



# Burges Salmon

## No stranger to success, this Bristol firm shares the secrets behind four consecutive wins

Burges Salmon is a prize catch. Four LawCareers.Net awards in a row officially prove it is not just a matter of luck: this firm has got it very right when it comes to recruitment. The secrets of its success are simple – it values its people and places great importance on attracting and retaining the very best.

Renowned for consistently winning some of the best talent in the business, Burges Salmon tempts people away from the City by offering top-drawer work along with a relaxed Bristol lifestyle. The firm's graduate recruitment manager Katy Main and recruitment partner David Hall agree that this is the perfect combination for those who are keen to escape the frenetic pace of London without compromising on quality of work. David speaks from experience, having himself been lured away from a magic circle firm: "We get the big trophy clients here, but we're small enough to attract a wide variety of subject matters and cases. Lawyers get to see a much larger span of work than they might at other firms, which is really appealing." Trainee Charles Delaney echoes these sentiments: "For anyone who wants a life outside of work, this is probably one of the best places to be in the country. There's a competitive salary, a great lifestyle and excellent quality of work."

After four consecutive years of success, it's no surprise that continual reviews of the firm's application procedure play a big part in keeping the firm one step ahead of the competition. Katy explains how they continue to innovate: "We conduct a formal review at the end of

each recruitment cycle. The whole team – including recruitment partners and trainees – sits down to talk through the entire process and we look for areas that need changing. As well as this formal review, we tweak things as we go along. We receive feedback from candidates on whatever we do – be that presentations, assessment centres or vacation schemes – so sometimes things will need changing there and then." David sees the benefits year on year of this comprehensive review process: "We always have new ideas about ways we can improve. One year we decided to introduce a more technical question into the interview and another year we decided to make the vacation scheme applications more formal to ensure consistency."

The integration of the recruitment team within the rest of the firm is another reason why David thinks the process works so effectively. "The human resources team here is a real part of the firm. They take pride in what they do and recognise the value they add by bringing in these excellent people. Therefore, when they are going about their job, they are really able to sell the culture of the firm."

An unusual six-seat rotation is another draw to the Burges Salmon training contract. By offering two seats above the usual four, trainees are given greater opportunities to try out different areas of practice before they decide where to qualify. Trainees confirm that four months spent in each department is long enough to get a feel for the subject, but not too long if you decide it's not for

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you. More seats means an inevitable headache for the human resources team in terms of admin. Katy says: “From our point of view it is harder work organising the extra seats, but the benefits for trainees definitely outweigh the negatives. The seat rotation is one of our selling points and one that trainees consistently say is a key reason why they choose to work at Burges Salmon.”

With all this on offer, it’s no wonder that applicants are queuing up to train at the firm. Sifting through the mountain of forms is no small task. Over and above the usual academics, Katy keeps a keen eye out for individuality and flair. David agrees: “It’s nice to see some personality coming through in a candidate’s answers – not things that are consciously controversial, but a glimpse of the person behind the application.” Katy is impressed by candidates who can ace the whole application form, from carefully considered answers to perfect spelling and grammar. “It sounds really basic, but so many people overlook the fundamentals. A candidate who ticks all the boxes – has the academics, the work experience, extra-curricular activities and a good set of reasons why they are interested in commercial law – would really stand out. Especially if they manage to do all this without regurgitating our brochure! It’s amazing how many people don’t manage to pull this off.” Committed to diversity, Burges Salmon is open to applications from career-changers too. Katy says: “We’ve got quite a lot of people here who’ve worked in other jobs

such as marketing, surveying, management consulting... We find that they’re able to bring another set of experiences to the role, which can be hugely beneficial.”

But impressing recruiters on paper is only half the battle: there’s still the daunting interview to master. David says: “I’m most impressed by people who speak with a bit of passion, who can engage me in a natural conversation and convince me that they’ve really given some thought to their future career and their desire to work here.” Relaxing in a training contract interview is not always easy – something which the firm fully appreciates. Katy continues: “The procedure itself is fairly straightforward – we don’t have any trick questions. It’s not our aim to get people so stressed that they can’t perform to the best of their ability.” A coffee with trainees and a tour of the firm help to put candidates at ease and allow them to find out more about what the firm is really like. David is similarly keen to emphasise that intimidating candidates is never on the agenda: “We’re not trying to see how people react to pressure; we’re more interested in finding out about the person – what motivates them to a career in commercial law and why they’re interested in our firm. The hope is that in a friendly environment, we can get to know a bit about them as people by the end of it.”

Giving future recruits a real picture of the firm is important, as it helps them to decide whether the firm is right for them as well. This

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is where the vacation scheme is invaluable, because candidates get to spend some time in the office to see what happens day to day. Meeting a range of people from the firm is all part of the process and the friendly attitude was what won over Charles: “Everyone I came into contact with during my two weeks was really friendly and took the time out to come and meet me. During a vacation scheme at another firm I’d felt I was a bit of an inconvenience, but the opposite was true here. The atmosphere was welcoming from the start – from the second I walked in, I was greeted on the door and given an itinerary setting out the plan for my stay.”

Coffee breaks and chance meetings in the corridors are not the only opportunities for candidates to mix with current trainees. Katy involves trainees in the recruitment process as much as possible and finds their input invaluable: “I wouldn’t be able to do what I do without them. At a law fair I can’t possibly speak to every single person who comes to the stand, so the information I get from trainees is vital.” Trainees are often the most useful people for students to speak to, because they are in the best position to explain what training at Burges Salmon is really like. For Charles, positive feedback from trainees really boosted his faith in the quality of the firm’s training: “All the trainees I spoke to were really friendly and seemed genuinely positive about working here. I thought that if they are happy, this must be a good place to work.” And the good vibes didn’t stop after Charles had accepted his training contract: the firm kept in touch during the two years before he started by sending birthday and Christmas cards, newsletters and invitations to social events.

But getting the best candidates in the door and onto a training contract is only the beginning. Supporting trainees during their two years with the firm is crucial to long-term staffing strategies. Katy and David believe that combining structured support with an informal open-door policy is the best way to ensure that help is always close at hand. Charles agrees: “It’s a good way of resolving any problems and it helps that we’re able to speak honestly and openly about any difficulties we might be having.”

The firm’s congenial working environment helps not only in attracting the cream of the crop, but in retaining them too. Katy says: “People here work hard and are dedicated to their work, but they do have a life outside of the office and they’re able to make the most of it.” There is no great divide in terms of seniority either. Junior members of the team work side by side with partners, a point that Charles is keen to emphasise. “I have a lot of contact with the partners. At the moment I sit between two partners and the atmosphere is very relaxed – one is Australian, so we’ve been having plenty of banter about the cricket.” And the camaraderie is not restricted to the office – Charles regularly plays football and cricket with another of the partners.

Socialising plays its part in creating the warm atmosphere at Burges Salmon and sporting activities feature high on the agenda. Charles explains: “People here are quite outdoorsy – there’s always a lot going on, from football and rugby teams to inter-departmental volleyball matches. For less physically taxing activities, our offices are just across the road from the bars, for when people fancy a post-work pint.” But with the firm’s relocation to new Quayside premises (a short distance from Bristol city centre) imminent, staff will soon be swapping their local for a new watering hole. As well as providing a spacious new home for employees, the move will assist the firm in meeting its commitment to reducing its carbon footprint. Various environmentally friendly initiatives are being implemented for the building, including using harbour water as a heat exchanger/cooling system and recycling rain water.

Will the new development be enough to guarantee Burges Salmon a fifth consecutive award in 2010? Who can tell – but added to the friendly environment, enviable lifestyle, top-notch work and innovative recruitment strategies, it suggests there’s every chance this firm will continue its winning streak.

For further information visit [www.burges-salmon.com](http://www.burges-salmon.com) or telephone **0117 902 7797**.

By **Claire Butler**

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