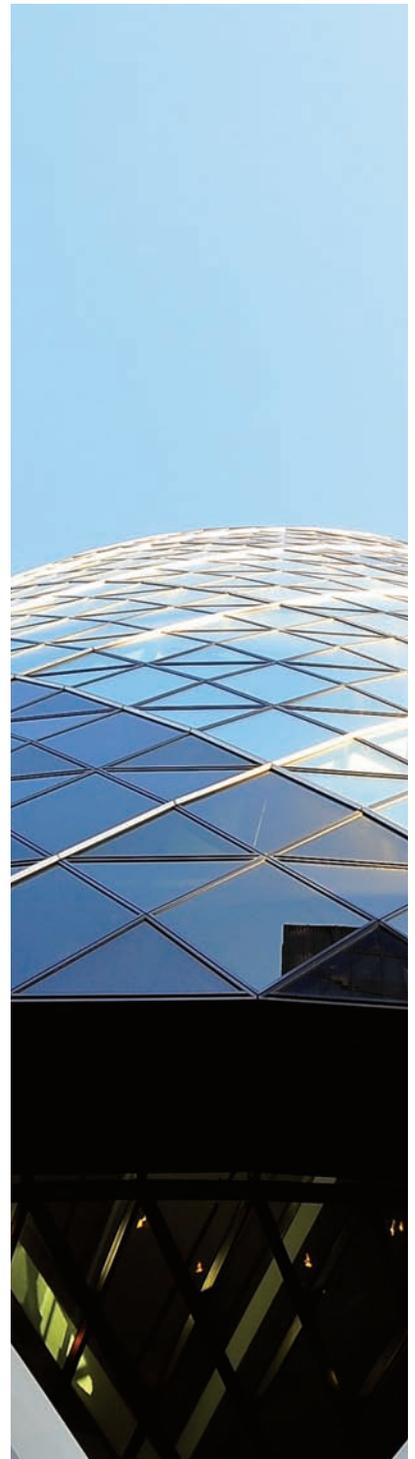


## LC.N AWARD WINNER 2012 BEST TRAINER – US FIRM IN THE CITY

The death of *The Great Gatsby's* idealistic hero – the bootlegging free marketer who elevated himself from humble beginnings to a position of wealth and status, only to be sucked dry by shallow, materialistic hangers-on – was widely read as symbolising the death of the American dream; for Fitzgerald, it had suffocated in a haze of champagne bubbles and exhaust smoke. But others were more optimistic: “It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely,” insisted historian James Truslow Adams, “but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable.”

At Kirkland & Ellis, people have always had opportunities to fulfil their potential. Established in 1909 (while a poor Gatsby played cabin boy) by one of the future founders of the free-market-supporting *Chicago Tribune*, its upwardly mobile philosophy has seen it expand into a truly international law firm operating across four core areas – litigation, corporate, restructuring and intellectual property. Clients are Magic Circle quality, ranging from corporate institutions such as BP and General Motors to media and technology heavyweights such as Apple and Samsung. Its political action committee lent significant financial support to Barack Obama's election campaign in 2008 – further evidence of the firm's ‘yes we can’ attitude.

Kirkland employs over 1,500 lawyers in 10 bases around the world, but the hub of international operations is its London office in the Gherkin, which is reaping the benefits from introducing grassroots graduate recruitment in 2009. “The firm had previously operated a lateral recruitment policy, but I was employed to establish its graduate recruitment programme,” relates experienced graduate recruitment specialist Kate Osborne. The new programme was planned as an extension of Kirkland's ‘maximum autonomy, maximum personal



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*Trainees work on high-quality, international deals from the start, and exercise control over their own training contracts*

responsibility’ ethos. “The firm decided that trainees would be treated as junior associates, which we knew would be one of the key selling points to applicants,” Kate continues, “Trainees work on high-quality, international deals from the start, and exercise control over their own training contracts.”

This approach is aided by the London office’s modest size – it employs just over 130 lawyers compared to the larger numbers at some other offices – and its small trainee intake. “Trainees get a more personalised training contract, and with that comes more responsibility from the outset – but within appropriate boundaries, of course,” explains graduate recruitment partner Rajinder Bassi. “Throughout the firm, lawyers progress based on merit. We don’t assess along the lines of ‘one-year PQE’ or ‘two-year’ PQE’ – we judge our trainees and associates on their abilities and don’t pigeonhole them. We need our people to be dynamic and resourceful – at a firm like Kirkland & Ellis, you won’t be spoonfed every part of your training contract as you might be at a larger firm.”

That has certainly been the experience of trainee Jason Peggall. Now in his fourth seat, he was first drawn to the firm by a winning combination of high-profile work and the impressive vantage point enjoyed by its offices. “I think trainees get treated as associates because the Americans at the firm don’t really understand what trainees are! They probably see us as equivalent to a newly qualified lawyer in the US, so they give us that standard of work accordingly. The responsibility has varied from seat to seat, depending on the sort of deal I have been working on,” he continues, “I got huge amounts of responsibility in my corporate and restructuring seats – one deal on which I worked was with a senior associate who had joined from a Magic Circle firm, and he said that the documents that I was being allowed to draft wouldn’t have got near even a third-year PQE at his old firm. Trainees are relied on to manage their workload without being checked up on every half-hour. That also means that if you’re taking someone to dinner that night, you have the autonomy to leave early that day and make up the time elsewhere.”



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This is not to say that Kirkland gives its trainees free rein over its biggest international deals, but nonetheless the level of quality work on offer is head and shoulders above most City firms. “We try to distinguish ourselves with a constant focus on high-quality work in a smaller setting, with greater responsibility and familiarity with colleagues across the firm – it’s much more personalised,” Rajinder confirms.

The freedom for trainees to shape the direction of their careers once they qualify is also unprecedented, as Rajinder explains: “We operate a free market system for associates. Associates are able to take the initiative in deciding what matters they work on and the key people with whom they work. No one has to get stuck with the same partner, doing the same work repeatedly. Associates are allowed to decide the direction of their career.”

However, there is support in place to make sure that trainees aren’t left to flounder out of their depth. “Having a small number of trainees means that they have greater access to the people at the top of the firm – partners and experts

in various specialisms,” explains Kate. Partners are closely involved across the recruitment and training programmes – a team of partners and associates conduct all candidate interviews, while another four-partner team monitors and supports the progress of trainees when they arrive. “Trainees also have to attend between 40 and 50 lunchtime learning sessions over the course of their training contract, almost all of which will be led by a partner,” outlines Rajinder.

Kate suggests that this mix of real self-determination and guidance makes for a better deal than in is enjoyed by your average City trainee: trainees at Kirkland & Ellis are treated as adults and given responsibility on a meritocratic basis.

Jason has found the easy, open atmosphere at Kirkland very unlike the culture at some other high-flying firms. “I did two work placements at another US firm and a UK firm, in addition to Kirkland & Ellis. They were really different experiences, even though the other US firm seemed very similar on paper in terms of its clients and size. The UK firm seemed to promote a more



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**Method of application**

Online application

**Application deadline**

Apply by 31 July 2013 for training contracts commencing in 2015

**Method of selection**

Interview

**Work areas**

- Arbitration, ADR
- Capital markets
- Commercial litigation
- Company & commercial
- Corporate tax
- Competition & EU
- Debt finance
- Funds
- Insolvency
- Intellectual property
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Private equity

**Offices**

Chicago, Hong Kong, London, Los Angeles, Munich, New York, Palo Alto, San Francisco, Shanghai, Washington DC

**What trainees said**

“The quality of work is brilliant – there’s always enough good work to be shared around the trainees. There is very little mundane work.”



closed-door environment than what I had experienced at Kirkland & Ellis, and also gave off a strong sense of stereotypical public school, old boys’ culture. There was such a stark contrast that I didn’t even attend my final interview at the UK firm because I was so sure that I wanted to go to Kirkland – even though I hadn’t even received an offer at that stage!”

The firm’s informal approach is even applied to interviews. “I was really nervous before the interview because I wanted the job so much,” Jason recalls. “The then head of European restructuring came downstairs to wish me luck because he had heard that I was being interviewed that day. It put me in a better, more relaxed frame of mind. One of the graduate recruiters then had a chat with me – again to get me more relaxed, I think – before I was interviewed by three solicitors – two senior associates (now partners) and a partner. They didn’t try to throw me with any stupid pop-psychology questions and didn’t even ask me about law for the most part. They were more interested in just having a chat and learning about me that way.” Any process that avoids playing have-a-go Freud is automatically way out in front. “At other firms, I got the sense that people were trying to catch me out,” Jason chuckles. “At one American firm I was asked how I would describe watching tennis on television to an alien who had never seen it before – you just don’t need that nonsense, do you?”

The pressure of responsibility is relieved by the fact that help is always available. “It really is an open-door policy, and trainees nearly always sit with a junior partner who is happy to help you and answer questions,” explains Jason. “You get reviewed halfway through and at the end of every seat, which keeps you on track. The graduate recruitment team are always available and are really lovely – I often like to wander over and have a chat with them. Trainees also



get assigned a buddy when they join too, just to help you settle into the team and answer your first questions. The professional support partner also takes a keen interest in trainees, and even the graduate recruitment partner Graham White used to come and check how I was and invite me for a pint after work. There’s not a single prescribed point of contact for when you have an issue – it really is the case that there is a whole range of people who are willing to help.”

Real responsibility in a collegiate atmosphere makes Kirkland an enjoyable place at which to train and work. “I’ve had to join a gym since starting here, as we can get taken out for lunch for any reason,” jokes Jason. “It’s very sociable; I feel really included.” Kate too, having seen life at other firms, recognises a very strong, particular appeal in Kirkland: “If candidates are ambitious, hardworking and want early responsibility and high-quality work, Kirkland & Ellis is full of hugely talented people, has a great office and is a wonderful place to start your career.”

*By Josh Richman*

**KIRKLAND & ELLIS**