

## **King's College London Law Employability Research, in partnership with *The Times***

**23 May 2013**

### **SUMMARY FINDINGS**

**Law firms rate 'global mindset', 'commercial awareness' and 'intellectual rigour' as highly prized competencies in graduates, finds new research conducted by King's College London in partnership with *The Times*.**

New research conducted by King's College London with 20 leading City and national law firms has revealed the skills and competencies most sought by legal employers and provides invaluable advice for graduates hoping to join the profession. The research has been conducted in partnership with *The Times* and is published in today's Student LAW supplement.

During interviews with partners and recruitment personnel and through a follow-up survey, law firms reiterated that recruitment of trainees was taken very seriously with many seeing it as a long term investment. They confirmed that it was a highly competitive market with more postgraduate and international students applying, as well as competition from qualified lawyers.

Professor David Caron, Dean of The Dickson Poon School of Law, said: 'I am delighted that our research into what Law firms really want from graduates has provided such clear insight and helpful guidance for students considering a career in Law. At the heart of 'legal London' The Dickson Poon School of Law is uniquely placed to interact regularly with the top Law firms in London and globally. The School's focus on transnational law – applying law across jurisdictions – positions us well to respond to the needs of employers.'

### **'Global mindset'**

All firms who responded to the survey (18/18)<sup>1</sup> were interested in candidates with a global mindset and almost all firms, both international and domestic, felt that an internationally minded workforce was essential or advantageous (18/19).

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<sup>1</sup> Where statistics are quoted a number is shown eg. (8/9), with the first number representing the firms which supported a certain position, and the second showing total respondents (maximum 20).

Firms valued applicants who could show an understanding of what it would be like actively working with lawyers from multiple jurisdictions and trying to solve global problems with cross-jurisdictional legal, social, economic, political and cultural knowledge and sensitivity.

‘Candidates need to demonstrate their ability to work effectively in teams with individuals from varying backgrounds, as this will be crucial to their future success as a commercial lawyer,’ said Caroline Lindner, Graduate Recruitment Manager, Norton Rose LLP.

David Smith, Recruitment Partner, Jones Day, London added: ‘London is a critical financial and legal centre and is therefore a key focus for the business – we are looking to recruit people who want to be challenged on an international level, working on global deals.’

Firms agreed that it was imperative for candidates to show that they understood what it meant to work in a global company and specifically in the context of the individual firms, including the impact of global events on their clients and the challenges of managing complex deals and time zones.

‘Candidates need to recognise that working for an international firm means that one day you might be speaking to people in Australia, the next Beijing and the next Washington or New York. Working across all of those time zones can mean that sometimes it feels like a 24-hour a day job, but it does add a very exciting dimension to your professional achievements,’ explained Daniel P. Cooper, Partner, Covington & Burling LLP.

The ability to converse and do business in multiple languages and willingness to travel were not recognised as indicative of a global mindset, and several firms mentioned less need to travel given modern technology.

‘Being well travelled is not necessarily the same as having an international outlook. We are really looking for candidates who are curious, flexible and willing to put themselves outside of their comfort zone,’ commented Elizabeth Cope, Head of Trainee Solicitor Recruitment, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP.

However, Philippa Crompton, HR Manager, Covington & Burling LLP, explained: ‘While we do not select based purely on language skills, their importance is increasing. For international clients there is a growing need for documents to be produced in, or translated from, local languages into English and vice versa.’

Over two-thirds (13/19) of firms commented that they sought commitment from candidates to working in the UK at least for the short term.

'We are looking for potential partners of the future, not candidates who will just qualify with us. Around half of our current London partners trained with the Firm,' said David Smith, Recruitment Partner, Jones Day, London.

Highlighting some of the work undertaken by her team at King's, Laura Mackenzie, Head of the Careers & Employability Service, explained: 'Our approach is to work with students to help them to recognise their unique potential and confidently pursue their individual goals. Our Law Career Development programmes, co-hosted by law firms as well as the numerous opportunities we provide for students to meet King's alumni herald our future Law at Work programme, which sits at the cross over between career management skills and professional development. Attendance at the Law Careers Fair at King's increases year on year – last year 69 firms were represented, providing our students with real opportunities to make a good first impression and find out more about the individual character of different firms.'

### **'Commercial awareness'**

Partners are specifically looking out for confident candidates who can use their commercial knowledge and curiosity to add a layer of analysis to discussions - taking an analytical approach to problem-solving, weighing up the pros and cons of an argument, but importantly having courage in their own convictions and coming down on one side of the fence when asked to.

Almost two-thirds (12/19 respondents) thought that teaching commercial awareness should come under the remit of universities, whether that be within the course, through internship opportunities or extracurricular opportunities with the Careers Service, with several firms also noting that they themselves should have a helping hand in developing commercial awareness.

'Universities should encourage and aid students in developing commercial awareness. But they need to avoid just spoon-feeding students as artificial commercial awareness will not stand up to scrutiny at interview or on work placements,' said Jo Footitt, Partner, Irwin Mitchell LLP.

Marie Milligan, King's Entrepreneurship Consultant in the Careers & Employability Service, explains: 'Entrepreneurship training helps students develop the confidence to generate ideas, undertake market research and step up to challenges. Our students can choose from a range of programmes

high inspire such thinking: the Startup Skills Programme, the King's Professional Skills Programme and King's Leadership Award, as well as the business competition, King's Lion's Den.'

### **'Intellectual rigour'**

Out of a choice of 18 different skills, competencies and attributes, strong academic background was ranked as the most important by the firms.

'Consistent academics are important and universities would be well advised to alert students to the fact that first year grades are considered very seriously,' commented Ben Perry, Partner, Sullivan & Cromwell.

Analytical and problem solving skills also ranked highly along with candidates who demonstrated 'intellectual curiosity'.

Nicholas Evans, Partner, Bircham Dyson Bell LLP added: 'Curiosity is a really important indicator of how people will get on and progress when at the firm. We ask specific questions in the application process to try and ascertain people's drive to develop and further their knowledge.'

'We need to be both thought leaders and trusted advisors', confirmed Barry Fishley, Partner, Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP. 'Candidates need to take a genuine interest in what is happening in the business world globally and understand how changes might impact on our clients.'

### **Application process – 'Do's and Don'ts'**

Firms reported that they used a range of different recruitment processes from a classic CV, cover letter and an interview, through to detailed online applications, online tests and assessment centres, as well as combinations of the two approaches. They provided feedback on the applications they typically receive and a list of 'Do's and Don'ts' for applicants:

### Do's and Don'ts at application stage

#### Don't

- Make spelling and grammar mistakes
- Copy and paste between various application forms or from the firm's website
- Fail to follow instructions/answer the question asked
- Lack structure in written work
- Fail to do any research
- Put the wrong firm name
- Lack individuality/personality
- Mention practice areas not available at this particular firm
- Speak ill of other firms
- Try to side-step minimum requirements especially around grades<sup>2</sup>

#### Do

- Create structured and well-written applications
- Show consistently high academics
- Create concise answers
- Link experiences/transferable skills into what the firm is looking for
- Write in standard English; don't swallow a dictionary
- Show your personality
- Show a good range of extracurricular activities
- Show development and learning
- Be enthusiastic and have drive
- Add a level of analysis to responses

<sup>2</sup> Genuine extenuating circumstances will be considered by firms

Getting through the 'first sift' of applications was usually the hardest part of the process, reported the firms – with all ten that answered the survey question taking less than a quarter of candidates through to interview or assessment centre.

'Candidates need to focus their efforts on the application part of the process first and foremost, as this is statistically the hardest hurdle to cross, yet they often spend more time preparing for the interview,' commented Sarah Cockburn, Graduate Recruitment Manager, Allen & Overy.

Poor attention to detail was the most common complaint of those reading the applications. Basic spelling and grammar errors, getting the firm name wrong, talking about practice areas that the London office does not cover – all were sure fire ways to go into the 'no' pile, the interviewees confirmed.

‘With so many applications for each training contract, you do start by screening out those that contain simple errors. If a candidate cannot get the basics right, then that doesn’t reflect well on the overall attractiveness of their application,’ said Daniel P. Cooper, Partner, Covington & Burling LLP.

Over and above poor attention to detail, the firms noted a general inability to write well, with candidates failing to use correct English, or structuring answers poorly or not being concise. It was also noted that applicants could struggle to perform simple tasks such as topping and tailing a business email or letter.

Sarah Lee, Partner, Slaughter and May, said: ‘Candidates still struggle to create well structured and focussed cover letters. The cover letter and the CV in particular should demonstrate the ability to summarise the key factual points of their life. It should make us want to find out more about the candidate.’

This was also highlighted by Caroline Walsh, Head of Legal Trainee Recruitment & Development, Clyde & Co LLP: ‘Presentation is critical as a lawyer, whether that be written or verbal. Candidates need to recognise a need for formality and polish, and should not use text speak or be over-familiar as they might be when using social media.’

The application or covering letter/CV should give an insight into someone’s experience, skills and almost more importantly their personality, yet candidates now can be so keen to tick boxes that their applications can seem bland and fail to stand out.

Barry Fishley, Partner, Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP, confirmed that this also related to interview technique: ‘We do not want people to tell us what they think we want to hear, we want them to be their authentic selves and show their personality. They need to have the confidence and maturity to give refreshing and or even sometimes unorthodox answers.’

King’s Legal Careers Week invites Law firms to work directly with Law students to enable them to understand the rigour required in submitting carefully crafted, thoughtful and individual applications. The Law Careers Development Programme continues throughout the year.

Commenting on the support offered by the Careers & Employability Service, Laura Mackenzie said: ‘We bring our students together with professionals in ways which develop their independence, curiosity and contacts. Innovative careers focussed events like ‘Law Elevenses’, the first-year targeted Law Careers Development Programme, don’t just talk about concepts like networking, they allow students to do so in informal settings, preparing them for vacation and training contract applications in advance of their peers at other universities.’

Whilst candidates need to ensure they are adequately prepared before an interview and have done their research, firms also warn about the perils of being overprepared. Simon Branigan, Partner at Linklaters LLP offers candidates the following advice: 'Sometimes you see candidates who have prepared set answers and do not listen to what they are actually being asked. When preparing for interviews, candidates can prepare by thinking broadly about topic areas and the kind of things they want to say about themselves, rather than rehearsing answers – lawyers need to be able to think on their feet.'

#### **Do's and Don'ts at interview stage**

##### **Don't**

- Over-prepare
- Fail to think about why you want to work at the firm
- Neglect to prepare
- Hide your personality
- Forget basic social skills and how to work in a team
- Forget to engage with the interviewer
- Fail to show interest in the business world
- Fail to give an opinion if asked
- Lose your confidence
- Reel off deals/the firm's marketing materials

##### **Do**

- Be engaging and have energy
- Be prepared and do your homework
- Think about the questions you want to ask
- Be open and show your personality
- Demonstrate you have thought about why you want to be a lawyer in that sector, at that firm
- Link experiences into what the firm is looking for
- Have the courage to give non-standard answers
- Be confident but not arrogant
- Be calm and collected – relaxed formality
- Sell yourself and your skills

## **Work experience**

Firms reported that it was also important that candidates mentioned all types of work experience in their applications and that they should explain how they had developed transferable skills that could be applied in a work environment.

Several firms noted that their vacation scheme was a fast track to the training contract, with a number saying they wanted to recruit more or solely from this avenue in the future. Time spent with the firm during those 2-3 weeks offered an invaluable insight into working there and would, at the very least, help candidates to describe what it was like to be a lawyer at that firm, at interview stage.

King's has recently partnered with Reed Smith to offer support, guidance and opportunities for work experience to students undertaking the Anglo-French LLB dual-degree. Anglo-French programme alumni, including those from the firm's London and Paris offices, together with the firm's graduate development team and senior faculty of the Anglo-French Programme will be working with students during all four years of the degree programme.

This unique arrangement provides a platform for personal and professional development, which allows students to enhance their legal skills and job opportunities in the UK, EU and globally.

## **The changing marketplace**

Firms reported an increase in competition for traineeships and raised expectations from clients. Across the board expectations were also increasing for lawyers and trainees to be able to hit the ground running. An appreciation of the entrepreneurial mindset encouraged by King's Careers helps students to recognise the value of resilience and emotional intelligence.

'All lawyers have had to up their game to wow clients and this means the standard for trainees is higher too. They need to be work ready from Day 1,' said Barry Fishley, Partner, Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP.

'Clients are becoming increasingly sophisticated in what they expect from their Law firms and are therefore willing to pay for. This could potentially lead to fewer opportunities for trainees under the current model of learning the trade on the job,' added Stephen Rosen, Partner, Olswang LLP.

Almost all firms (16/19 survey respondents) said that they wanted candidates to show openness and flexibility when approaching their training contracts; a dogmatic desire to work in one area before they had experienced it could point to a lack of maturity, judgement and commercial awareness as they needed to understand they would need to be flexible to meet business needs.

Ben Perry, Partner, Sullivan & Cromwell LLP, commented: 'Before 2007/8 lawyers were specialising very early on in their careers. Now firms want their associates to be much more flexible and able to undertake a broader range of work - something that we have always championed.'



'A genuine interest in the firm's practice areas is essential. However, if a candidate pins their colours to the mast too quickly, wanting to qualify in a specific area of law before they have even experienced the training contract, it may make us question their judgement. Excellent judgement is what clients come to us for,' confirmed Barry Fishley, Partner, Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP.

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## **Background information about the research**

### **Methodology**

Between 18/3/13 and 11/4/13 the recruitment partners and or/graduate recruitment team from 20 Law firms practising in the UK were interviewed.

This report aims to be a genuinely useful resource for all candidates applying for training contracts and those advising them, collating the definitive views of (mainly City) firms recruiting for their UK offices all in one place and building upon and developing the existing guidance offered to students by King's.

19 of the 20 firms were interviewed for between 60-90 minutes, either face-to-face or over the telephone, with one firm responding via email. Each firm was asked the same set of questions – a mixture of both quantitative and qualitative – around the subject of employability. Looking particularly at where students are going wrong, what can make candidates stand out and changes in the market place that may affect who and how they recruit, including particular reference to globalisation, global mindset and the area of transnational law.

Where statistics are quoted in the summary document a number is shown eg. (8/9), with the first number representing the firms which support a certain position and the second showing total respondents (maximum 20).

### **Law firms who participated**

King's College London would like to thank the firms that took part in this research for giving so generously of their time:

Allen & Overy LLP; Bircham Dyson Bell LLP; Clyde & Co LLP; Covington & Burling LLP; Davis Polk & Wardwell London LLP; Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer LLP; Herbert Smith Freehills LLP; Hogan Lovells International LLP; Irwin Mitchell LLP; Jones Day, London; Linklaters LLP; McDermott, Will & Emery UK LLP; Nabarro LLP; Norton Rose LLP; Olswang LLP; Orrick, Herrington and Sutcliffe (Europe) LLP; Reed Smith LLP; Slaughter and May; Sullivan & Cromwell LLP; Weil, Gotshal & Manges LLP.

## About King's College London

[King's College London](#) is one of the top 30 universities in the world (2012/13 QS international world rankings), and the fourth oldest in England. It was *The Sunday Times* 'University of the Year 2010/11'. A research-led university based in the heart of London, King's has more than 25,000 students (of whom more than 10,000 are graduate students) from nearly 140 countries, and more than 6,500 employees.

[The Dickson Poon School of Law](#) at King's College London is one of the oldest law schools in England and recognised globally as one of the best law schools in the world - ranking in the top 10 in the UK and top 20 worldwide ([Guardian University Guide 2013: Law](#) and [2013 QS World University Rankings by Subject](#)).

The School was established in 1831, and has played an integral role in the life of King's College London since the College was formed almost 200 years ago. It has one of this country's most distinguished research and teaching reputations - staff are active in research and among the leading international experts. This helps us to continue to push the boundaries of academic thought and to innovate across disciplines.

The School was renamed after the [£20m donation](#) from Mr Dickson Poon CBE, the Hong Kong based British philanthropist and was formally [opened by Her Majesty the Queen](#) in February 2012.

Mr Dickson Poon's £20m donation to the Law School, the largest in the College's history and believed to be the biggest ever to a British or European law faculty, is part of a £40m transformation project for the School which aims to further its reputation as one of the top law schools in the world and setting new standards in legal education and research

Most recently, Professor David Caron has been appointed as [Dean](#) of The Dickson Poon School of Law. David Caron was previously the C. William Maxeiner Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of California, Berkeley.

Located in the heart of the British legal and political world and surrounded by major global law firms, The Dickson Poon School of Law offers students invaluable interaction with the wider legal community and opportunities to establish links with their peers and a wider professional network.

[King's Careers & Employability](#) works closely with the Dickson Poon School of Law to provide tailored support to students at each stage of their programmes of study. Alongside individual support with CVs, applications and interview preparation, the dedicated law careers team run professional skills programmes as part of the timetable for different student groups as well as cross-School initiatives such as the annual Legal Careers Week. The ethos behind these programmes and events is to enable students to develop confidence and awareness around legal careers through interaction with law professionals and alumni. The annual three day law fair is another opportunity for students to engage with legal employers and gain valuable insights into the characters of each firm.