

Case study: CIPD Parent Returner Programme

Plexus

Profile

Plexus Law is a leading defendant law firm that provides innovative, high quality, specialist legal services to insurance companies, corporates and public sector bodies. Plexus offers clients the full breadth of claims-related legal work, from claims handling through to complex, high value litigation.

Size: 900+UK employees, including over 100 Partners/500 Fee Earners.

Location: The firm is headquartered in Leeds, with seven additional offices across the UK, in London, Manchester, Evesham, Liverpool, Halifax, Edinburgh and Chelmsford..

People function: The HR function includes the Head of HR, HRBPs, HR advisors and administrative support. Talent Management and Learning & Development work in collaboration with HR.

Operational context

It takes anywhere between 4-7 years to qualify as a lawyer. The first step is obtaining a law degree or doing a conversion course if you have a degree in another subject. This is often followed by vocational qualifications and in-house training in a law firm, with further exams along the way.

Many law firms provide the training with a view to offering permanent jobs to their best candidates. It takes at least six years of hard work and commitment, as well as requiring significant time and resources to be allocated by the law firm.

Newly qualified lawyers can go on to specialise in many different types of law and work in a wide variety of sectors.

Family life, and in particular the demands of new parenthood, is often cited as conflicting with the demands of the role (focus on billable hours/hard work culture).

The challenge

Through a series of initiatives, with the support of her Managing Partner and other senior partners in the firm, Director of HR, Andrea Wilby, decided to tackle the dual issue of:

- 1 The talent pool of women who leave the profession.
- 2 The difficulties faced by people returning to their firm from parental leave.

What they did

- 1 Andrea is leading a review of the existing recruitment process, focusing on the wording of job advertisements and where these were placed. This was in recognition that too often, the traditional routes of recruitment miss out on people who have taken a career break.
 - Most potential candidates won't apply for a role if they think there won't be flexibility in how the work can be done. The wording was revised to include the statement 'will consider flexible working and/or flexible hours' and the advertisements were placed on a number of different sites.
- 2 Behind the scenes, work had already been done with managers to help them consider what sort of flexibility might be possible. All of this was then mirrored in changes to the interview process. Whereas previously, flexible working may have been discussed at the final interview, it was now brought to the forefront of the recruitment process.
- 3 Other initiatives are being introduced (post Covid) including the development of a network of returners across the firm, informed by feedback from focus groups with parent returners, to really understand the pressure points and at which stages different types of support can be offered.
 - There is also work planned to support people on parental leave, with a joint effort from HR and the line managers. Rather than waiting to hear whether people are planning on returning, a series of regular contact points will be implemented throughout the period of parental leave, to discuss well-being, job opportunities and returning to work.

- Parent returners is one of the key projects assigned to the Greenhouse Programme. The Greenhouse Programme is designed to identify and nurture talent from within the business and is part of the overall Talent Management & Development Strategy for the firm. Greenhouse participants are drawn from those who have consistently excelled in their respective departments. They work as a team on projects outside of their everyday role for the duration of the programme.

Outcomes

While the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down some of the work around recruitment, it has also decreased resistance to different forms of flexible working, including flexible hours and remote working.

While the urgency around dealing with implications of the pandemic is still ongoing, the culture shift needed to enable more parent returners and flexible working is really starting. There are two returners who chose to take on development roles, working closely with apprentices to support their development as lawyers.

Andrea Wilby, Returner Champion (Plexus Law)

'Understanding the working environment and the pressures people work under is key. If you recognise that, you are in a better position to challenge ways of thinking and ultimately, encourage and enable changes to how people work.'

'Law firms invest hugely in their people, and we want to put the same investment into our parent returners as we do into our young up-and-coming lawyers. It's about well-being and talent management.'

Top tips and learnings

- Look at the culture of your organisation and recognise that attitudinal change can drive operational change.
- Speak to individuals to really understand people's lived experience.
- Make sure that policies and processes are there and working.
- Recruitment: remove the bottlenecks of job advertisement wording and placement of ads, to get access to a greater talent pool.
- Encourage openness around different roles and how people can transfer skills and experience within the organisation.

Supported by



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