

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

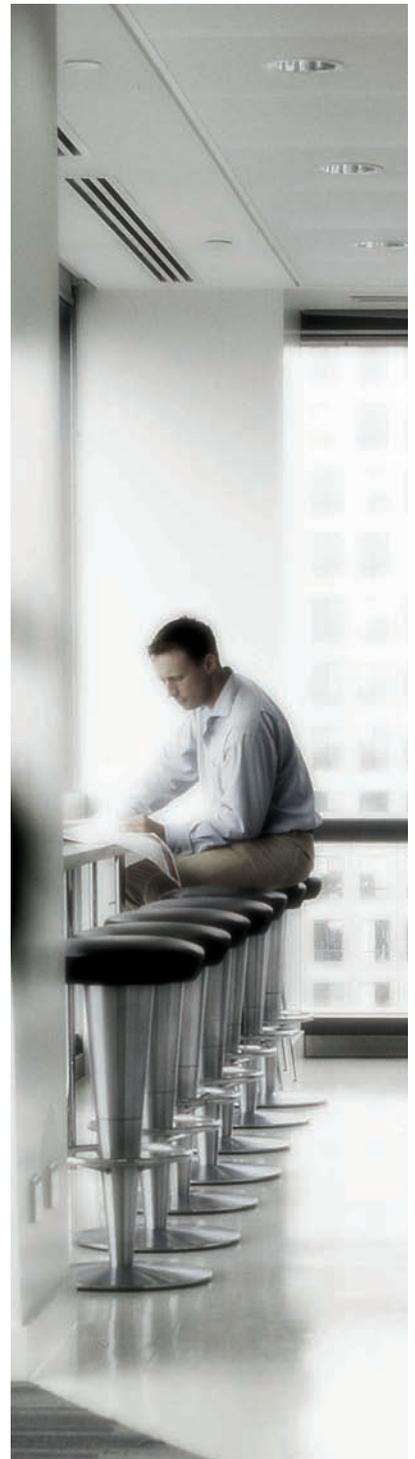


While Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom is a global giant, its London office chooses a select handful of just eight to 10 trainees a year. The lucky few who are offered a contract soon find themselves immersed in some high-rolling, big-ticket deals. No wonder that the firm sets such store by its recruitment process, and does all it can not only to attract the best applicants, but also to hang onto them.

“It is vitally important to us to get the right people,” says Danny Tricot, a capital markets lawyer who is one of two partners in the London office responsible for graduate recruitment. “Every year I say that we would rather take fewer trainees, and not fill the 10 or so slots, if we are not getting exactly the right individuals who we think will thrive at the firm.”

The search begins with the firm advertising in print and online and tapping into its alumni networks at a number of universities. Partners, associates or trainees who have a link to a particular institution are sent to give presentations and host dinners, encouraging prospective candidates to connect with the firm from their first encounter. Building relationships with law department tutors and the presidents of university law societies also helps to ensure that the firm sees – and is seen by – the best of a competitive talent pool.

The next step for candidates is to complete an online application form for either a vacation placement or a training contract. The preferred route to selection – as far as Skadden is concerned – is through vacation experience. Without ruling out direct applications, Danny remarks that in recent years the firm has taken on trainees only through the vac scheme. “I think personality fit is vital,” he explains. “While we are looking for people with excellent academics, even if someone is a rocket scientist, if we don’t think they would gel with the other people in the office, we would take a pass. We test that out by finding



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out what associates and existing trainees think of them while they are on the vac scheme. We attribute just as much weight to that feedback as we do to how the candidates perform at interview.”

Danny explains that the vac scheme should be seen not as a test of legal prowess, but as an opportunity to put enthusiasm for the job into practice. Recognising that students will be at different stages of their legal education, he stresses that it would be unfair to judge them on their knowledge of the law. “On the other hand, their general attitude to the job, to Skadden, to the associates and trainees – that is important to us,” he adds.

So what kind of application might clinch one of those sought-after vac scheme spots? Competition is intense and top-class academic results are a given, so candidates will need something extra: a keenly developed interest in the law, a desire to work at the firm and an understanding of why Skadden may be right for them.

“We look for candidates who have done their research,” says graduate recruitment coordinator Aidan Connor, whose job it is to sift through the application forms with Danny and his fellow recruitment partner, Pete Coulton. “Often you can tell that candidates aren't sure which area of law they want to specialise in – which is fine – but we like people to be a bit clearer about why they are applying to us, and to show that they have an understanding of what the firm does and what makes it different.”

Applicants who catch the team's eye will be invited to an open day, typically in groups of about 20. Applicants will have a brief meeting with two partners or a partner and a senior associate, before taking part in a teamwork exercise. After that, one of the graduate recruitment partners will give them a talk about the firm, with the opportunity to put questions to him, a junior associate or a trainee. Before they leave, applicants will also be given a tour of the building.





The number of vac scheme opportunities has increased this year – a consequence of the firm’s commitment to this particular avenue of recruitment. Between 40 and 45 places are available, spread over four schemes. Those who make the grade will join two departments, for a week apiece, and should be prepared to take up a role in the day-to-day business of the firm. What awaits them is a close reflection of life as a trainee.

Each vac schemer shares an office with an associate, who will try to involve them in every aspect of their work – a busy schedule of court visits, conference calls, researching documents and examining contracts. This level of direct experience, believes Danny, is one of the reasons for the firm’s success and its growing reputation in the legal recruitment market in the United Kingdom, to which it is a relatively recent entrant – although Skadden is the world’s second-largest law firm by revenue, and in the top 10 by lawyer headcount, the London office began taking on trainees only in 2005.

“The work might be at the simpler end of what we do,” explains

Danny, “but the feedback I get from applicants who have been on other work placements is about how much responsibility they were given here, compared to some of the other firms. We really do throw them in at the deep end.”

Although this might sound daunting, a solid support network means that no one is left to face down the challenges alone. Everyone on a placement is assigned two mentors: an associate takes charge of assigning work and making sure that the would-be lawyer is kept engaged, while a trainee provides help and advice with any issues that vac schemers would prefer to discuss on a level nearer their own.

Another reason for Skadden’s popularity among new recruits is the London office’s open, meritocratic culture – part of an ethos that allows its lawyers to make as much of the job as they want, regardless of title. “There is a really flat structure here,” says Danny, “and there’s definitely a feeling that you are not constrained by the level you are at. Ultimately, if you can do the job, you will be given the work – whether you are a trainee, newly qualified, or a first-year or fifth-year associate. You will be pushed and

given as much as you can handle, so opportunities to progress are not hard to find. That is something the students see when they come here on their placement, and it’s one of the main things that helps to bring people in.”

At the end of the placement, a further selection process takes place, involving a written test, a presentation and another partner interview. Feedback is also sought from all those at the firm who have interacted with the candidate.

Winning vac schemers who have yet to complete their LPC or GDL are sponsored by the firm, but the ongoing relationship between Skadden and its trainees-to-be does not stop there. “We are quite hands-on during the LPC, due to our relationship with BPP [Law School],” says Aidan. “During the LPC year, we organise a series of practical learning workshops: the future trainees come in once a month for a piece of work that we assess with the BPP lecturers. It helps with the whole induction process – by the time that new trainees start their first week, they’ve been to the office a number of times, had talks with the training principal and been involved in the firm’s work.”

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Method of application
Online application form

Application deadline
Apply by 12 January 2013 for vacation placements in Easter and Summer 2013. Apply by 31 July 2013 for training contracts commencing in 2015

Method of selection
Candidates are encouraged to apply for a vacation scheme in the first instance. Candidates will be invited to take part in an interview, group exercise and Q&A session

Work areas

- Arbitration
- Banking
- Commercial litigation
- Company & commercial
- Corporate finance
- Corporate tax
- Energy and projects
- Insolvency
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Private equity
- Corporate restructuring

Offices
Europe: Brussels, Frankfurt, London, Moscow, Munich, Paris, Vienna
US: Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Palo Alto, Toronto, Washington DC, White Plains, Wilmington
Asia Pacific: Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo
South America: São Paulo

What trainees said
“Very friendly, welcoming firm; my offer was made by the recruiting partner and I felt able to call him regarding the offer afterwards. It’s also a very social firm. I really enjoyed the pre-joining and trainee welcome dinners that I attended while on the GDL, the LPC and then as a first-seat trainee.”

“The firm is really good at communicating and answering questions, but perhaps most importantly is pretty fast at responding to applicants once they’ve had an interview.”

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This still leaves one final ingredient in the success of the scheme. Every August, when the last offers have been made, the process is reviewed to identify any potential weak spots and areas for improvement. “Last year we surveyed everyone who had a placement with us about their experience,” says Danny. “We asked them what they thought of the application process and the vacation scheme, and what we could do better; each year, we try to make small changes to accommodate that.”

This constant revision and re-engineering goes to the heart of the firm’s approach. “Throughout Skadden, a tremendous amount is invested in giving and getting feedback,” explains Danny. “As a firm, we are religious about giving annual reviews and we try to give constant assessment after every big project. The mentoring system that starts on the vacation placement is replicated during the training contract, and is even in place for newly qualified solicitors. At all stages, our young lawyers have an associate or a partner who is keeping an eye out for their career development.”

By Rowan McIntyre

Skadden
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