



Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom (UK) LLP

A growing training programme for people with big ambitions.

A second successive trophy for Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom as Best Trainer – US Firm in the City highlights a significant achievement, but also a small irony. Few trainees realise that the firm’s acclaimed scheme began with a conversation between two people who never completed a training contract – or even started one. Training partner Allan Murray-Jones and managing partner Bruce Buck – educated and trained in Australia and the United States, respectively – passed with flying colours through systems that launch new recruits straight into midstream. As Allan remembers, “We looked back and asked ourselves: ‘Before being thrown into the maelstrom, what would we have liked?’” The London office had already attracted a flow of gifted newly qualifieds from the cream of the City, showing the two partners the benefits of the English system at first hand, and both felt that, in its own way, Skadden could do just as well. Allan was rewarded for his enthusiasm for the project by being handed responsibility for the new starters’ training and pastoral care. “That’s the way Skadden works,” he remarks with a smile. “If you’re interested, you get involved.”

Fast-forward several years and the scheme is now an award-winning reality, its annual intake growing from a couple to closer to a dozen. As knowledge manager Shelagh Taylor observes, the aim remains the same – preparing young lawyers to “put the law into practice where it really matters”. The junior

training programme is constantly being revised and improved. The latest innovation is a bespoke version of the compulsory Professional Skills Course, run with other US law firms in London, which is designed not merely to introduce trainees to the kind of firm they will be working in, but also to give them a sense of its commercial environment. At each stage in the four-seat system, beginning with either corporate or arbitration and litigation, trainees benefit from a much-expanded seat induction, a process that Shelagh takes very seriously. “People realise how beneficial it is and the practice areas are committing more and more resources to it. A couple of partners or associates take you through the basic documents you’re likely to come across and the special resources available; they explain the different kinds of work you’re likely to be doing and what is going on in the group at the time.”

Appropriately, though, it is the trainees who have inspired most of the changes; regular training committee meetings have thrown up so many suggestions that the weekly training sessions have overflowed into twice-weekly sessions in some weeks. Trainee Nick Rushgrove explains that “if there’s something you want to know more about, you can raise the suggestion and normally you end up getting a seminar on the very thing you wanted”. Shelagh takes the example of arbitration, a blind spot in the LPC, but an important area of the London office’s work and now a key topic in



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the new trainees’ induction and training sessions. “It’s been a two-way process throughout and that’s really benefited us”, says Amy Kennedy, who plans to qualify into banking. “We’ve been able to shape our training contract as we’ve gone along.”

Running in parallel with the trainees’ courses are firm-wide programmes open to all, including a corporate and financial series that covers everything from contract refresher sessions with Oxford University professors to presentations by external experts dissecting the trickier points of financial promotion. The arbitration series, which in view of the practice’s international dimension consists of cross-office confabs with New York via video link, has proved a particular hit. Trainees can pick and choose, and although some topics may be over their heads, other learning opportunities are too good to miss. Amy describes the calibre of speakers as “incredible”, and Shelagh points out a key advantage of the office’s size: when it comes to internal training, the stellar speakers are partners from the next office, not distant figures whom the trainees have never met. This familiarity makes seminars feel more like an informal question-and-answer session than a return to the lecture hall.

The growth and success of the training scheme mirror the rise of a firm that arrived in the City determined to shake up the pecking order. Still ambitious and expanding, the corporate and arbitration big-hitter needs no

introduction to law students with aspirations at magic-circle level. Nick’s summary of Skadden’s work as complex, international and commercially orientated rings true across all work areas, while Allan explains how the firm’s stateside reputation as a mergers and acquisitions (M&A) powerhouse allows the London office to combine work for European and US clients with a significant UK M&A practice. “We do the same quality of work as the magic circle, but in firms with over 100 trainees, you have to systematise things and people get treated a bit like cogs. The advantage of coming to us – as it would be coming to most 25-partner firms – is that you’re treated as an individual.” Young lawyers with a hunger for high-profile transactions will find few better opportunities not only to experience deals up close, but to play a key role in them. Nick worked on just two in his corporate seat, but was teamed with associates and partners who matched tasks to his growing competencies, took time to educate him on the job and were happy to roll up their sleeves to help him with the less glamorous tasks. “I have a friend at another firm who has been involved in any number of closings, but here you’re called on when it counts, from the word go,” explains Amy. “You end up understanding every aspect of a transaction; you get exposure to partners, local counsel, everybody.” Whatever can’t be taught in the heat of closing generally gets explained in the weekly corporate and M&A meetings. “All the partners attend and the



junior lawyers and associates come along too,” explains Nick. “It’s fantastic to sit with some of the City’s pre-eminent solicitors talking about what they’ve been working on, the problems or disputes and how they’ve got round them. It’s good to see what you’re aspiring to.”

If Skadden swiftly corrects a few negative received ideas about US firms, its positive reputation for hands-on learning and an emphasis on commercial understanding still holds good. Allan puts it at its simplest: “We’re hoping to inculcate people with a feeling not only for what they’re doing, but for why they’re doing it.” However, the firm’s US background confers a few other distinct advantages. Skadden shares some training sessions with other US City firms as part of an informal arrangement which Shelagh set up for the firm’s first trainees. Still going strong, the network offers valuable opportunities for trainees to mix with their peers – and for an ever-alert knowledge manager to benchmark her intake’s progress. Although the training contract is run strictly to a London agenda, trainees are included in a summer programme for associates which offers an introduction to aspects of US law and a valuable headstart for multi-jurisdictional work in the future. Most eye-opening for new starters is the four-day new attorney training retreat in New York, an impressive introduction to the firm’s US reputation and history. For trainees eager for more international experience, the possibility of a seat in Moscow or Hong Kong is a big draw, but Nick highlights the diverse atmosphere in the London office as being equally important – a deliberate intermingling of US and UK lawyers helps to make it an informal, flexible and distinctly transatlantic place to work.

So how can the firm do more? It’s a question that Allan makes time to ask each of

the new intake in regular meetings, going through the previous six weeks in fine detail and with obvious enthusiasm. Allan’s priority is to ensure that everyone gets enough client contact and variety. “There’s no cotton wool here,” insists Amy. “You get all the opportunities, but you can’t do the level of work we do without support and it’s always there. It fires you up to want to become an associate, to want to get involved, because you know what you’re doing is valued.” For young lawyers with motivation in the blood, the firm’s policy of not awarding bonuses to trainees for hours billed has two great benefits. No false sense of competition itches away at a notably supportive and friendly group of people, whether in the office or during evenings at the pub. More importantly, everyone understands that the emphasis is on producing high-quality work by perfecting and trusting in his or her skills. No wonder, then, that trainees and mentors alike take a bright view of the future. While Allan quips that “we’re hoping to turn out very smart lawyers who will look after us in our old age”, Nick is looking forward to life after qualification with quiet confidence: “In years to come we may pull the long hours, but I’ll know at that point that I have the in-depth knowledge I need, and that I’m good at what I do.”

For further information visit www.skadden.com or telephone 020 7519 7000.

By **Theo Gott**

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