

EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

Last year was widely considered a tough year. With resources shrinking, job scopes expanding, an increasingly competitive marketplace to contend with and new regulations to navigate, many lawyers in Asia met the end of the year with a sense of relief. But now, as a global pandemic spreads and remote working arrangements are tested, the challenges of last year would be surely welcomed. In these difficult times, a good employer is more critical than ever.

For this year's Employer of Choice survey, (mostly) happy respondents took a moment to consider what their employers do well, and what they could do to improve. BY ELIZABETH BEATTIE

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Duane Morris & Selvam
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What makes a good employer? It's a question that all employees have a million answers to, but according to our latest Employer of Choice survey, certain key attributes are most important. Prominent among these are development, encouragement and feedback, and flexibility. "Caring" and "understanding" were words regularly bestowed upon their employer by those who felt truly satisfied in their workplaces, with "flexibility" rounding out other answers as another much-appreciated attribute.

While survey respondents were not short on suggestions for what their firm could do to improve, for most, it was simply a matter of having access to "more." Some commented that they wanted more of the professional development opportunities their firm already offered, while others wanted more chances to improve their expertise or education. Some requested more flexible working arrangements, but given the necessity of this during the COVID-19 outbreak, this will likely be up for discussion with more firms across the board. Others still told *Asian Legal Business* they were happy with what was on offer from their firm, and praised their employer's openness and opportunities available.



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FEELING VALUED

Having contributions and successes recognised by management is another critical decider for job satisfaction. In this regard, the responses were slightly more mixed. Some respondents said their

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"For years now, we have given lawyers the flexibility of working from home periodically, when they choose, no reason required. This was a simple decision because we have the best, motivated and ambitious lawyers we can ask for. In return, our trust and flexibility empowers and motivates them to be at the top of their game and produce excellent work. The partners are always there to provide guidance, mentorship, training and encouragement."

Kelvin Tan,
Drew & Napier



"Fostering an environment where well-being is at the heart of the firm's values is central to the success of Stephenson Harwood. It permeates every level of activity and decision-making, and the firm's partners and employees know this."

Mannet Tse,
Stephenson
Harwood

firm was "limited" in its recognition, while others said management would take credit for successes. Another issue was suggestions not being "taken seriously," and requiring those trying to make changes having to additionally chase up staff members to be heard.

Some were appreciative of positive feedback or kind words, while others praised their team for fighting for them and making them feel valued and celebrating their successes.

But those who feel truly valued and satisfied in their work, there were often multiple reasons – including an excellent work culture.

One respondent from a large Singapore firm described their team as truly believing in its people, and developing them into "important individuals; not just another work unit."

"I have been blessed with inspiring mentors who gave me meaningful opportunities and pushed me to achieve things I wouldn't have on my own, and for that, I will always be grateful," they add.

Law firms, on their part, are making sure they can meet the needs of their employees and ensure an engaged workplace. For example, while COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of flexible working arrangements, Singapore Big Four firm **Drew & Napier** has been offering it for years now.

"In the current COVID-19 situation, our whole firm is working from home," says

Kelvin Tan, director of dispute resolution at Drew, and "so the transition has been seamless."

"For years now, we have given lawyers the flexibility of working from home periodically, when they choose, no reason required. This was a simple decision because we have the best, motivated and ambitious lawyers we can ask for," he adds.

"In return, our trust and flexibility empowers and motivates them to be at the top of their game and produce excellent work. The partners are always there to provide guidance, mentorship, training and encouragement. With our IT connectivity systems, there is no lack of resource and support when our lawyers are outside the office," says Tan.

This demonstrates, he says, the "relentless focus on great work, strict ethics and constant training," while also exhibiting how "mutual trust and empowerment allows everyone to adapt to their work-life priorities." Tan notes that this is "winning formula for everyone".

Mannet Tse, regional head of HR at **Stephenson Harwood**, says that the firm have various initiatives in place to help support professional development. "Fostering an environment where well-being is at the heart of the firm's values is central to the success of Stephenson Harwood. It permeates every level of activity and

decision-making, and the firm's partners and employees know this," Tse says. "The initiatives the firm has in place involve people from every level of seniority, and every type of role and department."

Ongoing learning is a key priority for staff across every level of their career, Tse says. From technical skill development, to training around all-important technology and innovation, to business development and secondment opportunities. These can be accessed by interested staff.

After all, the internal development programmes that are the most well-received by employees and new hires are those that offer learning opportunities, says Tse. "The firm provides on-the-job learning, workshops, seminars and retreats, as well as secondments – whether that be to a different office in the firm's network, or a client," she says.

PREVENTING BURNOUT

But while development opportunities may be ample within firms eager to upskill their staff, this must also be balanced against workload. Given the pressure heavy-nature of lawyers' work, coupled with the need to remain "on" and contactable for long periods, in recent years, firms have stepped up and rolled out programmes that protect against burnout and create opportunities for their lawyers to decompress and re-energise. Avoiding burnout is something that the top firms increasingly consider carefully, take seriously, and respond to tactfully.

Veeranuch Thammavaranucupt, senior partner at Thailand's **Weerawong C&P**, says that preventing burn out is inbuilt in the way the firm operates. "We care about our people: our philosophy is that the firm is a platform to support all lawyers' advancement in the profession," she says. "Last year, we implemented new measures and new technology systems so that lawyers may work from anywhere at any time and we have designed the office with the facilities to meet their needs and wishes in a comfortable work environment. We also installed an on-site gym."

But safeguarding against this goes beyond simply creating spaces for lawyers to work comfortably. Veeranuch says the firm also emphasises "a culture of collaboration". "Often, lawyers from different practice groups work as a team. Regular informal activities have fostered a great team spirit – we work hard and play hard together, for example, at our TGIF events. We have an annual retreat where we conduct brainstorming sessions so that all staff may be part of the initiatives for improvements in the office, i.e., workplace environment and work procedures; we also celebrate our hard work and successes," adds Veeranuch.

Tse agrees that good workplace culture is critical when it comes to keeping employees happy and performing at their best for the long run. "Stephenson Harwood places real value on creating a work environment where ambition thrives, potential is developed and talent is rewarded," says Tse, adding that "Core to this is an emphasis on supporting the well-being of all colleagues, and an understanding of the importance of safeguarding mental health." Among the firm's initiatives in place to combat burnout are informal activities, such as hiking trips, to formal mental well-being workshops and one-to-one support mechanisms.

CEO OF YOUR CAREER

As traditional law firms adapt to the treat of ALSPs and alternative legal offers absorbing their talent, they are increasingly taking a different approach towards their employees, and empowering them to work in a way that best serves their abilities and enables them to "be the CEO of their careers."

Veeranuch says that many of the firm's lawyers attend its legal skills training sessions, which are provided by the partners. These are also complemented by programmes organised by reputable



STEPHENSON HARWOOD

institutions and international law firms. "Our soft skills training is also very popular, for example, writing, negotiation, presentation and leadership skills," she adds.

This development is very much tied into a state

STEPHENSON HARWOOD

"We're thrilled once again to have our efforts in this area recognised by ALB, made all the more important because so much of the feedback they received came from our people."

Mannet Tse, regional head of HR, Asia

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of mind as well. "In addition, our 'be the CEO of your career' policy is very well received by our lawyers: this policy accommodates the needs of each lawyer if they want to commit more hours or fewer hours in a given period and we remunerate them according to their preference. Along with the CEO policy, they do not need to work at the office, they can work anywhere but they must meet their professional commitments re clients and the office. We support their working and learning anywhere with high-speed internet and advanced mobile equipment," Veeranuch tells *ALB*.

With an emphasis on being your own CEO, the message to staff is one of autonomy — this is something the firm places at the heart of its internal mentoring programmes too. "Over the years, we have found that the most effective mentorship is on-the-job mentoring by seniors in each practice group and an open-door policy for partners. Further, we have established a listening committee comprised of partners, senior associates and junior associates. The listening committee will receive feedback/concerns from lawyers and escalate these comments to the management level to implement improvements," says Veeranuch.

At Stephenson Harwood, Tse says there is a range of internal mentoring and coaching programmes available for the team.

"Colleagues can choose whether they want more formal or informal support and adjust it to reflect the stage they're at in their career or any particular hurdles they might be facing, including personal ones," she says.

This is also linked to a quality the firm prides itself on: its approach to flexibility, Tse adds. "While there are structured schemes in places — such as the development partner and high potential programmes — there is also a range of other options, which can be adjusted to meet the needs

of particular practice groups, or even on a more bespoke and personalised level. The firm also recognises the value for colleagues of having the opportunity to mentor others, as well as be mentored, and the role that this plays in developing longer-term managerial skills; there are numerous opportunities for more junior colleagues to play a mentoring role, whether to peers or juniors, as appropriate," she says.

LONG-TERM VIEW

With development programmes committed to upskilling staff, getting the best results and encouraging retention, the importance of these elements working together to create a good workplace is a priority for firms.

Veeranuch says the firm's various initiatives work in tandem to help support its internal culture. "We care, not only for the well-being of our lawyers, but also for their progression and development in the legal profession. So, our training sessions are designed to develop a professional mindset — strategic thinking, effective communications and negotiations, positive approach and service mindedness. Our social events are fun, and they reinforce our internal culture — a pro-collegial atmosphere amongst trust-worthy team players who have enthusiasm and a passion for excellence," she says.

Another important element, says Tse, is ensuring buy-in from across the whole company. "Fostering an environment where well-being is at the heart of the firm's values is central to the success of Stephenson Harwood. It permeates every level of activity and decision-making, and the firm's partners and employees know this. The initiatives the firm has in place involve people from every level of seniority, and every type of role and department. Because everyone is involved in them, it's an authentic part of the firm's culture," she says. ALB



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