

# Telling Stories:

## Understanding Social Mobility



# Introduction

We believe that ambition and talent should decide how far people progress in their career. However, there is a wealth of evidence which indicates that isn't always the case, and that many people are unable to reach their full potential because of where they grew up, where they went to school or what their parents did for a living. As a leading City law firm, we believe we have a responsibility and an opportunity to address some of the barriers which can prevent people from achieving their potential.

To complement our wider social mobility related work, which includes; engaging with schools and colleges, raising aspirations of young people, and offering paid work experiences and

internship opportunities, we are excited to launch this "Telling Stories" project. The project is about creating a platform for people across the firm to share their stories through a lens of social mobility, and to be open and authentic about aspects of themselves which may not be immediately apparent.

For the firm to be truly inclusive, we must create a space where people can bring their whole selves to work. Being able to be oneself is a very powerful way to increase awareness, break down barriers, improve relationships, challenge stereotypes and create positive change.

As well as being the right thing to do, it also makes business sense.

People perform better when they can be themselves. They will be more productive, feel more connected with the workplace, build effective relationships with colleagues and clients and hopefully go on to lead a happy and fulfilling work life.

We are very grateful to everyone who has contributed to this project by sharing their personal stories and experiences. We hope you enjoy reading this booklet and that you find inspiration in our people's stories.

Please do get in touch with us if you would like to get involved in the firm's social mobility related workstream.



Madeline Gowlett  
Partner, Tax  
madeline.gowlett  
@traverssmith.com  
+44 (0)20 7295 3411



Peter Hughes  
Partner, Derivatives and  
Structured Products  
peter.hughes  
@traverssmith.com  
+44 (0)20 7295 3377



Polly Richard  
Partner, Dispute Resolution  
polly.richard  
@traverssmith.com  
+44 (0)20 7295 3347

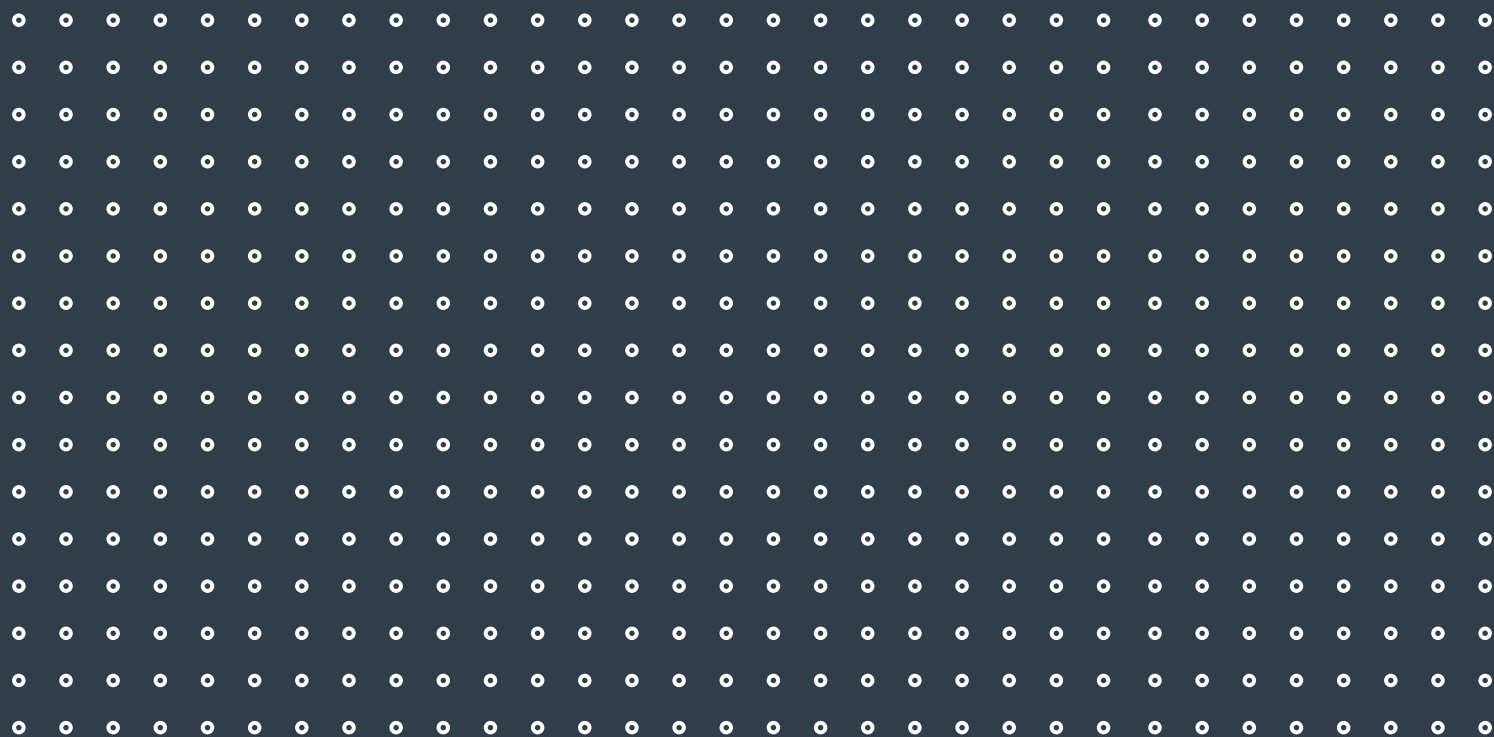
# Sami Ahmed

**Legal Product Specialist,  
Legal Technology**

My background isn't the typical one you'd imagine someone working in a corporate law firm to have. My mum and dad both came here as immigrants with no formal education, they both worked labour intensive jobs that consisted of long hours. My siblings and I were raised in a council estate in Camden where many of the families were generally first-generation immigrants from lower socio-economic class. Naturally, my socio-economic background mirrored my early academic experience as I attended an underachieving state school in my local area that consisted mainly of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds as well. Growing up in an environment where my friends and peers came from the same social circumstances made me feel, to a large degree, normal as I didn't know any different. The normality of this led me to adopt an inner-city London accent that often entailed a lot of colloquial







language and the mispronunciation of certain words. Again, the way I spoke never made me feel like an outlier as everyone I knew spoke the same way.

However, this state of "normality" changed once I started to focus on pursuing a law degree and I started to build the image in my head that a stereotypical law student was one that came from a privileged background and had been well spoken. This stereotype didn't faze me until I reached the ages of 16–18, where I was discouraged to pursue a law degree by career advisors and friends purely because of my accent. Once I achieved the goal of starting a law degree at the University of Manchester, it was clear many of peers sounded nothing like me. To exacerbate this, a lot of the people I spoke to at networking events also spoke more like my peers than me. These events, and general social interactions, put pressure on me to quash my accent

as I didn't want people to think less of me due to my pronunciation of certain words.

Although my initial experience with networking events and social interactions was daunting, this improved as I attended more diversity and inclusion related networking events. These events involved people that worked in the City but were from an array of backgrounds, and in some cases backgrounds like mine. I found camaraderie in this as it built my confidence to continue with my studies and apply to City law firms I hadn't considered before.

Since joining Travers Smith, D&I has become more of a reality. They are a prime example of a city establishment emphasising diversity amongst their employees and ensuring they are from a range of backgrounds. There is much more to do but I am glad how much my misconceptions have changed since law school.

# Lewis Currie

Associate, Tax

I was the first in my family to attend university, having attended the local comprehensive school (primary and secondary) on the small island in Scotland where I grew up. I was lucky to have a role model at university in one of my professors, a veritable social mobility champion, who was really key in helping me recognise and challenge my own self-imposed limitations and lack of confidence, reorienting my mindset towards recognising and realising my potential. This impressed upon me early the importance of having good role models.

It became quickly apparent during my studies that the legal sector had a reputation of perhaps not being the most socially mobile. This was reinforced through my initial experience of law firm recruitment where there was a definite, narrow focus on that elusive concept of 'polish', which operated as a natural filter to exclude more diverse candidates. Thankfully, the firm I trained at (alas, not Travers) did not put a great emphasis on 'polish', viewing candidates holistically in light of all of their life experiences.

Firms now seem to be increasingly receptive to the idea that candidates who have overcome challenges from wider life experiences can demonstrate positive qualities which carry across into the workspace – endurance, tenacity, conscientiousness, to name a few. Improving social mobility is incredibly important for law firms and this is no mean feat to achieve. Firms also need to take into account the complex intersection of social mobility with other strands of diversity – such as race, religion, sexual orientation and gender. To that end, it is important to recognise that some talented people may not have had the same or similar set of experiences, or 'polish', as others, but may well be the best people for the job. No business striving to recruit the best people should choose to limit its talent pool. City law does not exist in a vacuum, and our clients are making similar efforts to improve social mobility as part of a wider package of improving diversity and increasingly expect to see the same reflected in their advisers. We are, after all, the sum of our experiences, and genuine diversity of thought is difficult to achieve if the recruitment pool is limited to a narrow set of



candidates, with similar life experiences and similar backgrounds.

Though we still have some way to go, things definitely seem to be improving in the legal sector as far as recruitment is concerned, as demonstrated here at Travers through our work with Aspiring Solicitors, City Solicitors Horizons and RARE. The next step should be a focus on retention, which should be just as important as recruitment, otherwise realising greater diversity is short-lived and, will, ultimately, be illusory. In my view, role models and mentors will be a key component of a successful retention strategy going forward and Travers has done a great job in promoting such role models.



# Kirsty Emery

Senior Associate, Finance

"Why do you want to be a lawyer?". It is a question you are asked at every single training contract interview. Thankfully I had enough sense back then not to give the honest answer, which would have been that I had sort of fallen into it!

I grew up in the Isle of Man with great, but ever-so-slightly pushy, parents. My dad is a roofer who left school as soon as he possibly could. My mum would have loved to continue her education, but was told at 16 that she had to get a job to help support the family. Despite this, I was very fortunate that they both really recognised the importance of a good education and they spent a lot of time and energy supporting me and my brother in succeeding at school.



However, when it came time to decide what degree to apply for, family advice was thin on the ground. For a while I contemplated doing a maths degree, but was told by my dad that it would be pointless, as I would just end up being an accountant and I could do that without a degree. The fact that you could do a degree in one subject and then get a job in a completely different field was lost on him. Running out of time for the deadline, I decided to put down law.

Whilst this wasn't the most informed or promising start to a career path, I approached the end of university thinking that I could potentially enjoy being a lawyer. I set about applying for vacation schemes and training contracts and it was always that question – "why do you want to be a lawyer" – that caused me issues. How can you know why you want to do something when you don't really know what it involves? Unlike some of my peers, there were no family friends who were lawyers that I could quiz or do a bit of informal work experience with. This is not insurmountable, but I think there are socio-economic hurdles at the application and interview stage of a law career. Whilst there were trainee solicitors at law fairs that I'm sure would have been approachable and willing to answer questions, the thought of asking a stranger potentially stupid questions was intimidating and I lacked confidence. The best my family could offer was to proof read my applications, but I was aware of others who would have a huge amount of help with applications and interview prep from family and other contacts.

Looking back, I imagine that my interviews made me come across as very unpolished and I did not have a great deal of success until one of the vacation schemes I applied for held an assessment day. Unlike the other processes, this involved a business game that we played out in groups. Moderators watched how we interacted on the table to gain an insight into how we would fit in the firm. I was successful at this

stage and gained a two week vacation scheme. By the time it came to the interview stage, I felt much more confident in being able to draw on my real life experience to explain why I thought I would be a good fit.

There are lots of small things when you start your career in the City that might be unnerving for those with less insight into how it works. For instance, I remember a trainee telling me before I started my training contract that the associates could spot the trainees who were wearing suits from Next... This sent me into a rather pointless tailspin, worrying about where I should be buying my office clothes! However, since I started my career, it has been rare that I have felt disadvantaged due to my socio-economic background. With time, I have gained confidence in my ability to do my job, and have recognised that our clients are also from a diverse range of backgrounds. In some situations, I think my background might even be a benefit, as it can make me more approachable to those who may be nervous about "bringing the lawyers in".

Whilst the process worked out for me in the end, I do wonder how many people with the ability to do well in law are either being put off applying or are finding themselves slightly lost in the process due to their backgrounds. The fact that lawyers are generally required to have a degree in the first place is an obvious hurdle to those who may not be able to afford going to university. But even after this point, there are lots of reasons which can add up to make those from lower socio-economic backgrounds less confident and less informed about embarking on a career at a City law firm. It is comforting to know that Travers Smith are taking steps to screen applications to take into account socio-economic backgrounds and improve social mobility. But we all must strive to ensure that those with talent are applying and being recruited to the firm, regardless of their background.

# Dan Forshaw

Associate, Real Estate



Social mobility is an impossibly broad topic to write 1000 words on, so I will attempt to focus this discussion through the lens of my accent which has a particular resonance for myself at work. Whilst I admit that an accent may be a slightly crude metric of socio-economic background, if you've never considered it before, hopefully this will help – to be clear, it's not about your voice per se, but about how your accent is part of your identity and social background.

From my work profile picture you can tell that I'm white and male (welcome to a City law firm). What you wouldn't immediately know from that picture is that I'm from a working-class background, went to a slightly below average state school in the North West and (consequently) I have quite a thick Manchester/Lancashire accent. The point is, our image is only one aspect of who we are, and there are

many other less visible and more significant markers of identity – for instance, I would say that my voice says much more about me than how I look. I had never considered my upbringing or my accent until I moved to university (Bristol) and found myself in a very different social milieu from that in which I grew up – you certainly don't find yourself surrounded by extremely confident wealthy kids from the home counties (ironically) wearing clothes they bought in Oxfam in my home town. It was deeply uncomfortable and I found that my innate response was to emphasise my differences to make a point (it's breakfast, dinner, and tea, by the way, in that order). I grew more confident and comfortable through university but when it came to applying for law firms, I harboured suspicions that the legal profession would present similar malaise.

In the context of interviews (and more generally, I suppose), I was often told to not quash my accent, because it makes me stand out. It is empowering advice; my accent is part of who I am and where I'm from – not to mention that it takes an awful lot of effort to think about how to pronounce words any differently to the way I do. Yet it is still unsettling to be the only person in a room with a regional accent. It still makes me feel like the odd one out, which as a state-educated person in this industry, in this city, at such a firm, I often will be. I do think we've come a long way and I am personally encouraged by hearing more regional accents across the departments I have worked in while a trainee, although a mate at another firm was still subject to a comment from a senior which insinuated that it was understandable that he made mistakes, given 'he is only from Lancashire'. Joking or otherwise, it demonstrates an outmoded and bigoted sentiment which sadly still pervades some elements of this industry – that if you don't look and sound the part, you won't fit in and you're probably not up to the job.

As with any other aspect of identity, it is a huge shame that anyone should feel that where they were raised or the way they talk is the basis of people's pre-formed opinion of them, and even worse, that they should feel it necessary to suppress that part of themselves to assuage those doubts. On my path to this career, I have spoken with several

people from similar backgrounds to mine who have clearly stifled their accents, which I can only assume was in an effort to better 'fit-in' and protect their careers prospects. It's important we do not do this, not just for one's own self-worth (being genuine is a virtue in itself, plus it's tiring to act differently), but for that wider pool of people who would otherwise be encouraged by our example. A positive example of this is the Speaker of the House of Commons, Lindsey Hoyle (who happens to be my MP back home). I find it incredibly refreshing to hear such a thick accent from someone in a position of such visibility and status, especially when most other politicians are so polished and media trained that we have become accustomed to those in prominent positions all sounding the same. It seems obvious when you think about it, but there is no reason why there should not be more people in positions of power and influence with strong accents, elected or appointed on their merits as a leader and effective at what they do. Just like seeing people from minorities in positions of power, hearing people with regional accents is as equally empowering and inspiring for those who identify with a similar background (be it geographic, socio-economic or otherwise).

So what more can we do? Firstly, and fundamentally, it comes down a very simple and well versed moral lesson of not judging a book by its cover – how we look and sound





This comes down a very simple and well versed moral lesson of not judging a book by its cover – how we look and sound has no bearing whatsoever on our skillset.

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**Dan Forshaw, Associate**



has no bearing whatsoever on our skill set. I'd be the first to admit that I've made assumptions about people before really knowing them and have badly misjudged them, often to my own detriment. And secondly, there's a positive element of actively fighting off unconscious bias to ensure that the teams we assemble are diverse and benefit from as wide an array of skills and experiences as possible, which means employing people from all different backgrounds.

Other businesses are waking up to the advantages of having a diverse workforce and you can be sure that a client made to feel uncomfortable

or judged by their background would be a client no more. As an industry, we have a duty to combat our pre-formed impressions of people based on their background, and look to the unique experiences and skill set of each individual to build genuinely diverse teams.

We are tackling other stereotypes, and while those associated with socio-economic background (of which accent is just one marker) are less visible, they are just as important. The crushing irony for me, however, is that to my mates back home I'm now a posh southerner...

# Orlagh Joyce

Associate, Dispute Resolution



I didn't attend a "top 20" university and this is my journey to become a solicitor.

I grew up in the quiet county of Suffolk. My mum was a part-time artist and landlord, my dad was an in-house lawyer. Like many candidates in today's market, I went to a state secondary school. Being an aspiring lawyer at the time, I applied to some of the top university law programs, which were seen as 'the way to get in'. Whilst I excelled in my GCSE's, come A-level results day, my results were not what I'd anticipated. On the day I was faced with a choice:

- Attend my original university of choice but study archaeology, not law; or
- Study law, at a university I hadn't originally applied to, Coventry University.

At the time this was an easy choice for me, of course it was going to be law. Whilst I have nothing against the wonderful archaeologists of this world, I always wanted to be a lawyer. My dad had studied business law at Coventry 30 years prior and I had family in the city, so it felt like the right choice to read Commercial Law at Coventry.

The Commercial Law LLB at Coventry allowed me to focus on specific commercial aspects of law such as international commercial law, intellectual property and law in the business environment. The program also honed my practical legal skills in drafting, interviewing and advising, negotiation and mediation. Something which certainly prepared me for working in the city.

However, I always feel the need to caveat at this point, even though I went to a state school and a "non-elite" university,

I had the advantage of my dad being a lawyer. He gave me the insight, support and advice that many others didn't have. Notwithstanding this, entering the legal profession as a non-elite university graduate was challenging.

I had graduated top of my class, I had a wealth of legal work experience at several prestigious law firms, and I had more extra-curricular activities than you can shake an archaeologist's brush at. But this seemingly wasn't enough, I received a plethora of rejections until finally, I received a training contract offer on my last application. Sadly, I soon realised that, from my university cohort of +200, I was the only person to have been accepted onto a training contract.

I knew these people, I knew their talent and the level of training they had received. I couldn't understand why they weren't being offered their opportunity to shine. One training contract from over 200 students – below 0.5%, it was difficult for me to believe that this was a chance-occurrence.

As testament to their ability, many of my university friends have gone on to qualify or are in the process of doing so, and many are now successful lawyers. However, each has

had to find an alternative route of doing so, none were afforded training contracts during university. Sadly, in my experience I have found that academic background continues to be an issue of contention well past the training stage in some circles. I recall an unfortunate experience I had when interviewing for an NQ role, where the hiring partner said "So, Coventry, not a great institution is it?", I was shocked that someone could think that, let alone say it. Why was my alma mater not a great institute? Why was I being measured on this basis? As you may have guessed, comments like that rang alarm bells in my head about the culture of that workplace and I chose not to pursue that role. Experiences like these show that an old and outdated way of thinking toward academic background remains in some areas of our industry.

Fast forward to now. I've been at Travers Smith for just over 3 months, and I am so pleased to have joined a firm that works hard to embody its values and genuinely cares about social mobility, not least by providing a space for us to contribute our stories to help expand the discussion around social mobility.







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**Orlagh Joyce, Associate**

Ultimately, we come to the question, what more can we do, individually and collectively, to promote social mobility? I truly believe there is an abundance of talent that is simply overlooked because of the stigma around non-elite universities. Widening the talent pool outside of the 'traditional' universities to find these candidates may require more resource, but ultimately, I believe that the time that firms invest now to do so, will reap the rewards.

A phrase that has stuck with me for a long time now, and one which I think we should try and keep in mind is, "as you climb the ladder, pull others along with you". It's a concept that's easier to put into practice than we might think, for example:

- **Become a mentor** for an aspiring student. You can provide advice and guidance which they may not otherwise have access to; whether that's through a formal scheme such as Aspiring Solicitors or informally through LinkedIn or other channels.
- **Respond to LinkedIn requests** from aspiring students who may want to ask questions, gain insight and advice from you or learn more about the type of work you do.
- **Share your story** with others (in ways such as this) to promote discussion around social mobility and provide insight and ideas to make changes for the better.



# Jacob Miller

## Paralegal, Dispute Resolution

When I first started thinking about my contribution to this series, I have to admit that I wasn't really sure what direction to go in. Social mobility is such a vast and complex topic that it seems almost impossible to do justice in a single piece of writing. Nevertheless, it is a topic worthy of significant discussion, and it is extremely encouraging to see that discussion now being given a bigger platform.

One of the biggest challenges associated with social mobility – in my opinion, at least – is actually understanding what it looks like. It is also arguably unfair to ask those around us to make an effort to understand something if they don't know what that 'something' actually comprises. Often, the way we think of social mobility 'factors' (the characteristics which may make someone socially mobile) is overly-simplistic, and this prevents us





from considering the issue in the round – it also creates the narrative that social mobility exists in isolation, rather than being something which changes the lens through which we ought to consider all aspects that comprise someone's personhood.

Generally, the way many people think of social mobility is on the premise that there are various factors which might make someone socially mobile, and the more of those factors which are relevant to them, the more socially mobile they are. While this is understandable, it is much more important to consider a person's circumstances in the round, and also consider that different people may be socially mobile in different respects.

By way of example:

**Person A** was state school educated at a supportive, but significantly under-resourced, school. They secured a place at a non-Russell Group university to study law where they achieved a first-class degree, and they had to work at least one job throughout university to stay financially afloat.

**Person B**, on the other hand, was privately educated at one of the best schools in the country, secured multiple offers from top Russell Group universities, and also has a high 2:1

or first-class law degree. They had a job through university, but mainly because they wanted to have it. On the face of it, Person A seems a lot more socially mobile than person B. But, if you scratch a bit deeper, it transpires that Person B was actually brought up in the care system because their parents couldn't look after them. They ended up in the top-flight school because they were awarded a full academic scholarship for which they had to sit an arduous additional set of examinations every year, they have absolutely no financial support from family and their finances through university are covered again by academic scholarships, based on things like exam performance. If their grades dip and they lose the scholarships, they would have to drop out of their course. That fairly changes the picture, doesn't it?

The point I'm getting at, here, is that we have to consider person B in the round to realise that they are also socially mobile, despite the fact that they may not present as such in the same way that person A does. Nor does person B's perceived 'degree' of social mobility change that of person A – they are simply socially mobile in different ways, and they present differently because their experiences as people are different. My experience is very representative of person A's; person B is modelled on someone who I know well, who is a trainee at another City firm.



A socially mobile person's experience of life events – especially unexpected challenges – may differ significantly from that of others who are not socially mobile.

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**Jacob Miller, Paralegal**

While the above example uses certain financial metrics as a frame, I ought also to clarify that social mobility is not an exclusively financial issue. While the vast majority of socially mobile candidates will come from a comparatively less well-off background, it is not true to say that challenging personal finances are the only – or even the primary – social mobility characteristic: someone might, for example, launch a successful business while at university which supports them more than adequately financially, and still be a socially mobile candidate based on other elements of their background.

The other point I touched on earlier is that a socially mobile person's experience of other life events – especially unexpected challenges – may differ significantly from that of others who are not socially mobile. That was something I experienced first-hand when I was 18 years old, in August 2018. I was weeks away from starting my second year of

university, had just moved in with my fiancée for the first time, and had a job I enjoyed working at a bar which provided an essential source of income for me – life was good. One afternoon, as I went to go to the supermarket, I tripped over the doorframe and went over the side of the few steps up to the door – there being no railing to stop me. When I landed, I couldn't move and, to cut a very long story short, it transpired that I had herniated and disintegrated a number of discs in my lumbar spine, causing me to be paralysed from the waist down. I was in hospital for around a fortnight, later being discharged about 48 hours before my university term started – while very much still re-learning to walk.

In an ideal world, I'd probably have taken a significant amount of time away from everything – work, studies, commitments – and just have focussed on getting back to full health. That wasn't a viable option for me, though,



on the basis that I couldn't afford to take that time out. As such, my focus became on balancing the things I had to balance – studies, recovery, and finding a source of income which I could work around those. Soon after, I started tutoring school students going through exams, and that became something which provided a reliable income that I had enough control over to also keep my head above water in terms of making sure I stayed on track at university. Recovering from the injury had to take something of a back seat in the end, and it remains a challenge, but I'm working on it, and I remain optimistic that it will improve with time. The various challenges along the road have taught me a huge amount about myself, and generally about what people are capable of fighting back from if they take the right attitude. Whether those challenges were posed by being a kid from Glasgow trying to break into the City legal

world, or unexpectedly having a run-in with a spinal injury, they've all made me more able to adapt and figure things out for myself.

Coming back round to the focus of this discussion, when I was asked to contribute to this series, he asked me to consider what more can be done to promote social mobility, and I think the answer is very simple: on one hand, being armed with a genuine understanding of what social mobility is and how it may present differently in different people; on the other, understanding the hidden strengths that come from navigating through a socially mobile background, and encouraging people to recognise and channel the applicability of those skills in the workplace.

# Polly Richard

Partner, Dispute Resolution



In any other context, when asked to describe my background I'd say I was brought up in the countryside in a nice part of the North-East, enjoyed school and had lots of friends. With a social mobility hat on, my background sounds slightly different. I should add that these aspects of my background were (at the time) unimportant to me: I'm the first generation in my family to go to university, spent some time receiving free school meals, was born in the North of England and I went to a series of Northern comprehensive schools. It's probably fair to say I have had a less than straightforward family life – my mother raised me and my three older sisters as a single mum in my formative years. Looking back on it (now as a parent myself) I can't imagine how hard that must've been for my mum.

I should add that this changed when my mum met my step-father. He was from Northumberland and eventually we

moved (from Yorkshire) and started a new life with him. My step-father was unlike anyone I had ever met, he was well educated (sent to boarding school when he was 6), had a proper job (as an estate agent), liked country pursuits and was (relatively speaking) a bit posh!

My route into university wasn't certain. My parents weren't fussed about me going (my older siblings hadn't). It wasn't something we spoke about at home. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. The school had no careers advice other than a series of yes/no answers on the computer which then spat out a career option (mine was probation officer). I didn't know how to apply to university. My school had a group of about 5 people who were handpicked by the headmaster and who were encouraged to apply to Oxbridge. If you weren't one of those (I wasn't), there was no conversation. Despite getting all A's at AS, not one teacher asked me if I'd

thought about going to university let alone encouraged me. So a week before applications closed I took the huge UCAS directory out of the library, took a flick through and thought I'd give law a go (I enjoyed a trip to Newcastle Crown Court in Sociology so why not?). I had no idea where to apply to but I saw the list of ranked law schools, jumped over Oxford and Cambridge (the thought didn't even cross my mind to apply) and I applied to the next 6. I got 4 rejections and 2 offers.

One of my two offers was from Durham. I couldn't believe my luck (at the time Durham was the best ranked law school outside of Oxbridge). I got the offer the day offers closed. So I concluded that I'd just scraped in. Probably because they have a quota to fill from "local" northern comprehensives. This theme continued throughout university. When I received vacation scheme offers, the common response was "you must've been let in on an equal opportunities basis" – to fill their so called "northern" (aka "poor") quota. When I told my law school peers I had a training contract offer at Travers Smith they looked at me in disbelief. Apparently, Travers Smith was a "conservative" law firm. I've never understood where that perception came from because they took a punt on me! I graduated with a first class law degree (no northern quota to fill there). But maybe that was just luck? After all, I'd

always been told I must be really good at exams...

Durham was the making (but could've been the breaking) of me. It was tough academically and otherwise (not least because I had to work in a restaurant two days a week during term and full time in the holidays to fund myself). I also had to stand my ground with lots of privileged and entitled (mainly) men. This was great training for life in City law! It's fair to say I had never really thought about any aspect of my background until I went to Durham. I was blissfully unaware of the "north/south divide" until a fellow student said to me on the first night "oh my gosh, I've never spoken to a northern person". That was a defining moment. Before then, I was never made to feel like a second-class citizen simply because of where in the country I was born and where I went to school. Before then, I had never suffered from impostor syndrome.

I would like to say that Durham was the first and last time negative perceptions have been drawn about my level of intellect simply by being northern and state school educated. But really that was the beginning. But let's fast forward to today. I am where I am because of my background. It gave me the drive and grit to succeed. I have different lived experiences and I bring that with me



I am where I am because of my background. It gave me the drive and grit to succeed. I have different lived experiences and I bring that with me in the way I approach people and my work.

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**Polly Richard, Partner**

in the way I approach people and my work. I now see it as a strength, not a weakness. Does it mean I sometimes feel excluded? Yes, very much so. Mainly due to a lack of shared experiences/interests. Do I have to work that bit harder to prove myself? Yes, I think I still do (or perhaps I don't, but my impostor syndrome tells me I have to).

What can we do to help promote social mobility? Talking about it (and creating a network) helps. It's been the elephant in the room in law firms for too long. We need to challenge (ourselves and others) about what a "good lawyer" looks, thinks and sounds like. The focus should always be on performance – and potential – not fit

and polish. Challenge yourself and your own unconscious bias by thinking about those in the workplace who you naturally gravitate to. Is that because they are most like you? We should all proactively think about steps we can take to create a more inclusive work environment. For example, be mindful of the conversations you have in and around the office – are they conversations that everyone can join in equally? Let's make it our business to make everyone feel welcome and valued. After all, Travers would be a pretty boring place if we were all the same.







# Danny Riding

## Partner, Financial Services and Markets

I'm Danny Riding, I trained with the firm and I became a partner in the Financial Services and Markets Department in 2022. I am also from a lower socio-economic background.

I have been here for the best part of a decade, and have never felt compelled to talk about my background or considered it to be an issue; I have always felt welcomed, supported and able to be myself at this firm. But last summer's article on social mobility by Polly Richards, Madeline Gowlett and Peter Hughes made me reflect on this. It made me recognise that sharing stories about our different backgrounds can be a powerful way to showcase how we are not all the same, and to celebrate what makes us different.

My story is uncomplicated: I just grew up poor. Not that I realised it at the time, at least not in any meaningful sense. My Dad was an entertainer at a holiday park, and my Mum was and remains a care assistant at a home. We didn't have much money, and every autumn my parents would worry about how we'd get through another winter (my Dad's work and income dwindled to nearly nothing for five months each year). Before me, nobody in my family had ever worked in a professional setting: my lineage is generally comprised of cotton workers from Lancashire and coal miners from the South Wales valleys. And I had two options for school: a Welsh-speaking or English-speaking comprehensive school (there was no grammar and private or public schools, if

they existed in the area, were not an option). But none of that seemed to matter – Aberystwyth (where I grew up) is beautiful, the coast and countryside are free, and my upbringing was a happy one. The first time I recognised I might be "different" was when my teacher discouraged me from applying to Oxford: "Don't bother applying, Danny – you won't get in. It's not for working class Welsh boys like you; it's for kids from London whose parents are doctors and lawyers." I almost listened – at first hovering over whether to apply to Oxford, and then about whether to accept my offer. I focussed more on whether my lack of family money or mild (now non-existent) Welsh accent may be more important than my aptitude. I owe my girlfriend—now wife—and family a great debt for encouraging me to stop overthinking and just give it a go.

I've been lucky. In addition to my support at home, Oxford was very generous with access grants—free money—and my tutors were not at all concerned about my background or how I spoke; only with the holes that they could pick in my analysis that week. And then, knowing nothing about the City or law beyond what I'd read, I applied to and received a training contract offer from Travers Smith. I could not have become a lawyer without the financial support that came with this, specifically the firm settling my law school fees and providing regular maintenance payments. My first supervisor, Jane Tuckley, also provided sensitive guidance when I was at my most green, helping me settle in and with

aspects of professional polish that I had missed along the way.

I am very grateful, but also aware that I caught lucky breaks with the support I received. I no longer need to worry about affording a home or food (as my ballooning, post-lockdown/new Dad waistline will bear witness). And I now consider my background to be an asset – it has given me a different perspective and emboldened a sense of grit and determination that has seen me through many late nights and helped me to cope with the relentless pace of new regulatory developments.

But as I say, I've been lucky. Things have moved on so much since I joined and, in particular, the recognition that luck should play less of a role in the firm recruiting and retaining the right candidates, no matter what their background. The firm is looking to build on its fantastic work in this space, and I am excited to support its initiatives however I can.





## Moira Slape

Chief People Officer,  
Human Resources

I am one of four children and grew up in Maidenhead, Berkshire. I have two older brothers (four years separate us) and a sister who is 12 years younger than me. My father was a police officer (a traffic sergeant) and my mother had part time jobs whilst we were growing up. I feel blessed that my parents are still alive and they continue to be role models to me. They celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary last September and that was a wonderful occasion for us all.

I attended a comprehensive secondary school. I enjoyed school (most of the time!) and worked hard to gain respectable grades in my O levels and CSEs. I was not an A star student, yet I knew what I did and didn't enjoy. We



had a strict upbringing and my father pushed us to work hard, sometimes in my case, too hard given that academia was 'never my thing'. Whilst studying for my exams I decided that I did not want to go to university, much to my father's annoyance, yet I had a plan which I was determined to follow, and that is what I did. I have always had a plan!!

The plan led me to attend the local sixth-form college to undertake a legal secretarial course which involved A-levels in Law and Economics. My vision was that I would complete the two-year course and secure my first job in a firm of solicitors. This vision was linked to what had always been a deep interest in anything that had a legal slant to it (documentaries, films, real life stories from my father). A simple vision but one that I believed in. I loved those two years and did well in my studies.

At the age of 17 and on completing my course, despite multiple applications to local firms, I did not manage to secure a legal secretarial role, but I did manage to secure a place as a trainee secretary at ICI Paints Division as it was in those days (now Astra Zeneca). That was the start of my working life and I can still remember, with clarity, those early days of my career and I knew that I had made the right decision to not attend university. I simply knew that university was not for me.

After my first two years I was promoted to become a trainer at ICI and that was the start of my journey in becoming a learning & development professional. I moved to a commercial training company when I was 21 and knew that I had found what I wanted to do with my career.

Our clients were diverse and as the business grew many of those clients were law firms. I was in heaven! I was given opportunities to design and deliver training programmes for those firms and, in parallel, developed my management skills which put me in a good position to grow as a leader.

Cutting a long story short, one of our key clients was the international law firm Linklaters & Alliance, and they approached me in 1999 to join the firm to join their Learning & Development department which was part of the HR department. I jumped at the opportunity and that was the start of my career in the legal sector.

Lawyers have always fascinated me! When I was growing up, we didn't have any family member or friend who was a lawyer so I had no first-hand experience of being in the company of a lawyer, yet my interest in 'anything legal' helped me recognise how I needed to use my strengths to not only navigate the complexity of a law firm, but also to build relationships in order to perform at my best.



One of my mantras has always been to try to step into the shoes of the person you are with so that you can do your best to appreciate their position. This equally applies to social mobility – appreciating and recognising difference in the context of social mobility can only contribute to people achieving the best they possibly can.

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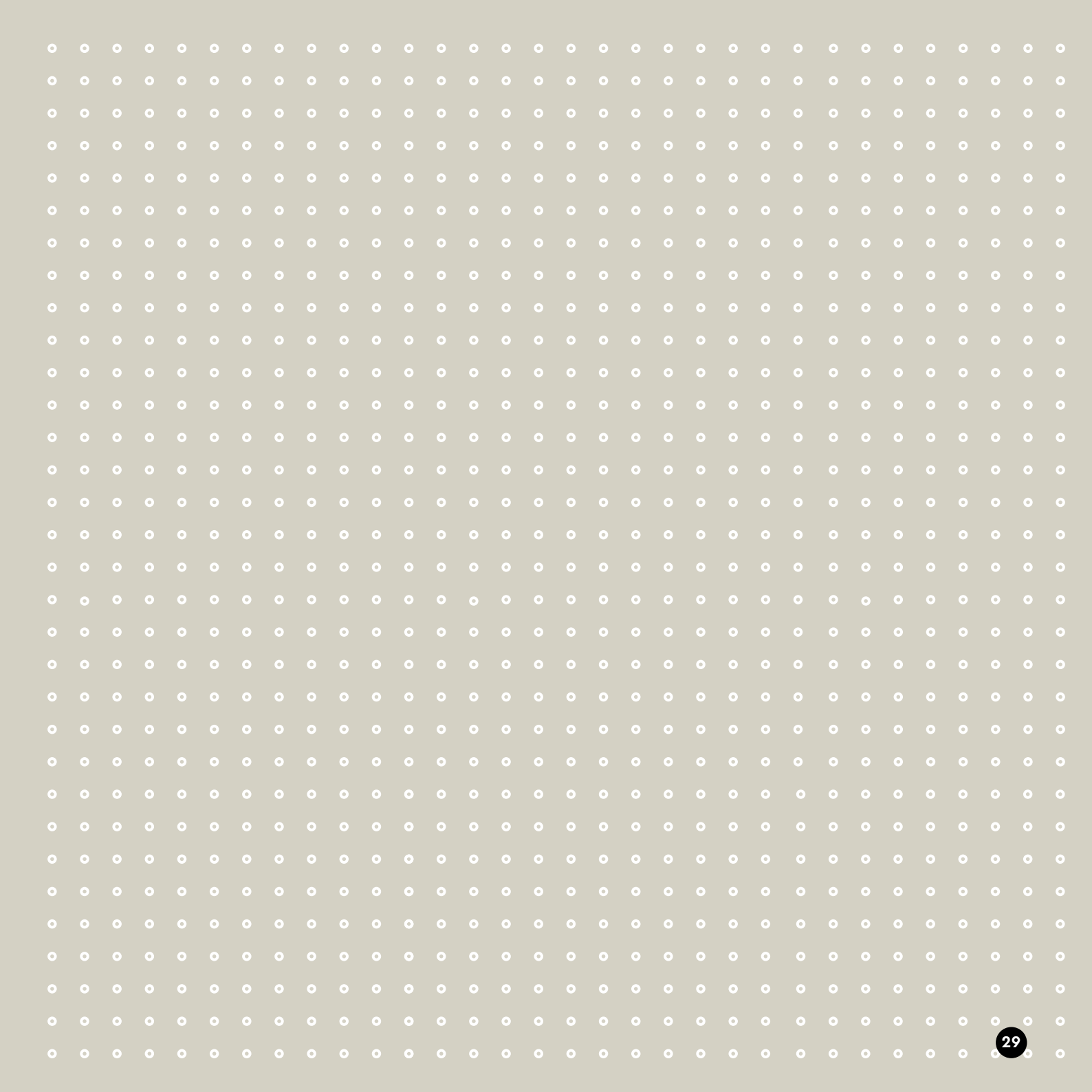
**Moira Slape, Chief People Officer**

At Linklaters, I realised that I was different from my peers. I did not have a degree, I knew that I didn't want children, yet I had never taken anything for granted. That was the way we were brought up. I soon realised that, even without a university degree, despite some initial insecurities, I was as good as my peers, and I was determined to stretch myself to build my career in the legal sector. I also came to believe that I 'fitted in' – I brought different perspectives into the team and that made us better performers. In those moments when I have lacked confidence, I have heard my husband's voice in my head saying "Moira, of course you can do this. Just get on and do it!" He remains a mentor to me in so many ways and still says that to me.

At Travers Smith, our ongoing diversity and inclusion agenda continues to evolve, and social mobility is at the heart of that agenda. For me, social mobility means multiple things. I firmly believe that more and more people, today, recognise

that the more successful employers are those who are prepared to support people in applying for, gaining, and advancing in roles that are above their usual social status. Thankfully it is becoming more widely accepted that people should be given equal opportunities regardless of their socio-economic background. Those opportunities should be freely available to everyone and restricted only by their ability to do the role.

Throughout my HR career, one of my mantras has always been to try to step into the shoes of the person you are with so that you can do your best to appreciate their position. This equally applies to social mobility – appreciating and recognising difference in the context of social mobility can only contribute to people achieving the best they possibly can. That must be good, not just for Travers Smith and our workforce, but also our clients.





# Cindy Smith

## Senior Associate, Derivatives & Structured Products

Even before I joined Travers Smith I was acutely aware that for someone at a City law firm, my background was non-traditional.

I had a modest upbringing, went to an average south London comprehensive and was the first in my family to go to university. I studied English because it was a subject I loved, but -naively- had no career plan at all and was never offered any careers advice. It was eye-opening to meet other students who were assured and strategic about their choice of degree and university and knew exactly what they needed to do in order to get to where they wanted to be. By contrast, I didn't know anyone with a professional career and I was unaware of the vast range of career opportunities out there. It certainly wasn't a given that any such opportunities were open to someone like me.





It was by chance during a summer job for a high street law firm in Balham (stacking boxes of files in a storage facility) that I met a barrister who told me that my degree was good and asked me whether I had considered becoming a lawyer. He told me to find a Chambers & Partners book in the office and to start reading up about different law firms. I realised I needed to do the legal conversion course in order to get a training contract, so I took out a £15k loan to pay for the PGDL. I didn't have enough money for the LPC fees so I was both pleased and relieved when I was offered a training contract at Travers Smith Braithwaite, as it was then known. It even sounded posh!

When I started at Travers, everyone was really nice and welcoming, but I felt I stuck out like a sore thumb! At that time, many of the other trainees and lawyers went to Oxbridge and I went to Leeds, although a lot of my intake were also non-Oxbridge. As one of the few minority ethnic trainees, I felt self-conscious of my many differences – my life experiences, the way I looked, the way I spoke (sorry for the swearing everyone!), my class background. I didn't have the social confidence of my peers, and I felt like an outlier: someone who was lucky to be here, rather than someone who deserved to be here.

Having been at Travers for nearly two decades, it is amazing to see how the firm has evolved over that time. It is a really diverse and supportive place to work, with an increasingly inclusive culture.

Despite such progression at Travers and many other firms across the City, it seems to me that the perception of City

law firms has not really changed. The legal profession is still seen as an elitist institution occupied by (mainly white) people from the most privileged backgrounds. Although this is not necessarily true, this perception can be a barrier to entry for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

We need to do more to break down these barriers to ensure that our profession is open and accessible to all. Mentoring programmes (such as City Solicitors Horizons and Grow Mentoring) can provide support and focus to university students pursuing a career in law. Our involvement with schemes aimed at younger children, like the BEE scheme, can be powerful in demystifying what we do from day to day and widening the horizon of possible outcomes for young people from disadvantaged communities.

People from different backgrounds can offer alternative perspectives and alter conventional ways of thinking. They are often resourceful, resilient and persistent and able to find other ways to achieve what they need. These are all qualities which can make a good lawyer.

Diversity can only improve our work culture, our profession and our community. We need to acknowledge the structural inequalities that certain social groups face and work towards creating an environment where an individual's personal circumstances no longer limit their expectations and opportunities.

# Stuart Smith

## Evening Print Technician, Print and Digital Production

I was born just a short distance from the office in Guys hospital and spent my first 10 years of life living in a pub in Rotherhithe with my parents and older brother. Spending my early years surrounded by my dad's mates in a pub really was something I loved. I learnt so much (including how to play cards!) and had access to unlimited coke and crisps – what more could a kid want!

We moved from Rotherhithe to Peckham when I was 10 and I loved it there too. My dad was a docker so when we left the pub he went back to working on the river. I know he really wanted me to follow in his footsteps as many generations of our family have but I just couldn't hack that cold weather, so an office environment was always for me. Although I did make an attempt at working at South Dock Marina, that only lasted for four weeks (which was enough for me). Growing up in Peckham in the 80's and 90's was pretty rough but it definitely helped to define you and set you up for whatever life might throw at you in the future.

I'm a big football fan and support Millwall for my troubles. My dad would always get us season tickets and it was there that I found another environment which almost mimicked the pub. My first away game was at Luton in 1985 which will always be remembered for the wrong reasons, but as a kid you don't realise the enormity of what you're witnessing.

My first job after leaving school was at an insurance brokers in Crystal Palace which I had done work experience with the year before. I spent a couple of years there but my older brother was working in Holborn at the time and after I went to meet him after work one day I was blown away with the buzz of the City and knew I had to get a job here.

My first role was as an office junior for a small law firm on Gray's Inn Road and after a couple of years I moved in to their Print Room and thoroughly enjoyed my time there. Being so young and finding out what a couple of mates were earning by temping in other print rooms all over the City, I decided to do the same. My first assignment was with Linklaters and I ended up spending the next 18 months there. After temping for that time, I wanted to get back in to full time employment but they could only offer me a short term contract. I ended up leaving and starting a new role at Freshfields, where I stayed for two years. I then moved on to Dentons where I met a young Steve Norman (the now Print Services Supervisor at Travers Smith) who had joined on the night shift. We really hit it off and he is still a very close friend to this day.

When I joined Dentons I knew I had to try and make it work as I was running out of big law firms to join! I stayed there for 20 years and only left because my old friend Mr Norman



got in touch with me to tell me about a near perfect role here at Travers Smith. Upon meeting Kandis, I was really made to feel comfortable and valued, so straight away she made my choice a no brainer for me. She even reached out to me the night before I started my first day to tell me that all will be ok as she understood how I would be feeling after leaving somewhere after 20 years' service. For that alone I will always have so much time and respect for her.

After working for a few different law firms I can honestly say that Travers Smith gives you the warmest of welcomes and really makes you feel part of the "family" instantly. I look forward to spending a long time here and to any new challenges that will come my way whilst here.

## Julie Stott

Chief Marketing Officer, Business  
Development and Marketing



***"As you're one of the clever ones, you could get a job as a cashier in the local bank, rather than being a hairdresser".***


This was the sum total of careers advice given to me in 1984 by the Career's Adviser at Brynmawr Comprehensive, the school in the South Wales valleys that I attended between 1979 and 1986, as I was choosing whether to undertake 'A' levels or get a job.

No-one in my extended family had undertaken schooling beyond the age of 16, leaving school to work primarily in factories, care homes and other blue-collar jobs, so choosing to go into a Sixth Form was a really big deal. My parents were keen that, having been a straight A student and doing very well in my O levels, I was the one in the family to break that pattern. During my sixth form years, I secured a place at the University of Exeter to read Law (not because I knew anything about law, but because my family thought it was

'posh' and I would earn more money than in any other job!), but after my parents' divorce, my mother's alcoholism and a need to work 15 hours a week in the local branch of Tesco to make ends meet, my O level success wasn't repeated at A level. I did study for a law degree, but at a Polytechnic achieved through clearing, on a fully funded tuition and maintenance grant, and not as I had hoped, at the University of Exeter.

Growing up in a typical working-class family and studying at a Polytechnic, I never thought that a 'city' job would be open to me or anyone like me. Most of my friends stayed in the valleys, working in shops, the local council offices or hairdressers in Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale or Merthyr Tydfil. I was the odd one out for getting away.

In the second year of my degree, many of my fellow students were applying to the College of Law in Guildford or Chester to do 'the LSF' (the Law Society's Final – the precursor to



the current LPC, Legal Practice Course). As I researched this option, I realised that there was no opportunity for me to do that, as the costs were prohibitively high. In 1989 it was possible to start as an Articled Clerk without doing the LSF, to gain some experience (and money) before going to law school, so I joined a high street firm in Coventry in the Criminal and Family teams in a bid to earn enough money to do the LSF. I spent many months in police station cells on the duty solicitor roster, attending the Magistrate's Court and the County Court and bearing witness to some eye-opening criminal and distressing family court cases. I concluded that 'being a lawyer' wasn't for me, though it genuinely never occurred to me that maybe there was an alternative to a Legal Aid practice and that not all lawyers had to endure the sexist banter that existed at the time in the police stations of a Midlands city!

So, in 1990 I applied for a job as a Legal Editor at Sweet & Maxwell (when 'cut & paste' meant using scissors and Pritt Stick to create riders to send to the typesetter) and was,

thanks to a wonderful woman willing to take a risk on a comprehensive and Polytechnic-educated girl with a very strong Welsh accent, offered the job. Very soon Sweet & Maxwell was acquired by The Thomson Corporation (now Thomson Reuters) and my London career started.

Looking back, whilst the formal education I received was certainly second-rate, the life skills I learned along the way – resilience, adaptability, determination – coupled with what I came to realise was a natural ability to be a strong team player, be creative and to 'join dots', have served me well. I did, though, feel the need to change and adapt to fit in. Out went the strong Welsh accent, the curly perm haircut, and the white stilettos (yes, I really did have a pair) as I believed that to get on, I would need to look and sound more like the people I worked alongside. Whether that was actually the case, I don't really know, but making the changes made me feel more like I belonged, and over my 17 years at Thomson Reuters, I was promoted every few years until I was a Director working on acquisitions, disposals and new product





A large factor in my life/career journey has been the presence of inspiring mentors, sponsors and supporters willing to give me a break, take a chance on me and help me to succeed. Without them, I know I would have been on the first National Express bus back to South Wales.

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**Julie Stott, Chief Marketing Officer**

development for the Business of Law unit.

I did, as is now evident, realise that city law firms existed and in 2007 left Thomson Reuters to join McDermott Will & Emery as their first International BD & Marketing Director, and have spent the years since working in and with numerous city and US law firms before joining Travers Smith in the summer of 2017.

A large factor in my life/career journey has been the presence of inspiring mentors, sponsors and supporters willing to give me a break, take a chance on me and help me to succeed. Without them, I know I would have

been on the first National Express bus back to South Wales.

I firmly believe that all of us need role models to aspire to, but we also need people who will champion us, support us and help us to develop. In building the BD & Marketing team here, I was so keen to implement the graduate training scheme to provide opportunities for people at the start of their careers, as those inspirational and committed people did for me decades ago. I am really proud to work for a firm that knows that diversity and social mobility is so important in ensuring that we have a fully inclusive workplace.





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