

LC.N AWARD WINNER 2013 BEST RECRUITER – US FIRM IN THE CITY

While Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom (UK) LLP may not be a name that trips off the tongue, the firm itself is as smooth as silk. Skadden's London office blends the might of a huge international firm – around 1,800 lawyers in 22 locations around the world – with the intimacy of a mid-sized office (around 130 lawyers) and a small trainee intake, offering great exposure to high-level work.

Twice blessed, this is the second year in a row that the firm has scooped the title of Best Recruiter – US Firm in the City. Aidan Connor, graduate recruitment coordinator, describes the dynamics of this award-winning team: “The team is me, Danny Tricot and Pete Coulton, who are both partners. They dictate the recruitment strategy and the direction, but I am given lots of independence to get on with the implementation. Still, they are very hands-on and make sure that I get the support I need from all the partners and associates.”

That firm-wide support is the defining factor in the recruitment programme's consistent success, a point agreed by Aidan, Danny and Pete. “Graduate recruitment is taken very seriously across the partnership and the entire firm,” explains Danny. “A vast number of people are involved in every stage of the process, from on-campus events to interviews, open days and vac schemes. There is a very broad pool of partners, associates and trainees taking part.” Pete continues: “We think it is very important that people at all levels, from partners through to trainees, get to see potential hires and form a view – we take feedback from all of them very seriously. But it is also important for potential hires to get a good view of everyone at Skadden. That is the best way for candidates to differentiate between one firm and another: exposure to as many people who work there as possible. It's easy for our candidates





to tell our lawyers enjoy and are passionate about what they do, and it sends a positive message.”

Jake Foster, a graduate of anthropology at UCL and the two-year law degree at Cambridge, centred his training contract search on US firms, attracted by what he had heard about “hands-on training and being thrown in at the deep end”. Skadden immediately appealed and his experiences reflect Pete’s hypothesis that the people sell the firm: “I chatted to some Skadden trainees at a law fair for nearly an hour and a half, so I got a true flavour of the things that they were working on and the type of people they were. That’s the best publicity a firm can have.”

Following extensive on-campus promotion, including presentations, dinners and law fairs, January is when the vac scheme selection process kicks off in earnest, as Aidan explains: “We go through all the CVs that have been submitted – usually around 800 – and hold an assessment day at the end of January for about 80 people, of whom we select 40 to take part in the schemes. We take on between eight and 10 trainees each year, so the vac scheme attendees have a one in four chance of getting a training contract.” Pretty good odds!

The firm runs four two-week schemes (one at Easter, three in summer), with roughly 10 people on each. Each student is allocated a trainee mentor and sits with an associate in two different seats over the two weeks. Crucially, students are given real work to do. “One comment we always hear from the students is that they appreciate getting exposure to real work on the scheme,” explains Pete. “At some firms, we get the sense that the focus is on wining and dining the students, rather than on exposing them to the sort of work they could expect to do as a trainee or qualified solicitor on a day-to-day basis. Although we like to mix socially

with the students, and we arrange a good number of fun events, we try to strike a balance between work and play. There’s no point giving them an unrealistic view of what they would do if they worked here: they need to understand what they would be getting themselves into.”

Pitching the level and type of work appropriately requires forethought, as Danny describes: “We liaise with the associates and trainees who will be mentors during the scheme to ensure that they are up to speed with what we expect of them and the type of work they should be passing on to students.” As a result of this forensic planning and broad exposure, the firm’s scheme proves persuasive and training contracts are offered almost exclusively to those who have completed the scheme. “We put a lot of resources into it, so there is an imperative to get the right candidates, based on cultural fit,” confirms Aidan. “Even if you look amazing on paper, if we get negative feedback from interviewers or supervisors, you won’t make it through. We’re looking for people who are flexible and adaptable,

and who are prepared to get their hands dirty.”

Jake was one such individual, and describes his time on the scheme: “Skadden’s was by far the best summer scheme that I experienced. I sat in two different departments, went to court a few times and wrote a memo for a QC. I wasn’t fobbed off with tangential work; I felt that I was really making a contribution and that the lawyers had gone out of their way to make sure I was working on current matters. At the end of the scheme, I had an exit interview with three partners. I was thrilled to receive an offer – I had another on the table, but had no hesitation in choosing Skadden.”

Between receiving his offer and starting his training contract, Jake appreciated the firm keeping in touch, with dinners and emails, and running workshops during the LPC which allowed future starters to spend time in the office: “It all helped to ensure that I felt much more integrated by the time I actually joined.”

With a small cohort of up to 10 trainees, it is impossible to hide behind others, so what does the

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firm hope to see in its trainees? Not cookie-cutter automatons, that's for sure. "Some things are a given – intellectual rigour and academic excellence, a demonstration of teamwork, drive and ambition," details Pete. "Above that, there will be certain qualities in certain individuals that make them stand out, but it is a very eclectic bunch of lawyers here, from very different cultural and educational backgrounds. You throw them all into the mix and it makes for a dynamic environment in which to work." Danny agrees: "It's true across the firm, from partners to associates to trainees. We all have common attributes, but in terms of personality, everyone is hugely different. And that's why the vac scheme is so important – you get to know people beyond their application forms and see what makes them tick."

Jake's experiences so far, as he prepares to move into his third seat in Hong Kong, reflect the immersive nature of the training contract. "I started in the capital markets group – it was a very busy period and four deals came to fruition when I was there. My supervisor was a

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junior associate, but I was working for everybody, really. It was a great introduction to the firm. I'm now in litigation and arbitration, and again it's very busy. And I'm excited about the prospect of going to Hong Kong, experiencing living abroad and seeing how the practice of law differs over there."

Aidan reiterates the need to get stuck in as a trainee: "We want people who are prepared to be thrown into the deep end at an early stage. They are part of a small number, so there is no photocopying or drudgery; rather, they have to be able to take the initiative, working both independently and in a team. We are preparing them to be independent lawyers."

Although Skadden clearly is a large, international firm, Pete thinks that it occupies a unique space. "Our differentiator runs deeper than that," he suggests. "Of course, we are a large international firm and there are a number of large international firms. But very few of those firms focus on the complex, cross-border work in the way that we do. And very few firms the size of Skadden have retained control over the culture



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Online application form

Application deadline

Apply by 12 January 2014 for vacation placements in Easter and Summer 2014. Apply by 31 July 2014 for training contracts commencing in 2016

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
- Company & commercial
- Corporate finance
- Corporate tax
- Energy and projects
- Insolvency
- Litigation
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Private equity
- Corporate restructuring

Offices

Europe: Brussels, Frankfurt, London, Moscow, Munich, Paris

US: Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, New York, Palo Alto, Toronto, Washington DC, Wilmington

Asia-Pacific: Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo

South America: São Paulo

What trainees said

“A 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.”



of the firm, as we have. We’ve never merged, instead choosing to grow organically, and that has allowed us to hold on to the very democratic and meritocratic culture that is so much a part of the firm’s history.”

Specific to the recruitment process, one of the reasons that the firm has enjoyed such success is its emphasis on personalising the process for participants. “When we’re on campus or during our open days, we speak to people one to one,” confirms Danny. “On the vac scheme interviews, we make sure that each person has an interview with a partner. We want to get to know every candidate properly, and it’s something we have got better at with each passing year. This is reflected in our conversion and acceptance rates, which are higher each year.” Pete echoes Danny’s point: “We try very hard to look behind the CV to determine what special qualities each candidate brings to the table. By involving so many people in the hiring process, and spending time with candidates in different settings, we can form a more rounded view.”

Summer schemers regularly express amazement at the number of

people whom they meet at the firm, says Aidan: “We always get feedback that they have been surprised at how much exposure to members of the firm, particularly partners, they get. Having so many people involved means that we choose the right candidates and it shows that we take it seriously. Our retention rates are really high too.”

The last word must go to the trainee at the coalface. “I had very high expectations before joining, especially in terms of Skadden’s reputation and the amount of responsibility given to trainees, and the firm has matched those,” concludes Jake. “I feel very positive about being here.”

By Isla Grant

