

# Fierce competition for top law students

One of the focus areas for all the large law firms is attracting the right students and providing a high level of training to the people working in their practices.



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Gérard du Plessis, chairman of Adams & Adams, says: "Law firms are competing aggressively for top young talent. We recruit from universities around the country and so do all the others."

He says in the past recruitment was aimed at students in the final year of their university studies.

However, as the war for talent has heated up so firms have begun targeting students in their third or even second years of study.

The starting point for selection is academic performance so students must have good university results. However, he says firms are looking for a lot more from the students they opt to take on.

"We are looking for balanced people with common sense who can be both successful attorneys and good business people and you cannot evaluate those characteristics during a five minute chat on a career day.

"Therefore, we have vacation programmes for first and second-year students who spend two to three weeks with us at a time and this helps both the firm and the students to get a better look at each other," Du Plessis says.

Illustrating the point that students are being recruited early is the fact that Adams & Adams has already concluded its recruitment for 2016.

Du Plessis says that a lot of competition is also taking place to ensure that individual law firms are considered employers of choice.

Another competitive edge is training. Word soon gets out when a firm provides good training, making it easier to attract

talented people and, with a good training culture, talent retention is easier.

Jack Phalane, partner and director at Fluxmans, says the legal profession is attractive as a profession and firms are able to draw on some of the most talented university students.

"There are a lot of students going through university and obtaining law degrees and many cannot find positions to complete their articles with law firms."

He says people do not need to pass at the top of their class to become good lawyers and they need to seize any opportunity to do their articles that comes their way. "In marketing yourself to the law firms you have to make sure they know what you are doing in broader society.

"Students need to call the people who carry out recruitment and make themselves known.

"You can even volunteer to do vacation work without pay so that the law firms get a chance to meet you and perhaps you will get your foot in the door - and the experience gained will also be valuable," Phalane says.

Max Boqwana, co-chairperson of the Law Society of SA and senior partner at Boqwana Burns, says there are a lot of good students getting their law degrees but competition for the top students is very intense.

"There is a limit to the number of places for people wanting to do their articles at the large law firms and these tend to go to those students at the very top of the talent pyramid," Boqwana says.

He says while the well marketed, top talent students find law firms competing for their skills, other very able students are finding it more difficult to obtain positions in which they can do their articles.

Competition is very stiff for lucrative positions at the large corporate and commercial law firms.

"However, it is not a lawyer's job to be only chasing money.

"There are a lot of medium and small law firms as well as public interest organisations that are looking for people with the potential to become good lawyers.

"There are a lot more opportunities than students first realise and with those positions there is also often a chance to make a real difference in our communities; helping in roles such as legal aid and fighting environmental issues.

"Lawyers who accept this broader role may not make millions of rands but they can make a very real difference," Boqwana says.

*Source: Business Day*