



Allen & Overy LLP

It's all about the soft sell – that's A&O's winning approach to recruiting the best

With a sterling reputation and membership of the exclusive magic circle, some might doubt whether Allen & Overy (A&O) needs to sell itself to would-be trainees, and can instead simply sit back and wait for the applications to roll in. But the recruitment team takes quite the opposite view, with a huge amount of planning, resources and firm-wide support injected into the process. Proof of this, if it were needed, is its Best Recruiter – Large City Firm award at the 2011 TARAs.

Founded in 1930 by George Allen and Thomas Overy, the firm has grown to become a huge international practice, employing 4,750 staff in 39 centres worldwide and winning plaudits for big deals and cutting-edge work. Caroline Lindner, graduate recruitment manager, has been at A&O for four years and is responsible for the firm's graduate marketing campaigns, campus activities and the application, interview and vacation scheme processes. She describes the motivation behind their comprehensive on-campus presence: "The law fairs and campus events are crucial, but it's not just about thrusting a brochure at students; it's about having a proper conversation with individuals so we're seen as an approachable employer that listens to concerns and provides tailored information." It's also, in this age of escalating tuition fees, about "recognising that students are putting a lot of money into their studies, so they expect greater delivery of information and support".

Caroline emphasises that while the firm is keen to use social media in an "appropriate way" – that is, to inform and encourage debate – they're also very aware of the importance of remaining on campus: "Facebook and Twitter help us to be more dynamic and creative in our campaigns, but students still want to meet people face to face."

All levels of the firm attend in force at the campus events. "We are wedded to reaching out to a broad range of universities and we rely heavily on trainees, partners and associates to help do that," explains Richard Hough, graduate recruitment partner. "It's always good to take alumni onto campus; whichever university it may be, it helps students see the achievability of a training contract at a global law firm. There was a sense last year that some people were ruling themselves out of a training contract with us because of their particular course or university, which is a sentiment we very much want to dismiss."

The firm goes to around 30 law and careers fairs each year and does presentations and workshops at around 15. "We try to make the most of our time on campus," explains Caroline. "Not every student can go to an evening event, so we try to reach out in a variety of ways, from networking events to structured 'how to apply' sessions." An appreciation of the unique needs of individuals is combined with a year-round presence, including participation



in and sponsorship of activities with student societies and careers services. Caroline explains: “It’s a softer sell, but it shows we’re committed to the university and that we really do want to meet students.”

One such student, now a third-seat trainee, is Madelin Sinclair. As an English literature and theatre student at the University of Warwick, her first impression of the firm was large and red: “A&O had a unique presence on campus – a double-decker bus, which was hard to miss!” She learnt more when she attended one of the firm’s presentations: “We had a chance to meet and mingle with people from all levels of the firm. I was struck by how enthusiastic, open-minded and genuine everyone seemed to be, and how willing the partners were to talk to people they may never see again.”

Open days and workshops at the firm are another way to capture students’ attention, including two dedicated open days for the sought-after first-year market. Caroline warns against undervaluing the usefulness of open days: “The drop-out rate used to be high, but students are realising that they’re not just marketing exercises – we do recruit from them.”

Another way to cement that understanding is via the firm’s vacation schemes – one 10-day winter scheme for graduates and those in the final year of their degree, and three three-week summer schemes for second-year law/third-year non-law students. The schemes include talks

from department heads, skills sessions and workshops, a client pitch, as well as tasting the role of a trainee working alongside an associate or partner on tasks that might include taking meeting notes, due diligence or research. “The schemes are deliberately packed,” says Caroline, “because students have to realise that as a trainee, they’ll be required to manage their time and cope within a busy environment.” Senior partner David Morley is a strong supporter of the schemes and meets all the students, explains Caroline: “He thinks it’s very important that we listen to our audience; graduate recruitment is the future of the firm in terms of talent pool. He’s also very approachable and students respond well to that.”

Everyone who comes to an A&O event is surveyed about their views and Caroline confirms that the firm takes note of the feedback. The introduction in 2010 of an on-campus business game, culminating in a *University Challenge*-style event at the firm’s offices, was a response to comments from students that they wanted to develop their commercial awareness.

Madelin, who did the winter vacation scheme, thoroughly enjoyed the glimpse into the firm it offered: “There are so many misconceptions about life at a City law firm, so it’s important to get practical experience to assess what it’s *really* like. It was a very well-organised scheme, including fun social events such as dinners and karaoke.”

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Madelin took up the offer of a training contract interview at the end of the scheme – available to all vac scheme students – and was delighted to receive an offer of a training contract on Christmas Eve 2007.

With over two years between recruitment and starting her contract in September 2010, Madelin was impressed by how much a part of the firm she was made to feel. And during the firm-specific LPC at The College of Law, the soon-to-be trainees often went into the firm for training, talks and presentations. Madelin explains how that helped on her first day as a fully fledged trainee: “You can get stuck into working already feeling like you’re part of the A&O community.”

‘Transparency’ is a buzzword at the firm – Richard is keen for people not to be “mystified by A&O”. He explains: “We try to be open about how hard we work, but also about the importance of a work/life balance. We’re also honest about the type of person we’re looking for, thus allowing students to make their own minds up about whether this is a job they would enjoy.” The brochure is a good example of that upfront approach, including an article on three alumni who have gone on to do something else: “We’re open about the fact that sometimes people move on to other things.”

This is a different approach from that of a few years ago. “When I joined, the firm was very much in sell mode,” says Richard. “Now we’re still trying to attract people from a broad catchment area, but at the same time identifying those for whom A&O may not be the right fit. It’s our responsibility to be honest about what’s involved, without trying to hide the inclusive and friendly culture of the firm.” Caroline agrees: “Our message is, ‘This is what we can offer and this is what we expect from those who join us; use this

information and the tools you have to make your own mind up.’ It’s not a hard sell – we’ve got a strong reputation and brand, but our people are what differentiate us from others.”

The firm recruits 90 trainees per year, spread over two intakes (March and September). And successful candidates will have to demonstrate a number of key qualities to get picked: academics are a given, but that’s not enough in this highly competitive market. “We’re looking for someone with good social skills, who’s got lots of drive and who can use their initiative and common sense,” says Caroline. Richard agrees that a person’s academic excellence has to be balanced with a “life outside the library”, as he coins it: “We’re impressed by people who’re sufficiently organised to get good grades as well as having a life beyond study.”

In return, trainees get the chance to be part of a truly international organisation, where there is “not just an opportunity to travel, but an expectation that you will spend some of your career overseas”, says Caroline. Richard thinks that “some people think that’s wonderful and are very receptive to that reality. For others, who just want to do a brief stint overseas and work out the rest of their career in the UK, it may mean that this isn’t the right firm for them”. Madelin is one of the former: “The opportunity to work overseas is one of the things that attracted me to A&O. I’ve got my heart set on Hong Kong or Singapore.” New offices also opened recently in Washington DC and Casablanca.

Ambition is one of the secrets to A&O’s success, suggests Caroline: “A business that is well aware of the different pressures in a marketplace, but not afraid to take bold decisions, can be very attractive to potential



recruits.” Combined with a workforce made up of “nice individuals who are keen to work collaboratively” and a hierarchy “that is flatter than you might imagine”, this means that the firm can attract some of the brightest and best.

Richard also sees the collegiate atmosphere as a key selling point: “There is a strong mentoring ethos; it’s collaborative, inclusive and we don’t scare people into learning. I do think that culturally we’re attractive to people by being professional and ambitious, as well as welcoming and friendly.”

The last word on A&O’s stand-out qualities must go to the person at the heart of the recruitment process – the trainee. “Something that separates us from other firms is the quality of the work that you receive and the way the training contract is structured,” says Madelin. “The firm has exceeded my expectations in many different ways; I have much more responsibility than I thought I would and it’s a brilliant place to have started my career.” With a glowing assessment such as this, it’s clear that A&O will continue to attract and recruit talented individuals, and remain at the top of its game.

By **Isla Grant**

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Method of application: Online application form

Application deadline: Final year non-law undergraduates and graduates apply between 1 November 2011 and 15 January 2012. Penultimate-year law undergraduates and graduates apply between 1 June 2012 and 31 July 2012

Method of selection: Assessment day and interview

Work areas

- Arbitration, ADR
- Commercial property
- Computer & IT
- Construction
- Corporate
- Corporate finance
- Corporate tax
- Dispute resolution
- EC & competition
- Employment
- Environment
- Finance
- Insolvency
- International capital markets
- Mergers & acquisitions
- Real estate
- Telecommunications

Offices

Abu Dhabi, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Athens, Bangkok, Beijing, Belfast, Bratislava, Brussels, Bucharest (associated office), Budapest, Doha, Dubai, Düsseldorf, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Hong Kong, Jakarta (associated office), London, Luxembourg, Madrid, Mannheim, Milan, Moscow, Munich, New York, Paris, Perth, Prague, Riyadh (associated office), Rome, São Paulo, Shanghai, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Warsaw, Washington DC

What trainees said:

“Allen & Overy was definitely the most approachable and friendliest firm that I met. I was made to feel incredibly welcome all the way through, an impression which did not falter once I had accepted my offer or when I had joined the firm. I felt the whole process was very fair and open.”

“Out of all the law firms I applied to, I found this firm to be the most approachable and least daunting. Everyone I met was friendly and down to earth, which definitely puts you at ease as it therefore allows you to perform the best during the recruitment process.”

“A great recruitment team – positive, friendly and very informative!”

“All my expectations were met when I joined the firm, but in so many ways also exceeded.”

“The recruitment process was transparent, well organised and far superior to the processes that I experienced at other firms.”