

Taken from the publication 'Top Legal Employers United Kingdom 2009'

IMMIGRATION ADVISORY SERVICE

The Immigration Advisory Service is the leading charity in the UK giving legal advice and representation services to immigrants and asylum seekers, who get free help if they are eligible.

Established in 1993 out of the former UK Immigrants Advisory Service, which had been set up in 1970, the service is independent from government and is one of the country's most influential not-for-profit organisations. The firm has 20 offices and 350 staff spread throughout the UK, as well as three offices in Pakistan, one in Bangladesh, and plans for more in Nigeria and India and elsewhere.

With a turnover of £15.5m today, the service has expanded from six offices and revenues of £2.5m over the last 15 years.

Executive summary

Immigration law is one of the fastest changing fields of legislation in the UK, coming under huge political pressure. As such, working at the Immigration Advisory Service is no easy task for the 200-plus accredited and legally qualified staff: "One of the hallmarks of our success and our survival has been an ability to adapt in light of fundamental changes," says chief executive Keith Best. "That's not just in the way we are funded, but also the technicalities of immigration law, where there are always changes in the law, pronouncements by ministers and court decisions that affect our work."

Unlike Citizens Advice Bureaux, the firm does not just offer a frontline service but advises its clients right through the gamut of immigration and asylum difficulties. That means employees can see the process right through to the highest courts. "If you come here you specialise in the field of immigration," says director of finance and central services Robert Phillips. "You can do the traditional solicitor-type job of advising, and you can do similar to barristers' work in representing clients before the Asylum & Immigration Tribunal, at different stages of your career. You don't have to choose as you would in most other legal jobs."

Compensation

Salaries at the Immigration Advisory Service are based on a job evaluation system that grades workers and creates a hierarchy of posts. Against each post there is a salary scale, and within each pay band, there are three increments.

Every two years the firm conducts salary reviews for its staff, and it aims to benchmark wages against the voluntary sector rather than the commercial sector. The management invites input from the union, and comes up with revised salaries: "We hope that, in the eyes of most of our staff, it will be competitive with the voluntary market," says Best. In some instances the pay rates actually exceed other employers in the commercial world, he says.

The firm also offers a cost of living adjustment in London, which is negotiated with the union, and has a bonus scheme that is largely performance-related. For case workers, the Legal Services Commission already sets targets for performance, so bonuses are measured against those, whilst support and administrative staff are regarded as members of a team in each office, and are rewarded according to the performance of their office.

Career prospects

The Immigration Advisory Service employs candidates who are educated to A-level, or have degrees in subjects other than law, to work as advisers and casework assistants. They provide first-line advice, and the firm will pay for them to go through accreditation exams to further their career if they wish.

Immigration counsellors require a LLB or law-related degree and to have passed their accreditation examinations.

"We take candidates as trainee caseworkers that we expect to have a law degree but nothing more than that," says Best. "We train them to pass their accreditation exams, then we increase their salary. That way we are not only encouraging new entrants into the profession as a whole, but for our staff it is also a great way of retaining people and helping them right through building their career."

Completing accreditation is like a mini training contract in a commercial law firm, and typically takes around nine months to complete. After that, caseworkers are encouraged to take Level 2 exams, which allows them to appear in court representing clients. "If someone joins us as a trainee, within 12 months they can be representing clients in court before a judge," says Phillips.

The next step is to become a Supervising Counsellor, which requires at least a year's experience of immigration and asylum law and practice and includes a management function, or people can progress to Tribunal Counsellors, able to conduct reconsideration appeals before the Asylum & Immigration Tribunal.

"We take staff development very seriously," says Best, "and we encourage employees to build the skills and knowledge to allow them to achieve their full potential."

Working there

The Immigration Advisory Service is a very multi-cultural employer, says Best. "We have a multi-ethnic, multi-religious workforce here," he says "In a way we assume that's normal, but it's not. For me the most wonderful thing about that is the ability to learn about other people's cultures in an informal way, and also to see the fundamental ability of people to work in harmony with each other when they come from such diverse backgrounds."

The firm has been working hard to improve internal communications, and has introduced regular office meetings attended by one of the senior management team where staff can set the agenda and introduce items they wish to discuss.

There are monthly union meetings, as the firm has a Union Recognition Agreement with Britain's GMB. "We encourage people to join the union," says Best, "because it enhances our ability to negotiate with a body that's representative of our staff."

The firm funds "the odd jolly" for staff, including days out, Christmas parties and regional staff conferences. Training is a priority, with staff receiving monthly legal bulletins, fortnightly case law updates, and regular training sessions that the service provides which are also for external participants.

Ideas

"We like innovation," says Best, and staff members are encouraged to contribute ideas not only about the running of the operation, but also to input into the legislative process when the service is asked by government for feedback.

Being at the cutting edge of national immigration legislation makes the firm an innovative place to work by its very nature, but from an internal perspective the firm also hosts twice-yearly away-days for supervisors from around its network of offices to come together and share ideas, so that knowledge is pooled across the firm.

There is also an intranet designed to facilitate the sharing of information, with HR policies available online and reviewed regularly with staff input

Corporate Social Responsibility

The Immigration Advisory Service is an active member of the not-for-profit sector and is highly influential in its space, with its own research arm publishing legal updates and bulletins that are read by the most senior decision-makers in the sector.

The firm's employees influence government plans and provide expert input on legislative discussions, and a number of staff members service on consultative bodies and stakeholder groups.

The service is increasing its pro bono contribution, having recognised a need amongst its clients, who either qualify for free advice or have to pay all of their costs. Often there are individuals who complete the means-testing and are judged to be able to pay but still find it hard to meet the costs, so the firm is looking to help them out more "There are cases where people are definitely poor," says Best.

As a not-for-profit organisation there is little spare cash for pro bono initiatives though, and there is always a question of what should be provided free. Staff are asked to contribute ideas: "We are going to have a discussion with staff, get people to come up with suggestions, and then once we have built up a fund we can put money into those projects they identify," says Best.

Governance

The Immigration Advisory Service is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee, with a board of up to 16 trustees who are volunteers and are responsible for the organisation's strategic planning. The daily running of the business is done by Best, the chief executive, along with a small monthly Senior Management Team of three and then a senior management executive team that includes all seven regional managers and three department heads, which meets quarterly to discuss issues.

The business also complies with the Legal Services Commission's quality standard, which involves an external audit by the commission, and requires the service to have a detailed written procedures manual. Supervisors have to make regular independent file reviews and other checks, and staff are required to have frequent training updates

Environmental footprint

Most of the firm's offices are located on the edge of city centres, close to railway stations, to encourage both clients and staff to use public transport wherever possible. Staff are urged

to go by bus and train between meetings and offices whenever they can, and the firm is also looking at how much energy it consumes, and how it might reduce its carbon footprint

All staff are asked to recycle their old mobile phones when the firm provides replacements, and trips between the firm's various offices are now actively discouraged so as to reduce unnecessary travel. Trainers will visit the offices rather than expecting staff to travel.

The environment is an area where the firm continues to look at new initiatives, "We are certainly looking at ways of continuing to improve on that," says Best, "and we recognise how important it is."