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LAW STUDENT REPORT

In association with:



Legal Week Intelligence

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Introduction

The first Law Student Report was published in January 2007, before all but the most perceptive of commentators saw the credit crunch coming, and the contrasts between the answers of this year's cohort with those of two years' ago is fascinating.

As ever, the Legal Week Intelligence Law Student Report explores the issues that face the present batch of law students and how those issues affect their choices of a career and, for those who want to become solicitors, their choice of law firm. It looks at the reasons why students want (or do not want) to become lawyers, assesses the impact that these have on their choice of career and aspirations and identifies which other professions and occupations provide the strongest competition for top graduates. It also analyses how students research their choices of employer and law school and the factors that help them make the final decision.

A recurrent theme of this survey has been the general difficulty that many students encounter in differentiating between individual law firms. This year, we have added additional questions to identify in exactly which respects students can and cannot tell law firms apart.

This year, 2,763 students took part in the survey, making this the most comprehensive research project of its type.

Given the current economic background, law firms will probably enjoy the softest graduate recruitment market for many years. Nevertheless, while some may take a certain satisfaction in the sudden loss of bargaining power suffered by the student population, law firms still cannot afford to be complacent when it comes to graduate recruitment.

Competition for the brightest students remains intense and the recession creates new problems for law firms' graduate recruitment, not least in trying to work out which graduates are genuinely committed to a legal career and which ones just see a training contract as a safe port in a storm.

Derek Bedlow and Philip Hoults

Executive summary

The personal touch

When this report was first published in 2007, the 'War for Talent' was at its peak, with law firms struggling to compete with investment banks and other glamorous employers all offering compelling lifestyle and financial inducements to the most coveted students.

Since then, the credit crunch has changed the graduate recruitment world substantially, if not for ever. One consequence is that an increasing number of students are looking to the law as a potential career, both as a safer option and because opportunities elsewhere are more limited.

Assuming that economic activity remains subdued, then the balance is likely to tip further in favour of legal employers as the growing number of training contract deferrals creates an ever-larger bulge in the pipeline of students waiting to start work.

Although many firms remain wary of making swingeing cuts to their trainee intakes after the experience of the early 1990s – when bust quickly turned to boom, leaving law firms with gaping holes in their middle ranks and rampant wage inflation – training schemes will inevitably be cut if there is no sign of recovery.

As a legal management consultant says: "The bar is going to get higher so that the really good firms are definitely going to find themselves able to recruit a higher quality of graduate."

While this is clearly good news for law firms, it does not mean that they can afford to be complacent. The perception amongst some students is that winning a training contract has become so ridiculously competitive that even applying is a waste of time. Moreover, students widely read the trade press and its student variants and news of lawyers being made redundant is making some students nervous.

Further into the future, the perception that the legal profession provides a poor balance between personal and working life is increasingly widespread amongst students and could damage the prospects for law firms' recruitment efforts as and when the economy recovers, especially now that working in the public sector is back in vogue for many students.

Work-life balance is also a factor in the high proportion (40%) of wannabe-solicitor students who do not want to make the sacrifices required to become a partner. This lack of commitment can lead to a high attrition rate of newly qualified and junior solicitors before the training firm gets the opportunity to see a return on its investment. In the same regard, the recession is creating an additional risk for law firms as large numbers of students inevitably target a training contract as a stepping stone to employment elsewhere when better economic times return.

So while the odds have clearly moved in favour of law firms, there remains a relatively small pool of highly-prized students that all of the law firms covet. Law firms will need to work as hard as ever to ensure that they get their brand recognised by the best

students, and to ensure that those students recognise what sets them apart from the competition.

The evidence of this year's survey, as with past editions, is that very few firms outside the magic circle enjoy a significant level of brand recognition amongst students. Students also continue to struggle to identify significant differences between individual law firms based on their marketing material and the other sources of information open to them, especially with regard to some of the more important aspects of their future professional lives such as culture, work-life balance and career prospects.

By far the most effective way for firms outside the magic circle to show their true selves to potential recruits is through bringing them in for a week or two on a summer placement or vacation scheme. More than nine out of 10 respondents to this survey describe such work experience as a good way of finding out about both individual law firms and whether life as a lawyer is really for them. The only complaint that most students have in this respect is that such schemes are difficult to get on to.

As one student told researchers:

"Nothing beats working inside the firm to know what it's really like beyond the publicity."

From the law firm's perspective, vacation schemes also have the obvious benefit of allowing them to see how prospective trainees react in a variety of situations, rather than just how well they can cope with interviews.

"The bar is going to get higher so that the really good firms are definitely going to find themselves able to recruit a higher quality of graduate."

It is surprising then that some firms have reduced or even cancelled their vacation schemes. Taking on trainees without having seen them in action in a vacation scheme is described by one experienced graduate recruiter as being "like waggling the wheel of a new car in the showroom while wondering how it would drive on the motorway".

Above all, students want personal contact with potential employers, with both senior-level lawyers and graduate recruiters and with trainees and junior assistants who speak their language. Aside from vacation schemes, this increasingly means running regular open days for students and providing practical and personalised skills sessions and workshops on campus.

Generation Y has earned a reputation as one with a strong sense of entitlement – and it will take more than a year's worth of recession to knock some of those preconceptions out of its collective psyche. Even in the present graduate recruitment market, the personal approach is key if law firms are to be able to convince the best students that their future is safe with them.

Methodology

2072 law students studying at Russell Group universities were surveyed by Incisive Research, a sister company of Legal Week Intelligence, in February 2009. Subsequent longer interviews were conducted with 50 respondents between 30 March and 14 April 2009.

In addition, 691 students studying for the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) at the College of Law, BPP Law School and Kaplan Law School were surveyed at the same time.

Where a sample is described as 'All respondents', this includes both undergraduate/LLM and GDL students.

Undergraduates and LLM students

University	
University of Bristol	
University of Cambridge	
University of Cardiff	
University of Durham	
University of Exeter	
University of Glasgow	
University of Leeds	
University of Leicester	
University of Liverpool	
London School of Economic	
University of Manchester	
University of Newcastle	
University of Nottingham	
University of Oxford	
University of Reading	
University of Southampton	
University College London	
University of Warwick	
By stage of degree	
Undergraduate first-year qualifying law degree (LLB)	34%
Undergraduate second-year qualifying law degree (LLB)	23%
Undergraduate third-year qualifying law degree (LLB)	23%
Undergraduate fourth-year qualifying law degree (LLB)	5%
Undergraduate first-year combined law degree	3%
Undergraduate second-year combined law degree	1%
Undergraduate third-year combined law degree	2%
Undergraduate fourth-year combined law degree	1%
LLM	8%
Gender	
Male	37%
Female	63%

Undergraduates and LLM students

Ethnic background	
White (British/Irish/Other)	71%
Black/Black British (Caribbean/African/Other)	3%
Asian/Asian British (Indian/Pakistan/Bangladeshi/Other Asian)	11%
Chinese/Chinese British (Chinese: any Other)	7%
Mixed (White and Black Caribbean/White and Black African/White and Asian)	3%
Any other Mixed	1%
Would rather not say	2%
Other (Please specify):	1%
Age	
18-24	90%
25-29	6%
30-35	2%
36-44	2%
45+	0%

GDL students

Gender	
Male	42%
Female	58%
Ethnic background	
White (British/Irish/Other)	74%
Black/Black British (Caribbean/African/Other)	4%
Asian/Asian British (Indian/Pakistan/Bangladeshi/Other Asian)	8%
Chinese/Chinese British (Chinese: any Other)	3%
Mixed (White and Black Caribbean/White and Black African/White and Asian)	2%
Any other Mixed	2%
Would rather not say	4%
Other	3%
Age	
18 - 24	64%
25 - 29	21%
30 - 39	13%
40 - 49	3%