

Enabling, authentic and rewarding: how Browne Jacobson's culture fostered a leading education practice

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We sat down with Mark Blois, Head of Education and one of our longest serving partners, to talk about being a leader in the legal sector and the advice he has for young lawyers entering the profession.

When Mark Blois, Partner and Head of Education, joined Browne Jacobson as a trainee in the 1990s, education was an emerging area of law. His first contact with the sector came through litigation. "During my training contract I was involved in a little-known area of professional negligence law called 'failure to educate', whereby those with special educational needs could take action against a school or local authority for not dealing with their special educational needs appropriately," explains Mark.

Mark Blois

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By the time he qualified, an increasing number of education professionals were being sued for negligence and he was asked to continue working on this growing area. He soon gained an early opportunity to lead in defending a case involving a large class action brought against a county council for alleged failures to identify and support children with dyslexia, autism and other special educational needs. "This complex case gave me the opportunity to get to know this fascinating sector. I loved working with people in education and their view of the world," Mark tells us. "I was inspired by these education professionals' values and the importance of their work improving the life chances of children and young people. This has sustained my ongoing commitment to the education sector over the many years that followed."

Browne Jacobson had a well-established practice advising local authorities back then, but its client base didn't include education providers such as schools and colleges. However, subsequent major policy changes in the education sector, in particular the academies programme, significantly developed the range of legal support needed by education institutions, and Mark saw an opportunity to expand the practice area and offer new services. "The firm could have easily told me not to do it and to focus on my job, but instead they were very supportive and encouraging. The firm's enabling culture gave me a platform to take risks and be innovative."

Twenty years later, Browne Jacobson is the leading firm in the education sector, with a 70-strong multi-disciplinary team ranked Band 1 nationally in all five offices in England, advising over 1,500 different education providers every year. "At a different firm, I suspect I'd never have had the opportunity to build something like this," says Mark.

Since its creation, Mark and the education team have continued to innovate. In 2011, they introduced HR services as an additional offering, alongside ground-breaking products such as annual fixed fee help line retainers.

Despite the firm's Education team being six times winners of the prestigious Education Investor Award for legal advisors to education institutions, most recently in 2022, and Mark himself having been included in 'The Lawyer Hot 100' list in the same year and appointed a National Leader of Governance by the Department for Education, Mark is most proud of the positive material impact the team has had on the school and academies sector and the way they have helped to shape the development of education policy and law.

This commitment to delivering a genuine and positive social impact was particularly important during the pandemic. “We created a platform and developed resources offering guidance on how to manage the wide-ranging challenges arising from the pandemic from a legal and HR perspective, and made it freely available to the sector,” explains Mark. This contribution and guidance was extremely helpful at a time where schools were unable to operate as usual, and students and teachers were navigating entirely unprecedented circumstances.

Today, educational institutions are not only grappling with funding and recruitment challenges, but also with legacy issues coming out of the pandemic, which exacerbated the challenges already experienced by the most disadvantaged and socially deprived children and this in turn has increased the burden on many schools. “We advise our clients on how to deal with these challenges and put a lot of time and effort into discussions to see how we can help them overcome these difficulties,” Mark tells us. “We go above and beyond to embed ourselves in the sector and make a difference. We want to be seen as part of the sector, not just serving the sector”.

After over twenty years of leading the team, Mark still finds his practice area and working with clients incredibly rewarding. “Working with education professionals creates a special dynamic in the client relationship. There is often a high level of emotional engagement compared to some other sectors, and the clients are very grateful for what we do for them – it’s very fulfilling,” he says. “The clients and strategic partner organisations we work with inspire me every day.”

Mark is also inspired by the commitment and engagement of his colleagues and proud of the values and culture that exists in Browne Jacobson’s Education team, and attributes this to the wider firm’s ethos. “You couldn’t have the Education team dynamic in isolation without the catalyst of the wider Browne Jacobson culture,” he explains. Values and personal motivations are something Mark considers fundamental when recruiting new members for the Education team. “Naturally recruits have to be highly skilled, but what really matters to me is who they are as people and what they want to do in terms of the impact their advice and guidance can have over the course of their careers. They have to be a good fit for the team’s culture and be genuinely interested in what our clients do as well as in the education sector more generally,” he says.

Mark finds supporting and encouraging younger lawyers particularly rewarding. “Legacy is important and it’s really exciting to see the next generation of education lawyers coming through,” he says. “I always tell junior lawyers to think about what will motivate them on a sustained basis throughout their careers. If they get a thrill from advising a company in a fantastic deal, they should pursue that, and if focusing on making a difference on a social issue is what inspires them, they should follow that path.”

Mark recommends choosing a legal specialism based on what is going to motivate someone long term. “In the legal profession, it is important to understand that you can love your job as a lawyer but still experience the day-to-day process as hard work. Of course, the more you can enjoy the processes of being a lawyer the better, but aspiring lawyers should be under no illusions as to the challenges associated with doing the work itself,” Mark comments. “It’s important to choose an area of law and a client base or sector that will mean that while the process may sometimes be hard, you can still gain enjoyment, reward and satisfaction from doing the work well, and from the positive impact the work will have on clients.”

As the Head of Browne Jacobson’s Education sector practice, Mark believes it’s important for leaders to set the right tone. “You have to live and breathe what you ask of others. You can be a hugely successful lawyer, but if you are not an authentic and transparent leader, people will not follow you. We are fortunate within the Education team to have a number of compelling and inspiring leaders of people,” he says.

As one of the longest-serving partners at the firm, Mark believes that Browne Jacobson’s biggest advantage is its authenticity. “Unlike some law firms, we are what we say we are. The values the firm has put at the heart of its strategy are simply distilled from the existing cultural fabric of the firm and therefore in delivering on our strategy Browne Jacobson’s people have the advantage of a genuine and meaningful alignment,” Mark explains. “I have always been magnificently supported in my career at Browne Jacobson and I have many great people around me who I respect and admire. After all these years I still derive enormous pleasure from the firm, the work and the clients, what we have achieved to date and our capacity and potential to achieve even more in the future.”

Key contact

Mark Blois



Partner

mark.blois@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)115 976 6087