

Why diversity is good for business...

Freemans Solicitors

Interview

Freemans Solicitors in London's West End is proud to have a diverse mix of staff with roots from many different countries. It's a formula that seems tailor-made for success in our cosmopolitan capital...

A stone's throw from London's bustling Oxford Street is a firm where diversity plays a huge role in the success of the business.

The firm is Freemans Solicitors near Selfridges, which combines both legal aid and private work. The founder, Howard Freeman, cut his teeth as a trainee solicitor in a very different environment: West Yorkshire during the 1984 miners' strike.

Howard said: 'Compassion is a core value at Freemans. I think that is one of the reasons Freemans is an attractive place to work for

people from all ethnic groups.

'I originally entered the profession to help people who for whatever reason were in unfortunate circumstances and needed legal assistance.

'I trained in a socially conscious firm called Zermansky & Partners in Leeds. The value of compassion was really brought home to me while I was there.

'I spent a year in their Pontefract office. We were at the heart of a working class community during the miners' strike. Zermansky's was one



of only two or three firms prepared to act for the miners.

Vivid memories

'I used to watch the police coming into the town centre on horseback with shields and riot gear on when there was not even a hint of trouble in the town. It made a deep impression on me and the memories are vivid to this day.

'As a lawyer I want to make a reasonable living but I feel very strongly that I also have a moral obligation to help people. We need to support people wherever we can.'

Howard's first equity partner at Freemans was Oluwole Osibona – a black British citizen, who is also known as Osborn.

Osborn was born in Fulham of Nigerian descent and he had very clear ideas about the marketing value of a diverse practice.

Howard said: 'Osborn taught me to appreciate that today's political asylum entrant is tomorrow's property owner and/or businessman. That's particularly relevant for us because we do a mix of legally aided and private work here.'



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A wide social spectrum

Osborn heads up Freemans' immigration and nationality department and recalls a Palestinian client as a good example. He said: 'This particular guy was stateless and in danger of being repatriated to an uncertain future in Syria.'

'We helped him and he won the right to live in the UK. He has since used us to help develop his property business.'

Osborn said: 'There is a huge range of work here and about 70% of my department's work is legally aided.'

'Every month we are handling between 20 and 30 asylum cases and there is nearly always someone in reception worried about their rights to stay in the UK. But we cover a wide social spectrum. Only this morning I've had a call about a Premiership footballer with work permit problems.'

Cosmopolitan

Family specialist Karan Chadha is an associate solicitor at Freemans. She said: 'What I really like about Freemans is how our diversity within the firm is representative of the cosmopolitan city that we live in and the clients we represent. In

any one day I might hear three or four different languages spoken in the office.'

'In the family department itself we have three cultures. The head of department and partner, Nina Hansen is of Danish heritage. Then there is my colleague Laura Coyle, who is Irish. My own heritage is Indian Punjabi.'

'Each member of the firm is a valuable source of cultural knowledge and know-how. For example, in a care proceedings case involving a Somali family my Somali colleague's local knowledge gave me a deeper insight into local practices and the atrocities of war-torn Somalia.'

'When I needed information about the West African practice of Juju, Osborn was able to help. Another time, I needed to know about the different languages and dialects of Nigeria. Again, Osborn had the answer.'

'Having these resources to hand means that I gain a better understanding of my clients. So I can tailor my services to their needs accordingly.'

Good result

'My Punjabi Indian background proved important when I represented a mother whose children had been unlawfully kept in India. I was able to

use my local knowledge to liaise with embassies, local police and lawyers and achieve a good result for the client.'

'We do a range of work in the family department. This includes international child abduction, care proceedings, private children law, and financial and child maintenance claims.'

'I acted for one mother to secure financial provision for her daughter from the father – a professional footballer. Our client base is made up of a broad spectrum of nationalities and cuts across social groups.'

'We have a strong sense of team-work here at Freemans – generally we really enjoy working together. There is an exciting buzz in the firm and maybe that's because we all share a strong sense of social justice and are passionate about our work.'

'We all like a challenge and thrive on the sense of achievement at a good result. It makes for an extremely stimulating work environment.'

Approachable

Another member of the immigration team is solicitor Caroline Cheung, who said: 'This is a very friendly place to work. Everyone



“Freemans is like a branch of the United Nations save that we all work well together and get things done!”

is approachable and we all get on with one another.’

Caroline is doing a lot of work for former inhabitants of the Chagos Islands and their descendants.

The Chagos Islands is a British territory whose inhabitants were campaigning for independence when they were resettled between 1967 and 1971. This was done so that the US could build an air force base on Diego Garcia – the main island in a cluster of around 60 tropical islands in a remote part of the Indian Ocean.

Caroline said: ‘Unfortunately, they never wanted to leave their homeland and did not

to sort out. I see families whose parents have the right life in the UK while their children do not, which is a nightmare to sort out. There has recently been a decision in the House of Lords that was unfavourable to the Chagossians. So their nightmare continues.’

Partner Gopal Bhudia works on the property side of the business. His clients range from couples trying to create more room for growing families to property development companies trying to acquire a new site.

Invaluable

Gopal is fluent in Gujarati and has a working

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settle well in Mauritius where they lived in great poverty. They’re still fighting for the return of their homeland. But many have taken up the option of applying for British passports so that they can come here and find a better life.’

Test case

‘It’s a huge issue. There are about 2,000 Chagossians in England and their native language is Creole, which is a Pidgin form of French. I’m originally from Mauritius, so I’m fluent in both French and Creole.

‘I couldn’t help them without my language skills. There are a lot of difficult residency issues

knowledge of Hindi, which is invaluable for people arriving from India, or of Indian origin, who want to set up a business. He said: ‘Very often I see people whose first language is not English and need documents explained in their own language.

‘It might be a businessman needing help with shop lease renewals or a young family settling in Britain and buying their first home.

‘It’s very satisfying when you get a positive result. For example, there might be strict time limits on a £1 million plus deal. So it’s pleasing when it works out and everyone is happy.’

Freemans Solicitors

- Established 1995 in London’s West End.
- 19 BME staff out of a total of 36.
- Ten partners in a legal team of 21.
- Family, Crime, Immigration, Property, Litigation and Wills and Probate are key areas.
- Family work covers children with everything from care proceedings and international abduction cases. Also, separation and divorce.
- Crime offers a 24-hour police station service and cases covered range from terrorism to serious drugs offences, murder, fraud and sex offences. Clients represented in magistrates, Crown and youth courts.
- Immigration covers a huge range such as asylum cases, working to reunite families, student visas, work permits and naturalisation. Able to act for individuals or companies.
- Property services cover everything from buying a Council House to major multi-million pound commercial property work.
- Litigation and Dispute Resolution Department aims to find appropriate solutions to problems for both families and businesses
- Wills and Probate assists clients from all backgrounds.