even students on summer placements are given this level of attention.) Emma reveals, “The buddy system is really important: it can stop minor things from becoming real issues because there’s naturally more openness with somebody of a level closer to your own.”

Jane knows that the balance of atmosphere and character has to be just right. Adding social exploits into the mix is always useful and Covington lawyers play as hard as they work. Jane explains: “We are very sociable and organise a lot of events; there isn’t the tendency towards cliquishness and exclusivity that you can find in some firms.” She goes on to list the bi-weekly drinks trolley, the summer and Christmas parties, the biennial retreat and the regular dinner and drinks events, as well as sporting endeavours from softball and netball to sailing and running. The social activities, the buddy system and the flat-structure training contract – all were what Jane was looking for. As she says, “This is the environment that I felt most suited my personality.”

Whether they’re on a sports team or not, lawyers at Covington know that a firm’s success stems from the sum of its teammates. Such attention to detail is evinced not only in the outstanding training system – supported by the non-hierarchical structure – but also in the award-winning recruitment process. “Trainees have to be the right fit for us,” says Grant. “We’re recruiting people who will be our long-term colleagues.”

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By **Adam Smith**



“**The single most important thing we do is make sure we hire the right people.**”