

## LC.N AWARD WINNER 2013 BEST TRAINER – MEDIUM CITY FIRM



If there is one word that sums up venerable London outfit Farrer & Co, it is 'pedigree'. A long and distinguished history has seen it operate among the higher echelons of the legal scene for centuries. It has carved an exceptionally strong reputation for its private client work, representing high-net-worth individuals such as royals and noblemen, bankers and businessmen, actors and authors; but it has also had a thriving corporate practice since the mid-18th century, when many of the principles that govern modern commercial law were first enshrined.

Today, the firm continues to forge close and highly prized relationships with individuals, families and businesses alike. It has grown considerably in the last decade and now boasts a staff of almost 400, with 79 partners. Key to this expansion has been the care and consideration with which it has developed its training programme.

Thanks to this unstinting commitment, the firm also boasts an increasingly impressive pedigree at the TARAs. In the last four years, it scooped the award for Best Trainer – Medium City Firm three times (the year it missed out, it won the equivalent prize for Best Recruiter), confirming that this latest success is no flash in the pan.

"I think it probably comes down to the sort of firm we are," muses Jonathan Eley, a partner in the employment team who is also responsible for overseeing the firm's recruitment programme. "We are a group of individuals who enjoy what we do and enjoy working with each other. Our genuine desire is to ensure that our trainees have the best training they can get and that they stay with us, because that way training benefits both the trainees and the firm. Our retention rates are very good – we only take on around 10 trainees a year, but we consistently maintain high 90% to 100% retention rates."

Farrers trained lawyers also have



a habit of staying Farrers lawyers, thus perpetuating the ethos at the firm. “I qualified here in 1999 as part of an intake of seven, and until last year six of us were still here,” says Paul Krafft, the firm’s training partner. “Trainees are seen as very important, not least of all because they tend to stay here for a long time, and as such we fully understand they represent the future of the firm.”

The path for prospective trainees begins with an online application form, with up to 1,000 submissions flooding in each year. Unlike at many other firms, each one is individually assessed by members of the graduate recruitment team. “We don’t do a first sift on the basis of A level results or anything like that,” explains Jonathan. “We’re looking for many of the same things as other firms: good academics, get-up-and-go, initiative, commercial experience and the ability to demonstrate not only a genuine interest in law, but also why they might want to practise it at our law firm.”

Applicants whose forms hit the mark are called in for an initial interview, usually with one partner, which lasts for between an hour and 90 minutes and includes a brief written exercise. Those who make it past this hurdle are invited back for a second, more in-depth interview, this time with two partners and lasting up to two and a half hours.

As an alternative to the first interview stage, Farrers – like many other firms – takes advantage of the extra time it has to get to know candidates on vacation placements. Those who impress on a vac scheme are invited to join the recruitment process directly at the second interview stage. By this point, the swathe of original applicants will have been narrowed down to around 30. While some may be daunted by the length of the second interview, the firm goes out of its way to try to put candidates at their ease and make it a two-way process, encouraging them to ask questions about life at the firm.



“They are trying to focus on whether the candidate is a good fit for the firm and whether the firm is a good fit for them,” explains Alice Yandle, who has just started the second year of her training contract. “They gave me the opportunity to ask any questions I had and at no point did I feel I was on trial; it was much more informal than that. They seemed genuinely interested in me as an individual and what I had to offer. There wasn’t a parade of applicants going in and out, and it wasn’t a clock-watching exercise – it’s a good opportunity to get a real feel for the firm.”

While Paul, Jonathan and Alice would all agree there is no such thing as ‘the Farrers type’, the consensus is that the candidates who impress at the second interview stage are those who can demonstrate individuality on one hand and an interest in the firm’s key practice areas on the other, combined with the ability to fit in with that ethos.

“We are not looking for clones; we are looking for characters with various backgrounds and experiences,” says Jonathan, “who we feel will fit with the way we work. Something I think that we put quite a lot of emphasis on here is a certain way of working with each other – that is, people who are friendly, non-aggressive, collaborative and genuinely interested in those with whom they are working.”

Those ushered into the Farrers fold are made to feel part of the firm from the outset, with invitations to regular events such as summer and Christmas parties; while a variety of sports teams welcome the younger, fitter legs of future trainees to bolster their squads. In addition, as all new trainees are now expected to do their LPC (and preferably GDL) at Kaplan Law School, by the time the training contract starts, the new intake has generally bonded and should feel comfortable with their contemporaries.

The training contract itself is also designed to bring out the



best in those taking part. A six-seat rotation is intended to give a greater breadth of experience, with each trainee spending at least one seat in each of the firm's four key practice areas, a wild-card seat of the trainee's choice (although they will also have input into other seat selections), and a final four months in the seat of qualification. During each stint, trainees benefit from a level of responsibility and client interaction that is difficult to match elsewhere.

"So far, the training contract has been fantastic in terms of the amount of client contact you get," enthuses Alice. "That is probably the thing I've enjoyed most. You're not sitting at your desk all the time; you're taken to meetings and given the opportunity to call the client directly on specific

issues. You have a supervisor in each seat who helps to manage your workflow, but you work with others in the team – including partners, – and everyone gives you work to get involved in.

"This means that you can make the most of your four months and feel that you've come away understanding what that team is all about. That's how you learn; it's important that trainee solicitors get involved in as many matters as possible from an early stage. The level of responsibility you get really does help to steepen your learning curve."

There are also two assessments per seat, at the mid-way point and the end, when trainees meet with their seat supervisor and then either Paul Krafft or his fellow training

partner Madeleine Loughrey-Grant to discuss how things have been going. Meanwhile, an extensive support network works in tandem with the more formal system. After accepting an offer to train at Farrers, each prospective trainee is appointed a mentor, three or four years their senior, to talk to about life at the firm and ask any questions that they may not want to ask someone higher up the ladder. Upon joining, they are also appointed a training principal – a partner who will keep an eye on their individual wellbeing. Finally, there is the graduate recruitment team, including Donna Davies and Claire Roche, who will have known the trainees since receiving their application forms and are always happy to help with any problems that may arise.



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*The more time I spend here, the more I realise it's where I see my future; the quality of work and the type of people you work with are truly second to none*

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**Method of application**

Online application form

**Application deadline**

Apply by 31 July 2014 for training contracts commencing in 2016

**Method of selection**

Interview

**Work areas**

- Agriculture/rural issues
- Banking
- Charities
- Commercial property/real estate
- Company & commercial
- Construction & engineering
- Corporate finance
- Corporate tax
- Defamation/reputation management
- Dispute resolution
- Employment, pensions & incentives
- Family/matrimonial
- Financial services
- Intellectual property
- Media & entertainment
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Private client
- Sports & leisure
- Technology, media & telecommunications

**Offices**

London

**What trainees said**

"The six-seat system is a real bonus. Increasingly trainees are getting to go on some really interesting secondments (LTA, University of Oxford). I genuinely wouldn't want to train elsewhere. Supervision has been excellent – usually by non-partners who are on their way up within the firm. The level of client contact is good, and the work genuinely interesting."

"Both as a trainee and an NQ I have been offered a great deal of client contact, which really helped to improve my confidence. My training experience has been fantastic. I felt well supported and supervised throughout and this has continued since I qualified in September. Farrers has surpassed the high expectations that I had coming in

as a trainee and continues to do so. I would not want to work anywhere else!"

"The firm's training process cannot be rivalled. The level of client contact I have been exposed to has been brilliant; I have already had the opportunity to be the main point of contact for several clients. I believe that the ability for a trainee to have input in their seat allocation is very important, and this has definitely been the case at Farrer & Co. The mentor system is also very helpful – allowing trainees to have access to a partner and someone more junior in the firm, who can advise on any questions we may have."

"My two supervisors so far have both looked after me very well. I know that I could turn to my current supervisor for help or advice in any situation."

"Doing six seats is a fantastic way of meeting lots of people in the firm."

"I really think that Farrers competes with the very best firms in the world when it comes to its training. Of course, it is hard to judge comparatively when one has only trained at one firm, but the more I speak with lawyers at other firms, the more I realise what a superb job Farrers is doing with its training process."

"The firm excels at valuing trainee contributions, through direct praise of individuals (informally and in formal assessments) and through firm-wide intranet announcements which name the trainees involved in a particular matter. It's a fun place to work, all the teams are very welcoming and (despite the occasional inevitable photocopying task) lots of effort to involve trainees in challenging, interesting and even inspiring work. The training as a whole feels very personal: with only 10 trainees in each year, people get to know you as an individual, which helps to make you feel fully involved in the firm."



Towards the end of the training contact, Paul Krafft oversees the complicated process of trying to ensure that trainees can qualify into their chosen teams and then spend the final seat of their training contract there, to ease the transition to fee earner. "Sometimes you get the inevitable situation where there's only one place available in a particular department and two trainees who want it," he says. "In that case the teams try hard to take more than one, and we try to ensure things always work out well."

Their efforts are reflected in the firm's glowing retention rates, and Alice for one is certainly looking no further with regard to her legal future. "It is very much my aim to stay with the firm after I finish my training contract," she says. "I joined Farrers with a view to staying here throughout my legal career, and that's what I'd like to do. The more time I spend here, the more I realise it's where I see my future; the quality of work and the type of people you work with are truly second to none."

Pure pedigree.

By Rowan McIntyre

**FARRER & Co**