

How One Firm Moved The Needle On Disability Inclusion

By **Erin Coe** | August 14, 2018, 10:03 PM EDT



Reed Smith trainee solicitor Jonathan Andrews in the London office. (Photo: Daniel Way)

When Jonathan Andrews, a trainee solicitor at Reed Smith LLP, interviewed with the firm a few years ago, he had already seen its London office.

Andrews, who was diagnosed with autism when he was 9, sometimes has difficulty orienting himself to new environments. Before he formally met with the firm's partners, he and other candidates with disabilities had been invited by the firm to visit and meet some of its attorneys.

In a recent interview with Law360, Andrews said he found the practice especially helpful as he was going through the application process.

"I was able to get used to the office over a period of time, and that helps you feel more at ease and more focused on what you have to say in the interview," he said. "I don't think many other [firms] would be as willing to have taken that time."

At Reed Smith, practices like these are rooted in an initiative dating back to 2012 to better recruit and support attorneys with disabilities. One highlight is its global affinity group called LEADRS — Looking for Excellence and Advancement of Disabled Attorneys at Reed Smith — which has about 60 members across 14 offices. It includes those with and without disabilities from all levels of the firm.

In an industry that's often inhospitable to disabled attorneys, the group has proven to be an effective recruiting tool.

At the end of its 2014 recruitment cycle, the firm received 65 applications from candidates with disabilities for its summer program and 60 applications for its solicitor training program. The firm has offered work experience to more than 40 aspiring lawyers with disabilities since beginning its program.

In Reed Smith's London office, the number of candidates who tell the firm they have disabilities at the application stage has doubled since the start of the initiative, said Carolyn Pepper, a partner who co-chairs the affinity group.



Reed Smith London partner Carolyn Pepper. (Photo: Daniel Way)

More than 10 percent of its new graduate joiners now disclose that they have disabilities. That figure aligns with the 10.6 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 to 64 who have disabilities, according to 2016 data from Cornell University's DisabilityStatistics.org.

"You need buy-in from different groups," Pepper said. "It's impossible to effect change on an issue like this with a subgroup of people who nod their heads and agree. It's important to bring in allies who don't have the same concerns and who see what the issue is to work to change it."

An Overlooked Minority

Lawyers with disabilities are a diverse group that includes individuals with walking, sight or other physical impairments, as well as those whose disabilities are much less apparent and sometimes described as “invisible” — autism, dyslexia or mental illnesses, for example.

The group has historically been overlooked by law firms, even within diversity initiatives. While many firms publicize diversity efforts to attract women, racial minorities and LGBTQ individuals, attorneys with disabilities may be briefly cited, if mentioned at all.

When Reed Smith’s task force began its outreach in 2012, its members aimed to contact colleges and universities about reaching out to candidates with disabilities.

But then they realized that there were no such systems in place, and the task force instead linked up with advocacy organizations like The Law Society’s Lawyers with Disabilities Division, or Aspiring Solicitors, which promotes diversity in the legal industry.

Reed Smith’s London group also overhauled its application and recruitment process. It removed its online verbal reasoning test, which the group saw as a potential barrier for some applicants, and it trained its graduate recruitment team in disability awareness.

In addition, Reed Smith’s London office moved away from competency-based interviews to strengths-based assessments, and the firm plans to re-evaluate how it sources and assesses talent on a firmwide basis in 2019.

While a competency-based model focuses on candidates’ ability to perform the job through past work experience, a strengths-based approach is more forward-looking and considers candidates’ potential based on what they excel at and are enthusiastic about.

The move to strengths-based questions is beneficial for many applicants with disabilities who might not have big-name brands on their resumes or as much prior work experience, said Andrews, the Reed Smith trainee solicitor in London.

“With strengths-based interviews, people are judged on their passions and abilities, creating a more level playing field,” he said.

Improving Support

Reed Smith is also focused on supporting attorneys who’ve been with the firm for years.

Luke Debevec, a co-founder of the LEADRS affinity group, was a senior associate in the firm’s Philadelphia office when he developed epilepsy in 2013. It was a scary time. The seizures would come without warning and knock him to the ground.



Insurance partner Luke Debevec in Reed Smith's Philadelphia office. (Photo courtesy Reed Smith)

"Just the walk to the office suddenly became fraught with risk," said Debevec, an insurance partner at the firm. "Just crossing the street. Taking a cab. Even to this day, the complete uncertainty about what each day will bring: Will you wake up robbed, or in an ambulance, or will you make it to the office OK?"

Debevec said the firm has given him the support and time off he's needed, including several weeks while he recovered from a pair of brain surgeries in June 2017. Coworkers also modified Debevec's office, outfitting his working areas with padding and a soft rug in case of a sudden fall.

Because attorneys with disabilities are such a varied community, Reed Smith has learned to work with each attorney on a case-by-case basis rather than imposing some kind of one-size-fits-all model, Pepper said.

"Each disability is different and may require a different way of working," she said. "We learn from each person, and we modify our procedures as we go along."

'Thriller Thursday'

Pepper says the LEADRS affinity group has its origins in a historic night for British sports, later dubbed "Thriller Thursday."

She remembers sitting with fellow London partner Gautam Bhattacharyya and a group of the firm's media and entertainment clients at Olympic Stadium as the British athletes raked in multiple gold medals that night during the 2012 Paralympics.

During a subsequent discussion of the event, she recalls, it became obvious that the firm needed to take

action to better support, recruit and retain attorneys with all types of disabilities, both physical and mental.

And ultimately, she said, the move has had benefits for attorneys overall.

While Reed Smith's individualized approach can help it retain and recruit lawyers with disabilities, it also fits in with efforts to appeal to a workforce that is increasingly focused on work-life balance.

"We recognize that if we want to keep millennials, we have to learn to be better," she said. "It's certainly interesting to look at how we can adapt the role of lawyer in order to attract people and play to the best of their talents."

Erin Coe is a feature reporter who last wrote about the stigma surrounding mental illness in the legal profession. Editing by Jocelyn Allison, Jeremy Barker and Katherine Rautenberg.