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“Round my kitchen table podcast: having a face that fits” 08 September 2011

Chair:

Alex Aldridge (AA)

Guests:

Head of BPP Law School’s Legal Awareness Society – Shibley (S)

Kevin Poulter, Employment lawyer at Bircham Dyson Bell (KP)

AA: Hello and welcome to this week’s edition of my round the kitchen table podcast, I’m Alex Aldridge, columnist from Guardian Law section and US correspondent of UK Legal blog ‘Above the Law’.

With me this week is Shibley (S) a law graduate who tweets at Legal Aware. Shibley has a doctorate from Cambridge University and is currently looking for a training contract.

Also we’ve got my regular guest Kevin Poulter an employment lawyer with corporate firm Bircham Dyson Bell.

Last week I wrote an article in the Guardian about lawyers with disabilities which was inspired by a conversation I had with Shibley who has a disability and so far Shibley has been unsuccessful in his hunt for a training contract.

Shibley, if you could tell us a little bit about that.

S: Yes, I have done around 50-60 application for a training contract, some have done more so I consider myself lucky.

AA: 50-60 applications?

S: In total, I have done around 10 this year because I’ve lost some interest.

AA: Just to recap, what stage exactly are you at of the qualification process?

S: Well, it’s complicated. Due to a 2 month coma at the end of 2007 - as a result of this I was wheelchair bound and did my GDL in March 2009.

AA: Where did you study those courses?

S: At BPP (Law school) then I switched to College of Law where I stuck doing my studies by Distance Learning. I graduated January this year with a commendation from the College of Law, once I have completed my MBA I’ve decided it is time to bite the bullet and do my training contract.

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AA: so tell us about those applications, how many interviews?

S: 2 interviews with Magic Circle firms, and they were very nice to me actually at the interviews.

AA: then you received rejections?

S: Yes! (laughter). I was glad to go (to the interviews) so at least I could explain where I was coming from

AA: But, what happened in those interviews? Were they wholly positive? Were there any negative elements at all?

S: Actually, they asked all the usual stuff, which I think they ask everyone now, to be honest. Questions about law, their firm, what interests in commercial law do you have, what have you done, what have you read in the news, but as long as your face fits, bingo! You've got your training contract.

KP: I was curious about how you got two interviews in Magic Circle firms I imagine is a long process, even getting to interview stage, so how are you affected? Are you affected anyway? By assessment days, by vocation schemes, by the test, by anything else that was put in front of you to get you to an interview? Because I know there are probably a lot of people out there who would really quite like an interview at a Magic Circle firm and they're struggling as well. What have you had to go through?

S: Well, actually I have learnt this slowly but main thing is to tell them that you may need some special care, what they call '*reasonable adjustments*'. In other words you must liaise with them carefully, especially during psychometric test, or if you need print to be extra big like my case, you must tell them. Obviously they can't make the necessary adjustments if they don't know you have a problem. They did take it very seriously and there were no mistakes.

KP: But actually just in terms of getting those interviews...

AA: I suppose it doesn't hurt the fact that you got a PHD from Cambridge, they must like that. Are there any other tips? Because you've been quite successful in terms of getting interviews, two at magic circle firms, any tips?

S: Well I think the thing is not to think you can simply get the interviews. So you need to pay good attention to good careers service - they teach you some useful things. The firms' websites do tell you how they expect you to act as well, which is also important.

AA: That's interesting because when I was at law school, many years ago, there was a kind of arrogance amongst students towards the careers service - almost as if these people don't know what they are talking about. You really value the advice you got from them?

S: Yes, also I take you back to this 'face fits' but actually understanding rejection is useful because it's quite personal. Understanding rejection can be a good thing but also that you don't fit their organisation's culture is a good exercise.

AA: This face fitting thing - we had an interesting conversation offline. I wish we could have such an interesting one in front of the microphone, hopefully we can recreate that...but I think it is an important idea that your 'face fits' at a law firm.

KP: I think it is important because if you don't fit in, then you won't be happy there. And either you won't be happy or the firm won't be happy with you and ultimately you'll end up going your separate ways. And I think that is why in many ways the process for applications, the training contracts is so laborious. Guess you got to get down from a thousand applications to ten training contracts. But, part of the process is getting to know you; the back schemes, a lot of it is the social time as much as it is time spent in the office. A lot of the back schemes spend time in the pub, karaoke, going out for lunches either as a group or in smaller groups.

AA: So basically you're saying to get a training contract you've got to be a 'certain' type of person?

KP: No, I'm not. I think in certain firms there is an expectation, desire for you to be a certain type of person. You've already mentioned that in one of the Magic Circle firm interviews they wanted to know about your commercial awareness and the reasons why you wanted to become a commercial lawyer, it's the same thing. Whether it is about being a personality in terms of your academic background, whether that be in terms of your interest in a particular subject area or particular sector. There's no point in going for a job at a legal aid firm if you're wanting to be doing higher level commercial transactions.

AA: OK, so put it this way, alright. Say you're interested in high level commercial transactions and you're massively intelligent, you hate karaoke, you hate going to the pub, you don't really like hanging out with people, (laughter) well, not necessarily enjoy hanging out with people but you don't enjoy hanging out with those other commercial lawyers, where do those people fit in corporate firms?

KP: I think, there's (pauses) it's difficult to say, the reality is people that do well are those that do well in the job but also they're confident, they're social around the office, they make the effort to get to know people because that is ultimately where your work comes from. You have to be able to build up a community within the office, from my own experience anyway. This is what is important, relationships with your clients - if you have some sort of social problem then, depending on what sort of area you're working in it may well be you're not doing as well in the job as you could be doing. We talked again, offline, about Barristers (laughter) who are famously known for kind of working on their own. It can be a lonely job; they take instructions at the last minute they (Barristers) deal with paperwork whereas we (Solicitors) deal with people frequently and in fact a lot of academics are barristers and very rarely they transfer to become solicitors.

AA: When I worked briefly as a paralegal at a City law firm, I just didn't fit in to that office culture, I find it hard to articulate now I think about it, it's not that I don't like

people, I love people, but I just didn't fit in to that 'boyish' culture, one of the lads, that's never really been me. To put this to Shibley, you come from an academic background and you say that actually counts against you?

S: yes, definitely as you come across very academic and I'm proud to say I have a first class from Cambridge and my PHD from there, I'm on my 8th degree. That does come across as an academic and can come across as a liability for them, in employment that is a concern.

AA: Why a liability?

S: Perhaps if you use mental shortcuts, someone who prefers working on his own, and is less easily employed...At Cambridge where I trained you really had to have very good social skills - what we call commercial intelligence so I think to label academics as poor communicators is not right as some are good, brilliant people. Also, the issue about socialising, some academics like socialising too and whilst I do not drink I'm happy to socialise, and I enjoy it and also to be fair the amount of socialising involved can be separated from the job.

KP: There's a perception involved that having 8 degrees, your interest is purely academia. A perception that someone who has a disability noted on their training contract application that they will be more hard work, harder to deal with, it might be wrong, it might be unfair and similarly for me coming into the profession initially I came in with my training contract and it was only part way through my training contract that I came out (as being gay) as a result of that I accepted it, every knows, it's fine there is no problem. Is it something you would put down on the form? No, because I don't need any reasonable adjustments to make any difference as I could still do the job regardless, well, err, hopefully (laughter). But, the point is that it does come down to character and personality and it's about perception. Your perception of the environment you're going into as a lawyer, you're applying for new jobs and have to do your homework to make sure that is a firm you will be happy in. (agreement in background) Equally, and quite rightly, the firm has to do its homework to make sure you fit in with its ethos, its ideology, its values and with everyone else that works there, because you have to get on with them. At least sufficiently to be able to have a working relationship.

AA: Sure, sure, just generally speaking, law firms in particular seem to be quite good places for gay people. They seemed to have made a good effort with their LGBT groups.

KP: Yeah, there are a lot of groups out there. It's the same with lots of different diverse backgrounds, the black solicitors' network does a fantastic job, it does it surveys I think annually now. The association of Muslim lawyers, Association of Disabled Solicitors, there are various others, and yet is it right they exist? I ask myself the same question when I got involved in establishing a gay employment network. Do we need a gay employment network? How far down the line do we go with this?

AA: Do you think we do?

KP: Well, obviously I do, otherwise I wouldn't be involved with it (laughter). But I think it's just giving people the opportunity to come to an environment where they're comfortable but it's also business opportunity and I think this is what is important. Yes, these things (groups) are set up to be supportive, yes they're set up to be visible, but also it's an excellent network for getting to know people, transferring of contacts, for getting work.

AA: There are of course, groups for disabled lawyers have you been in contact with any them?

S: Yes, lawyers with disabilities via the Law Society and I would like to pick up on a point made by Kevin regarding the social issue whether there should be groups or not, certain groups of society being 'partitioned off'. I think it comes from Kevin in fact when he says that you can add value to your firm...how law firm brings value to society and commerce, is incredibly important to have a diverse background of lawyers within a firm for social value.

AA: We're going to have to wrap this up, thanks to you both of you for joining me, and thanks for listening, and I'll be back next week.