

Social Mobility: Turning good intentions into meaningful action

Brought to you by the **InterLaw Diversity Forum**, the UK MDS Knowledge Sharing webinars aim to increase access to knowledge, best practice and practical insights that help to drive meaningful progress in relation to inclusion and culture in the legal sector.

To explore what it really takes to drive meaningful change and broaden access to the profession, we were delighted to be joined by **Grace Osborne, Senior Social Mobility Manager at Browne Jacobson**. Grace is a deeply respected leader in the social mobility space and brings a fresh perspective to this work, having worked in education before leading the internal-focused social mobility inclusion strategy at a Big Four accountancy firm. Browne Jacobson is one of the most progressive employers for social mobility in the country, having ranked first in the UK Social Mobility Employer Index for three out of the last four years. The firm's UK MDS social mobility data makes it clear the firm is very much walking the talk.



Browne Jacobson

1. Access to work experience

Browne Jacobson's focus on social mobility began in earnest in 2016, when the firm realised that 96% of available work placements were being snapped up by client or family contacts. Today, the firm sources work experience students directly from schools and through university widening-participation schemes. This required a perspective shift away from seeing work experience programmes as pipeline programmes, accepting that some work experience participants may decide that the law is not for them.

2. Removing Academic Thresholds

"It's not just that we got rid of academic requirements, it's how that has shaped the culture of the firm... What has changed is people's perspective on what a good lawyer looks like."

One of the most impactful steps Browne Jacobson took in 2016 was to move away from academic thresholds. While this move didn't come without challenge, the impact in terms of social mobility has been phenomenal: 47% of Browne Jacobson's graduate hires in the last three years would not have made it onto the firm's programmes prior to 2016. Academic information has since been removed from the firm's experienced hire recruitment, right the way up to Partner. But what's taken its place? In addition to using the O-Shaped framework, for entry level talent the firm asks questions that assess skills and potential.

3. The value of quantitative and qualitative data

"Being able to see how our perspective on the world may make us biased is really important. Without that, we can't do this work."

Browne Jacobson used quantitative data to advocate for criteria change, and to track the impact of their social mobility work. But the firm has also invested in building qualitative insights. Through a partnership with socio-linguists at Nottingham University, the firm examined the lived experience of staff through the lens of class and social mobility. The process "exposed a lot of uncomfortable things" but without understanding disparities and issues it's hard to take meaningful steps to improve. The pervasive nature of accent bias across the legal sector, within the firm, through client interactions, and in chambers stood out as a clear issue. The firm is rolling out training on accent bias and wider socio-economic awareness to staff and clients.

4. The key factors to include in your Social Mobility strategy

If it's time for a social mobility strategy refresh, Grace recommends focusing on three areas:

- **Outreach or Access:** What steps can you take to democratise information on how to enter the legal sector?
- **Inclusion:** Ensure internal diversity efforts encompass social mobility. Not sure where to start? Use existing work on gender, race, or access as a blueprint.
- **Advocacy:** Open up a dialogue on social mobility within your organisation. If you have a compelling story to tell or best practice to share, consider meaningful ways to engage clients and peer organisations.

Measuring social mobility in your workforce

The SRA require all regulated firms to collect, report, and publish data about the diversity make-up of their workforce every two years. Their questionnaire includes three questions on socio-economic background.

- What was the occupation of your main household earner when you were about 14?
- Which type of school did you attend for the most time between the ages of 11 and 16?
- Did either of your parents attend university and gain a degree (eg BA/BSc or equivalent) by the time you were 18?

In order to meet the UK MDS threshold for social mobility, individuals must meet the criteria under parental occupation and either school type or parental qualification.

Confronting the uncomfortable

"There was immense pushback"

One of the key takeaways from the session was that achieving meaningful change requires sustained effort and a willingness to reimagine *what good looks like*. In any elite profession, stepping away from well-embedded practices is unlikely to be without challenge. Here are four tips to support your approach:

- Prepare thoroughly for challenging discussions. What concerns are likely to be raised?
- Build a strong understanding of the challenge you're seeking to address. For instance, in proposing a move away from academic thresholds, understand the social factors that influence educational attainment.
- Be prepared to gently challenge assumptions around what it really takes to be an effective lawyer. What supporting evidence do you have? What alternative approaches could you use?
- If you have internal data, use it to support the impetus for a new approach, and use it to measure impact after you have made a change.

The UK Model Diversity Survey ("UK MDS") is helping to build entirely new insights into the trends shaping the UK legal sector talent landscape. Over 30 major law firms participate in the UK MDS, providing headcount, hiring, promotion, and leaver data spanning sex, race & ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and socio-economic background. In addition to providing valuable benchmarking insights, the programme has helped to highlight the firms who are leading the way in terms of fair and inclusive treatment of talent.

To find out how to take part in the UK MDS, either as a law firm participant or a client signatory contact Jonathan.leonhart@interlawdiversityforum.org.

