

Agency heralds revolutionary approach to solicitors' training contracts

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Published at 12:01AM, May 22 2014

Fans say the scheme offers better value for law firms, without sacrificing quality for prospective young lawyers

Solicitors' training contracts are viewed by many as arcane as the days when they were known as articles of clerkship — but a changing legal profession landscape has encouraged some to take a revolutionary approach to the system.

Accutrainee is a business launched three years ago that has just seen its first two recruits qualify at law firms. The model aims to remove the burden of recruiting trainees from law firms, creating more flexibility around the process.

The business's founder and chief executive is Susan Cooper, a former banking and acquisition finance specialist solicitor at transatlantic law firm Hogan Lovells. She is adamant the Accutrainee deal provides better value for her law firm clients, without sacrificing training quality for the prospective young lawyers on her books.

Accutrainee is essentially a placement agency, providing trainees on short or longer-term contracts to both law firms and in-house legal departments at corporations. It was launched in November 2011, took on its first trainee the following July (after protracted approval negotiations with regulators) and saw its first two trainees qualify within the past few weeks.

“The aim is to create as many graduate jobs as possible while focusing on quality and diversity,” Cooper says. “We do that by trying to improve on the traditional training model. We take the best of traditional training while reducing inefficiencies, inflexibility and high cost — all those things that sometimes hold back firms from recruiting trainees.”

Graduates joining the Accutrainee programme have their training contracts with that business and not the law firm or corporation they end up working with.

The pitch to graduates is that Accutrainees claim to offer bespoke training. Instead of being stuck on the traditional two-year merry-go-round of six-month seats, those on the Accutrainees scheme can spend longer on seats that they and their firms choose.

They can also complete their training at a combination of law firms and in-house legal departments, arguably getting a wider flavour of the legal profession. So far, the business has placed ten trainees, but Cooper is looking to expand dramatically over the next year.

“There is no set rule,” Cooper says. “And that is also one of the attractions from the clients perspective. We’ve tried to move away from the traditional six-month seat rotation, with which a lot of firms struggle, not least because work-flows don’t necessarily change every six months. A lot of law firm senior partners complained that under the traditional model, once a trainee became valuable by getting to know a specific department, it was time for them to move on.

“At the larger firms, one of the issues we try to address is the ridiculous need that seems to be built into the existing system of having to recruit trainees two to three years in advance. That’s just crazy — no other sector in business does that.”

But there is potential controversy around the Accutrainees format — not least over trainee salaries. Cooper says that the business is targeting firms of all sizes, and is currently in discussions with recruitment partners right the way up to the “magic circle”. However, trainee salaries at magic circle and other leading City of London practices scrape the £40,000 mark, and go even higher at the offices of US firms.

On the other hand, Accutrainees trainees are paid £22,000 in their first year and £2,000 more in their second. Indeed, part of the business’s potential attraction to City firms is that it will cut training costs. Even accounting for Accutrainees’s monthly charge to client firms, City practices will still get a trainee for less than they would by recruiting directly. Cooper acknowledges that there is a possibility that Accutrainees staff could be working side-by-side with trainees recruited directly by a law firm that are earning considerably more. “If there is a salary differential,” she says, “we make that clear to our trainees from the outset, and they have the option of applying to a firm directly.”

Cooper also points out that some Accutrainees law firm and corporate clients had no history of recruiting trainee solicitors. “So the arrangement with us has created that opportunity.”

She is also adamant that Accutrainees are not disadvantaged in any other way apart, potentially, in terms of remuneration.

“Of paramount importance to us is that each of our trainees going into a client organisation is treated and trained in exactly the same way as those that have been recruited directly. That is something we monitor very closely.”

Case studies

Flora Hussey qualified in January at the private client specialist law firm New Quadrant Partners in London’s Chancery Lane. She did her legal practice course at BPP Law School and had been working at the firm as a paralegal.

The partners were keen to offer her the bulk of a training contract, but not all. So Hussey approached then recently launched Accutrainee for help. It found her a part placement at a leading London commercial firm to round out the contract. “Accutrainee was a very good means to an end,” says the 28-year-old. “And I like the ethic behind the business — providing alternative routes to a training contract.”

Simon Latham, 30, qualified in April in the commercial litigation department at the City niche law firm Hausfeld & Co.

Latham, who also did the BPP LPC, found himself on the Accutrainee programme because Hausfeld was too litigation orientated to offer a full training contract. The firm approached Accutrainee, which arranged for Latham to be seconded for six months to the in-house legal department at Film Finances. On qualification he returned to Hausfeld.

“The process was fantastic and efficient,” Latham says. “It is a very good way of sewing up various opportunities in the market.”