

## How to research a firm... properly

So you've got an application form to fill in for a firm you're desperate to impress, or better still, you've bagged an interview! You know just how crucial good research will be, and you know the one cast-iron guaranteed question you'll get is: "*Why did you choose to apply here?*"

Now, if your reply is to just sit there gawping like Cletus the Slack-jawed Yokel, the chances are that your potential employer will not be overly impressed. Nor will saying "*I really need a training contract and you were the only ones who offered me an interview*" win you any friends.

What you want to do, in fact, is to know everything there is to know about the firm beforehand, and wow the recruiters with your insights. Everyone knows that. But how do you go about it?

This feature sets out the different ways to research a firm, from the blindingly obvious to sources of information that are a little off the beaten track.

### Step 1: The Chambers Student Guide

You saw that one coming, didn't you? The fact is, the *Student Guide* is an ideal starting point for your research. In the True Picture features we aim to tell you about

- the work the firm does
- how well it's doing and its strategy for the future
- its culture – what makes it tick
- the structure of the training contract and what work trainees can expect
- the social life

We know just how much importance firms place on commercial awareness, so wherever possible, the True Picture features aim to raise relevant commercial themes. Try and follow up with general web research on themes raised in your favoured firm's feature. This could be, for example, the shifting fortunes of the Middle East or issues over future public sector cutbacks. If you can show that you have some level of knowledge about these issues, it is quite likely to lead a recruiter to view you as a commercially aware candidate who understands the issues of most relevance to their firm.

The *Student Guide* is exactly what we said: an ideal starting point. It's popular. Loads of law students use it. A couple of years ago, we mentioned in the True Picture on **Dundas & Wilson** that the lifts in their office were a bit dodgy. Apparently, it's the first thing all their vac schemers ask about these days. To get a bit more insight than the average law student, you're going to have to dig deeper.

So let's go further down the rabbit hole...

## Step 2: The main Chambers and Partners directories

Okay, this feature isn't meant to be an extended plug for Chambers and Partners, but our main directories are an ideal *second* step for your research. They rank law firms across the world. Want to know who the best business lawyer in Gibraltar is? Or the top firm in Angola? Or what's going on in the world of East Anglian agricultural law? Respectively, *Chambers Europe*, *Chambers Global* and *Chambers UK* will tell you the answers. *Chambers USA* can give you useful information about US-headquartered firms, many of which now offer training contracts.

The Chambers main directories are powerful tools. We've already mentioned **Dundas & Wilson**, so let's use them as an example. Go to the [main Chambers website](#) and type their name in. They have rankings in *Chambers UK*, and those rankings paint a very clear picture. The firm is Band 1 in Scotland for corporate, dispute resolution, construction, employment, immigration, media, local government – the list goes on and on. They are clearly a top player north of the border. But how about the firm's London performance? Band 2 for lower mid-market M&A. Band 5 for mid-market real estate. Band 6 for restructuring and insolvency work. The English office is picking up rankings, which is an achievement in itself, but it is not competing at the same top level as its Scottish counterpart. Click on that 'lower mid-market M&A' for Dundas (second link down on their rankings page). They are in the same Band as many of the smaller London firms like Farrer and RPC. The editorial on them suggests that corporate work is important to the office, and implies that although it still gets instructions based on its Scottish connections, it has started to pick up significant amounts of work in its own right.

So, from knowing nothing about Dundas & Wilson in London ten minutes ago, you have already started to paint a picture of its main activities and which parts of the market it operates in. It's still broad brushstrokes at the moment, but nuances are starting to emerge. Flick back to the *Student Guide's* True Picture feature and you'll see the office has been expanding rapidly and has been hiring star names in real estate. Think how useful all this information could be when filling in an application form or answering that tough question at interview.

## Step 3: Interpreting a law firm's recruitment website, adverts and literature

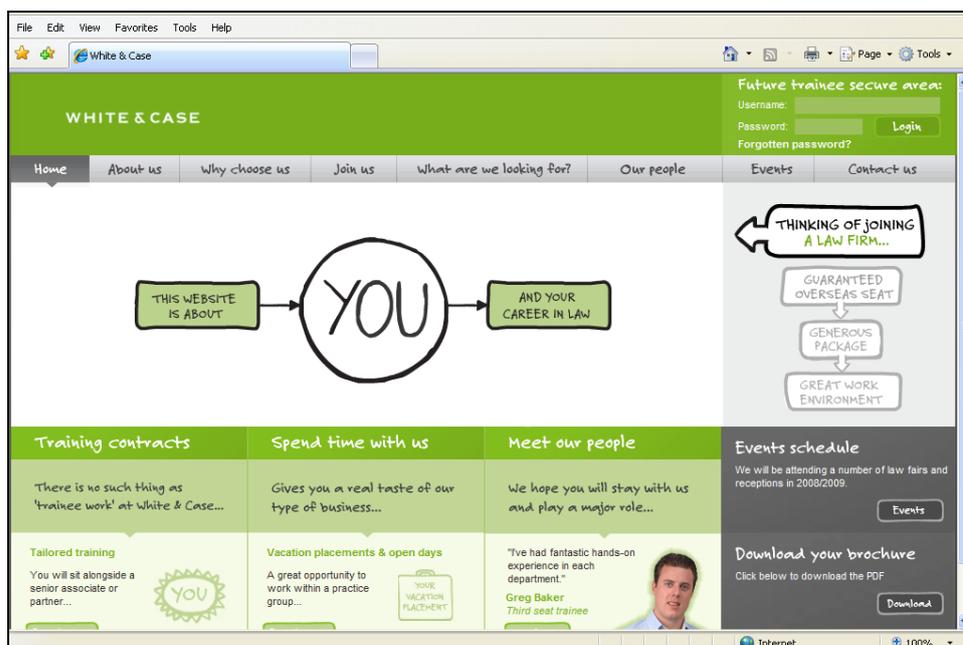
We're fairly sure the first ever law firm advert belonged to Lewis Silkin – and we'll be exploring how it came about in our next newsletter. That was in the late 1980s but even now, when advertising has been allowed for years, many firms are still remarkably unsophisticated in their marketing. They are gradually learning, however, that one of the worst things a firm can do is misjudge its recruiting campaign. When looking at recruitment websites, you'll see that all law firms say much the same thing about themselves (leading firm, client focused, etc) but they don't all say it in the same way. This is important. Let's compare the grad recruitment pages of three websites.

First, here's the offering of US-headquartered firm **Weil Gotshal & Manges**, which has an established UK training scheme:



A tiny bug-like person in the glare of a spot light and the word 'Challenging' in bold type? Yikes! The message Weil is trying to put across is pretty clear: a training contract here is not going to be an easy ride. It's supposed to be off-putting to a certain type of person.

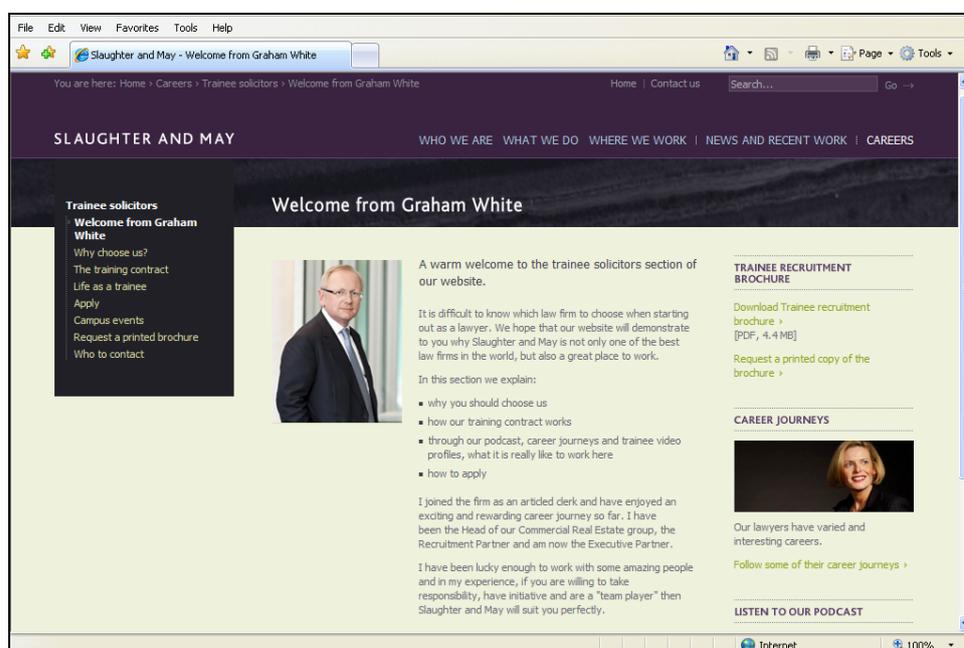
Compare and contrast with another US-headquartered firm, **White & Case**:



White & Case sells itself in a much softer way, asking what can we give YOU? One of its biggest selling points is its international network and it

pushes its guaranteed overseas seat heavily. This international message is absolutely the right one for the firm to be pushing, but how do you define a ‘great work environment’ and does that mean a training contract here is necessarily any less ‘scary’ than one at Weil?

Finally, here’s how the magic circle’s **Slaughter and May** presents itself to students.



Slaughters’ website is beautiful and we’ve met Graham White – he’s a lovely man who gave our editor a lift in his sports car to Southampton station one time. Go have a look around the site if you haven’t already. It’s incredibly well designed and must have cost an absolute packet to produce. Slaughters even has a podcast for students, but in terms of content, the website is actually pretty traditional. A message from the recruitment partner wishing visitors ‘a warm welcome’? The image it’s presenting to the world screams old school. This is not a criticism, but it does speak volumes about the type of student the firm is looking for.

That question we mentioned at the start: “*why did you choose to apply here?*” Well, as these three examples show, the firms’ own websites tell you the answer to that question. Weil wants people who are going to say ‘I want to really stretch myself’. White & Case wants people who are going to say things like ‘I want to make use of my languages’ and Slaughters – well, they want people who are cutting-edge enough to appreciate podcasts but who also carry themselves with a certain dignity.

If Weil sold itself as a fluffy, fuzzy place to work, it would attract students unsuited to it, and trouble would follow. So, every time you view a law firm’s web page, ask yourself: what is it trying to tell me? You probably already think about this subconsciously. Do it consciously from now on.

## Step 4: What to look for on a firm's main website

There is so much to be gained from crawling over a firm's website, and if you take away all the superlatives and self-praise you'll get a decent understanding of what a firm does. As these sites are designed primarily for clients, the usual approach is to say what the firm does and for what type of client. Firms will usually present themselves in a way that emphasizes the breadth of their activities. But be aware that this won't necessarily tell you which things they are best at and which they are just getting into. Look specifically for the following clues:

- a message or annual report from the managing partner/chair/CEO
- the way in which the firm divides itself, i.e. by department or by key client sectors
- the relative size of departments or practice groups
- the geographical spread of the firm
- biographies of trainees or partners who might be on the interview panel
- any information about community or charitable activities (CSR is the often used term – it means Corporate Social Responsibility)
- the gender/ethnic balance among partners/trainees
- the overall feel and ease of use of the website
- Press releases, deal and case examples

All these things can help you expand your factual knowledge about a firm and begin to gain a 'feel' for the place. You might notice, for example, that a lot of partners and staff come from certain universities. A lead partner might spell out what the firm's game plan is for the next few years. You might notice that particular practice groups have expanded (though firms will rarely make it obvious where they have contracted). Absorb the information but retain a degree of healthy scepticism about the trumpet blowing.

## Step 5: The legal press

Another obvious one. *The Lawyer* magazine, *Legal Week*, *The Times Law Supplement* and *The Law Gazette* are the best sources of daily and weekly information about what's going on at firms. *The Am Law Daily* will have information for US firms. Look out for big deals, financial results and stories making a splash in the profession to judge how well a firm is performing.

Gossip websites and blogs: Everyone loves gossip, and lawyers are no different. There are a handful of websites that focus on the stories and intrigue and it's worth taking a look at them. Beware, though – these sites should not be your key research tool. Updated weekly, *Roll on Friday* is probably the best-known UK legal gossip website, but it pales into insignificance when compared to its nearest counterpart in the States, *Above the Law*. Its stories are often in questionable taste and its comments section often puerile, but it has become immensely powerful and managing partners are known to keep a close eye on it. Equally dedicated to transparency but somewhat less controversial, *Lawshucks* is a website

that tracks firm redundancies. It is US-based, but covers some British firms as well.

## Step 6: Researching US-headquartered firms

US firms have come to London in their droves. Some offices will have been formed by a merger with an English firm; others will have started up from scratch. We've produced a list of every single US firm that has touched down on Planet Blighty, and which ones offer training contracts.

[You can find it here.](#)

Our sister publication, *Chambers Associate*, is also available to you. This is like the *Student Guide*, but aimed at American students. We've interviewed hundreds of junior associates Stateside, just as we interview trainees here. We also talked to many law firm managing partners about their future strategy – useful stuff if you want to impress interviewers. A new edition covering 100+ firms is going live at the start of May 2010.

Do bear in mind that the London offices of US firms are often quite different culturally from their headquarters. However, it's good to get an idea of how a firm is perceived on the other side of the pond, and there may well be something in the culture that has crossed the Atlantic. We've noticed that **Bingham McCutchen** is very brand-aware while **Covington & Burling** is an academic, intellectual sort of place. These statements seem to apply on both sides of the pond.

## Step 7: Researching a smaller firm

The largest firms all have a massive commercial presence and even much smaller outfits do crop up in the *Chambers* rankings. But what if you can't find much on the firm you're applying to?

At times we do research on smaller firms and often resort to very broad internet searches via Google. You might be surprised what turns up: local press articles; links with community and charitable organisations; references to things the firm has sponsored; really bad news about dodgy dealings (on rare occasions!); articles the firm's lawyers have written for industry journals; reported cases; and local business awards. Just one of these snippets of info could turn into a useful talking point at an interview.

At the very least the, the *Law Society Directory* will list the firm's solicitors and the areas of law in which it practices.

## Step 8: Using your network properly

We're always banging on about networking and it is something that law students and even qualified lawyers can feel intimidated by. There's really no need to feel this way and if you don't get over your initial inhibitions then you're doing yourself a real disservice.

- Write a list of all the people you know (in itself this could be an intriguing exercise). Start to enquire if any of them have contacts in the profession or contacts that could give you some kind of

assistance. You might end up with a contact at a firm you're trying to target and you might also be surprised at how willing people are to give you helpful advice. Even the odd sliver of info could be useful. Remember to include friends, family, neighbours, university or law school contacts, people you have worked for, people you meet at social events, people on your sports team... and so on.

- Use social networking sites to ask friends if they have potential contacts for you. Have you discovered the likes of the [legal forum](#) on The Student Room website?
- Attend as many careers events and presentations as possible. Be the person who stays to chat. Dress professionally – the recruiters are trying to imagine you as a potential trainee. Make it easier for them (and yourself) by leaving your university hoodie and Converse at home.
- Volunteering activities are excellent for making good contacts – people who get involved in this type of activity are generally the sort who want to help others as often as possible.

### **And finally...**

The only thing left to say is don't OVER-research and rattle on at interview about every deal the firm has ever done. Remember, recruiters just want to see that you have a broad understanding of what the firm is about. But the more detailed your prior research is, the more sophisticated and commercially aware your answer will sound. It's the difference between *"I like travelling and I know you have lots of offices"* and *"I know that you're expanding your operations in Asia, which is obviously an important area these days. I'd be excited to be at a firm where there's opportunities to work in a huge emerging market."*

So there you have it. Once you get into the habit of researching, it will come more and more naturally, so get to it!

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