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“Round my kitchen table podcast: Is the Roll on Friday generation dead?”
06 October 2011

Chair:

[Alex Aldridge](#) (AA)

Guests:

[Jo Martin](#), Associate Solicitor at [Simons Muirhead & Burton](#) in Soho (London) (JM)

[Kevin Poulter](#), Employment Law guru of [Bircham Dyson Bell](#) (KP)

AA:

Hello and welcome to this week’s edition of ‘Round the Kitchen Table Podcast’ with me today is Jo Martin Associate Solicitor at Simons Muirhead & Burton in Soho and also we my usual guest Kevin Poulter Employment Law guru of Bircham Dyson Bell.

Today we’re going to be talking about the changing culture in Law. In the last decade the profile of the average lawyer changed. As a generation of graduates with little interest in law joined firm essentially for the money. The resulting atmosphere of disillusion was embodied by legal gossip website “Roll on Friday”. Which as the name suggest, caters to an audience with little interest in their jobs, who just about pacified by the perks and remuneration they receive. Now though with wages falling

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and little job security, the incentive to become a lawyer has been significantly reduced, and those who would have been drawn to the law for the money will probably look elsewhere for a career. Leaving the profession to repopulate itself with people with a genuine legal interest. Jo, what do you think of my theory then? Is it a load of rubbish?

JM: I don't think it's a load of rubbish, I think maybe at the moment you're seeing the passionate people coming to the fore but back in the Roll on Friday days they were actually, I worked at DLA Piper post qualification had brilliant training and had the LPC paid for, which is obviously very difficult if you don't have the money privately, but before starting out I did a year in New Orleans working with people on Death Row, and I am very grateful to have done in retrospect as it gave me some perspective I didn't previously have. I started at DLA (Piper) which bit of a chip on my shoulder about working for corporate clients which wasn't just completely realistic obviously you learn as you train, and post post-qualification but I decided to leave as I wanted to work perhaps with a bit more passion you might say and did work in Employment and Discrimination only, so I would like to think there was passionate lawyers around then and had to take quite a hefty pay cut to do it.

AA: That's interesting, so you were one these lawyers who came in took advantage of the excellent deals where the big firms pay for you though law school and you having done that, you got out?

JM: To be frank, yes. If I hadn't done that, I would not be a qualified solicitor now if that weren't available to me. So I feel horrible on behalf of those struggling to get a training contract now because it was still difficult then but there are more of a chance then that you would get one.

AA: So just looking at this current generation of trainees out there that have come through obviously you are at a niche law firm in Soho, but you must presumably see trainees in other law firms and indeed your own law firm, do you think the profile of the average trainee has changed since your day?

JM: I think trainees with the greatest of respect will always be (*cannot make out word*) because not all will go on to qualify, and there are a number of reasons for that. You will get good ones, average ones, you will get brilliant ones. In terms of their attitude towards their legal career, understandably they perhaps feel concerned about what it took to get them where they are, some may prefer to be in a different firm, I don't know. I think it's a bit more traumatic to get to the point of being a trainee, most if not all of those I work with work extremely hard. I don't tend to ask them too much about finances, where they might want to end up because I assume they want to qualify either into our firm or another one.

AA: Do think the current trainees work harder than those in your generation of trainees, yes or no?

JM: No. I think as a trainee you're always slightly aware you may not get taken on and however popular you are in a department, it may be down to a budgetary issue at the end of your training contract in the seat you want to qualify into. You've got to

show you're really really good and I don't sense that changing and I don't think law firm decisions on who to take on still reflect that.

AA: Kevin, is the 'Roll on Friday' generation over in your opinion?

KP: I feel there is some truth in that, I think the barriers have changed, and the barriers have moved on. But years ago once you got a training contract you were set up for life, that was the thinking, certainly by my generation and it may well have been that had wanted to continue with the High Street firm that I trained in I may well be partner now, who knows what could have happened. And I think from that point of view things have changed yeah, you can no longer sit on your laurels as a trainee. There is no longer this relaxed atmosphere, certainly from what I've seen, this approach that 'I don't need to worry too much about things, they've got nowhere else to go' - 'I'm always guaranteed a job on qualification' the retention rates are awful, even if at the Magic Circle or at a high street firm in Loughborough. It's difficult, and you've still got to put in the commitment and I think that's what changed. I also think that we're having a, well we're seeing lots of the smaller firm's high street, legal aid firms, being squeezed out of the market which means that more and more people still are looking at the Magic Circle and Corporate firms for training contracts.

JM: It's funny, this thing on Twitter a few weeks ago I was chatting to a trainee at a corporate law firm and I was tweeting about the options for seats and they were saying how popular employment was and I was interested to see if it was still the sexy one to go for. It just happened to be that it was the one everyone was going for, I wonder that's because it's the only right spaced area of law, working in a big corporate for these trainees that in an ideal world might be at a legal aid firm with a decent enough salary as you say, isn't available now. And they quite rightly pointed out the big firms do a lot of pro bono work and the trainees can do some fantastic work including death row counsel. I think employment for me at DLA (Piper) was albeit for the respondents except the odd pro bono case for complainant, because it was right spaced.

AA: What about general profile of junior lawyers? Because it seemed during the boom years, this is judging by message boards, on Legal Week and Roll on Friday, there were a lot of people who were disengaged with their jobs. And they like the money, they like the perks, they just didn't care. Did you find that?

JM: That's totally true. I think without wanting to sound down on that because I was so naïve at the time, often I would be trying to explain that taking a salary cut at the time (was ok) because I had no mortgage or kids...

AA: This is when you left DLA (piper)?

JM: Yeah. I just felt that salaries were obscene what I was being paid when I left was such an enormous amount of money lucky me, you know...

AA: How much?

JM: Probably still under confidentiality obligations in perpetuity but you would know from looking on Roll on Friday that...

AA: How many years qualified were you when you left?

JM: 1 year PQE

AA: OK...

JM: I just thought it was obscene again, I don't wish to sound pollyannaish about it, I just did. Having just come from a place where the New Orleans manager would tell us, he paid himself \$15,000 a year because that's what he needed to live on and he thought it was a privilege to turn up and work for his clients, (*more here, unable to clearly here some words*) and all credit to him, he still works to that ethos, but absolutely, a lot of my peers would say it's not enough, and they get 10 grand more! It's not sustainable and makes me feel a bit sick so yes, I think that ethos was there.

KP: I find it interesting your pay cut was more than I was getting paid as a trainee so...

JM: It was obscene

AA: But the money that these trainees and indeed associates, for the City firms still get paid loads of money?

JM: Yeah, and I think those people are still there, I just think Roll on Friday has served its purpose. But perhaps it was more obvious then because it was new.

KP: But it's still commercial and very commercial, Roll on Friday is a million miles away from the high street lawyer, it's a different world. And I think that is what is not managed very well.

AA: Your journey though Kevin has been quite different, your journey is what a lot of the current trainees or indeed students without jobs, would aspire to. You started at a high street firm; you moved your way up to bigger firms and finally got into a corporate firm in London. That's the path that a lot aspire to. Having made that journey though do you find that you value being in a bog corporate firm because often your speak to associates at big City firms who are blasé about these jobs with all this money they are getting, perks, do you though, having come at this via a different route, value that?

KP: I would like to clarify; I'm not on mega-bucks!

JM: Lend us a tenner!

KP: (Laughs) I shouldn't really say that, I might upset my colleagues! I very aware of that, but that said, I'm not. I absolutely value it. When I trained and was encouraged by my parents to pursue a legal career which nobody in the family had done, it was a job for life. And particularly at the time, as an employment lawyer, hiring and firing, you're guaranteed an income. Then I was made redundant! I think as a result of that, that makes me value my position. I love going to work, part of it is enjoying the job, part of it is yeah, to certain degree the status...

JM: But also as an employment lawyer making some lose their jobs it makes you very aware of how lucky you are to have security for now.

AA: Interesting that I'm sat with two corporate lawyers, at quite big law firms, and who really like their jobs. The stereotype is lawyers at big law firms do not like their jobs.

JM: It's a work life balance, to use that well used phrase, at a big law firm.

KP: Yeah.

AA: So Jo, if you were still at your first law firm, DLA Piper, where do you think you would be now?

JM: I don't think I would be married. I don't think I would have a child, I don't think I would feel so just like I'm living *my* life the way I want to. Work would feel about 85-90% of my existence which when they are paying you mega-bucks that's fair enough. If you are brought up with a work ethic and you're getting a massive salary you're thinking quite rightly, I should be doing tonnes 'cause this is lots of money. I left before I had any responsibilities and lucky me to be able to make that move. I feel for people who can't because they bought a house on the salary from a big corporate, and others and I don't want to sound patronising because there is plenty of people at those firms, really happy, stimulated, enough work-life balance, great salary, not remotely looking to change that.

KP: Hmm, it's the live hard, play hard. That's what I used to hear.

AA: I think you mean work hard, play hard?

KP: What did I say?! Laughs. It's the work hard, play hard and that's the thing and people in the magic circle absolutely live by that and burn out in five years and end up moving to the provinces and become a partner in a provincial firm and see out there old years, i.e. after 26! Having an easier life because they've had enough of the city.

AA: So they effectively retire at 26?

JM: I think we're getting into territory that you can't really talk about without talking about female experience if I may say so, and all other podcasts to do with child bearing ages (*cross talk, difficult to hear some of this*) if I was still at DLA (piper) like I said I don't think I would be married with a child because I think everyone has a different approach to parenthood but a lot of people want to do it to spend some time with their child and it doesn't really work, part-time working at a big corporates for the individual and so people with either get a bad-rep for having two or three maternity leaves in a row to have a family, lose whatever status they might have accumulated and just get back to work, or just wait and wait and achieve partnership and then try for a baby when they are, perhaps, fertility wise, not best placed. I don't think it's impossible for firms to find a way to make that viable, I think maybe I am straying of topic a bit...

AA: No, it's an interesting issue linking back into the generational issue, this new generation of women trainees it's going to be tougher?

JM: It's such a personal question I don't actually know say current say 1-2 PQE females in corporate feel about this issue but I know from younger female colleagues at my firm that they should feel quite positive about having a family and continue their careers.

AA: Presumably they would be under more pressure, in your case you were able to recognise that DLA (piper) was not for you, you weren't happy with the work life balance aspect and left, but this lot may not be able to leave because they might not have another job to go to.

KP: This is it; there are no jobs to go to.

AA: Bringing it back round to issue of the culture changing of the law at the junior end, what do you think is going to happen over the next few years? It's possible we're only seeing the start of this change. I mean, last night I was at the FT innovative lawyers awards and all the winners seem to be law firms that had done something to cut staff numbers, and the sponsors of the awards won because of their new office they had started in Belfast (Ireland) where they had outsourced some of their lower cost work, innovation seems to be ways to cut jobs essentially. So what, what lots of commentators are saying is that for the next few years it's going to be hard for the next five years and so do you think this is going to be the tip of the iceberg and we will see a generation of new lawyers who are ultra-committed, swots?

KP: I think the danger is that we are going back 20 years; we're going back to paying for a training contract. I think that's a real worry.

AA: That's a slightly separate issue, my question here is do you think you are going to get this new generation of ultra-keen new lawyers?

JM: I think you probably will to a degree, as there will be fewer training contracts offered. I think it's all going to slow down a bit and people will focus on both quality, i.e. it's worth being a swot to get in also, what kind of fit are you within our firm again possibly a preference on people with experience and maybe that will lead to swots, or may lead to the law becoming more desirable than it is because it is harder to get in to, I don't know. Invariably there will be some kind of squeeze because I think there will be fewer training contracts offered.

KP: I think the opposite, I think we will go back to who knows who, I think we will go back to who went to Oxbridge, I think we will go down to fewer training contracts, we have to, if it's not down to fewer training contracts it's down to how many jobs there are at qualification.

AA: Final thing to conclude, imagine you have an applicant who, they're doing a law degree, considering becoming a lawyer, but they're not sure. They quite like law but are not sure, do they go for it? Or go for a different career?

JM: It comes down to experience every time, and I mean that in the broadest sense of the word. If you can do it abroad, it doesn't need to be in a firm in the UK, I know not everyone can afford to do that, you may have to pay as you do it, yes it's good to get your face known but if you can get a feel for the career you will know what you care about and I think, I don't know about you Kevin, but you get up in the morning and do a job that moves you a bit. If you are lucky enough to be there then the only way to work out what that might be is to as much of it or work like it as soon as possible, I did lots of legal secretarial work and you get a feel for the place, that way.

KP: If you want to do it, you've got to go for it. But you've also got to realise there are a lot of other people going for the same thing.

AA: Jo, Kevin, thanks very much for coming to my kitchen table and I will now let you go off to your glamorous corporate work events!

All: Laughter 😊