



Travers Smith LLP

The award-winning recruitment process at Travers Smith could just be the beginning of a beautiful friendship...

Modern socialites know that it's cool to have more than one best friend. Cooler still if they're dotted all over the globe – think weekend city breaks and exotic holidays. Social butterfly Travers Smith has a whole swathe of 'best friends' located around the world – and when you're a City practice that regularly advises on matters with an international flavour, an international network of allied law firms comes in pretty handy. Meanwhile, forging global links without the complications of a string of foreign mergers has allowed the firm to retain the distinctive culture it has worked for more than 150 years to create.

Travers Smith is not only adept at befriending likeminded legal practices around the globe, but also equally skilled at forming fulfilling, long-lasting relationships with its people. For proof, look no further than its trainee retention rates, which are consistently among the highest in the City; and its equally impressive attrition rates, which are among, if not the, lowest. Attracting and retaining the right people is crucial in perpetuating the convivial atmosphere that defines Travers Smith as a workplace. Andrew King, one of the firm's two training principals and a Travers Smith devotee for more than two decades, explains: "We are very protective of our culture, and to keep it we need the right sort of people – people we can all get along with, who are personable and fun to have around."

Luckily, the firm has a knack for identifying compatible partners and luring them through the door: it recently bagged

the accolade for Best Recruiter – Medium City Firm at LawCareers.Net's latest Training & Recruitment Awards. The secret to its success is that the recruitment process is geared as much towards getting under candidates' skin as it is to singling out the legally astute. Tom Purton, the partner in charge of graduate recruitment, explains: "We are very interested in people's personalities. When we're interviewing, we're obviously assessing their technical abilities, but we're also assessing what kind of people they are. We like people who take their work very seriously, but don't take themselves too seriously. A lighter touch is something we look for."

Another key to recruitment success is that, for a City practice with this kind of pulling power, the application process is refreshingly simple. Candidates for both vacation schemes and training contracts (more than 2,000 of them) apply through the firm's website and, if shortlisted, have to successfully negotiate an interview (two interviews for a training contract) to net a place; partners at Travers Smith do all the interviews. Stephanie Lee, a fourth-seat trainee at the firm, remembers being impressed by the fact there were no psychometric hoops to jump through and that plenty of partner time was devoted to the process. "I liked the no-frills approach," she recalls. "It was simple, the people I met were nice and the interviews were interesting."

The high level of trainee involvement also



scores well on the recruitment front. Graduates relate well to the junior lawyers who attend events such as law fairs and presentations, as they can often offer better insight into the reality of training than their more senior colleagues. Stephanie remembers chatting to some Travers Smith trainees at a recruitment event she attended when she was a student at Oxford: “It was great to hear from trainees about life in the firm because it gave me an appreciation of what training is actually like. Obviously, hearing that stuff from a partner is fine, but aged 20 that seems quite a long way off.” As Andrew points out, it makes sense that trainees are an integral part of the recruitment process. “They are our best advert,” he states. “It’s amazing how many people I interview who say that the reason they applied to us in the first place was the clear enthusiasm that our trainees displayed when they met them.”

What keeps trainees singing the firm’s praises is a combination of its friendly culture and its unique approach to training. A distinctive feature of the training contract is that in each department, trainees sit in the same room as a partner and/or associate. Andrew was trained in this way when he was learning the ropes and, having now shared an office with more than 30 trainees of his own, he is the system’s perfect advocate. “I think it’s the only way to learn,” he enthuses. “It works very well and it’s not something that we want to change.”

Tom agrees: “Trainees not only get to see senior lawyers working and how they operate, but there’s a significant cultural advantage because the place is less hierarchical. Partners become more accessible to everyone in the firm because when you share an office you’re able to build a rapport with people of the kind that you wouldn’t be able to if you were sitting in an office on your own.”

With trainees located in the heart of the action, supervisors can easily integrate their charges into the team. Andrew finds that submersing his trainees in his daily workload produces savvy lawyers who reach the level of assistant solicitor well before the two years of training are finished. Stephanie sat with Andrew during her litigation seat and acknowledges that this approach taught her well. “Andrew would take me to absolutely everything,” she recalls. “I would be listening in on all his telephone conversations and be in and out of meetings all day. I spoke to friends at other firms and that just doesn’t happen. I was exposed to so much that, without realising it, I learnt a lot. It really is a great way to learn.” And Stephanie didn’t simply strike it lucky – everybody else is just as inclusive. “Every supervisor I’ve had has let me get on and do stuff myself. In banking, for example, I was even allowed to run my own (albeit tiny) deal. I was thrown in at the deep end, but there were always people around to help if I wasn’t sure of something.”

“***I can honestly say that I’ve never got up in the morning and thought ‘Oh God, I’ve got to go to work’***”



Keeping trainees close at hand also allows more senior lawyers to provide better support and to monitor progress more effectively. “Our expectations of trainees are high and they hit the ground running when they arrive,” Tom explains. “Our philosophy is to give trainees as much responsibility as possible, but to make sure they are provided with as much support as they need – it’s much easier to do that when they’re sharing an office with you, because you can keep an eye on them and see how they’re getting on.” And it isn’t just senior lawyers who are on hand if there’s a problem, adds Stephanie. “We get help from all over. Because of the way we share rooms with people (at the moment I’m in an office with a partner and two associates), you immediately have a network of help. We are in constant contact with the graduate recruitment partners and training principals too, who are brilliant and always on hand.”

To keep the training system running so smoothly, Andrew, along with the firm’s other training principal Margaret Moore, keeps everything under constant review. And although a complete overhaul is not on the cards, they do make the odd tweak. In fact, one such adjustment has recently been introduced: trainees who already know that they want to become transactional lawyers at



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the start of their training contracts can avoid an entire seat in litigation by completing a two-week Law Society-approved course instead. This addition is a perfect example of the firm going that extra mile to help trainees realise their full potential. But then, a proficient lawyer benefits everybody, reminds Andrew: "It is worthwhile investing the time in training because you get it back, effectively, in the responsibility and work that trainees are able to do. A good trainee can genuinely help to lighten your load."

Travers Smith is undoubtedly a gold-standard recruiter and trainer, but what makes it stand out among its contemporaries is its unique ability to hold on to those it works so hard to attract and mould. The secret to keeping them is simple: allowing the lawyers of tomorrow to sink their teeth into a stimulating workload within a sociable, friendly environment. As Travers Smith veteran Andrew puts it: "I've never really thought of leaving, because I'm very happy where I am. My job is exciting and challenging, and I can honestly say that I've never got up in the morning and thought 'Oh God, I've got to go to work'. And after more than 20 years in one place, I think that's quite impressive!"

By **Claire Butler**

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Method of application: Online application form

Application deadline: Apply by 31 July 2011 for training contracts commencing in 2013

Method of selection: Interview

Work areas

- Banking
- Corporate law (including takeovers and mergers, private equity and funds)
- Commercial law (which includes commercial contracts and intellectual property)
- Corporate recovery/insolvency
- Employment
- EU/competition
- Financial services and markets
- Litigation
- Pensions
- Real estate
- Tax

Offices

London, Paris

What trainees said:

"They want to get to know you as a person and there are no psychometric tests or inbox filing exercises. It is what I feel an interview should be – two people having a conversation and working out if they would like to work with you and whether they think you would fit in and bring in value, rather than relying on arbitrary tests conducted by a computer."

"Application by CV & covering letter online ie, no long application forms. I thought this was much the best approach. Recruitment had a personal touch which is borne out by the general atmosphere of the firm."

"I enjoyed my interview and came out really inspired by how much my interviewers seemed to enjoy their work and the environment. Then, on my tour of the office, I was really impressed by how much time everyone was willing to give you and to invest in the recruitment process."

"An interview that was actually enjoyable and interesting rather than a regurgitation of an application form."