



City work without City stress

Darise Ogden finds out why lawyers are clamouring to work in the Channel Islands

Practising offshore law does not necessarily mean taking yourself off to places made famous by marauding pirates. For those who prefer to be closer to the United Kingdom and Continental Europe, the Channel Islands may be your destination of choice.

Jersey, the largest of the Channel Islands, is a British crown dependency located 14 miles from France and 100 miles from the South of Britain. Guernsey, also a British crown dependency, is located 75 miles from the English coast and 30 miles from the coast of France. Despite their location and size (Jersey is just 116 sq km and Guernsey, 78 sq km), both islands have become major offshore centres.

A taxing situation

The unique tax structures of the Channel Islands, says Simply Legal consultant Damian Hanna, has meant that numerous banks and financial institutions have established bases in Jersey and Guernsey. Law firms, of course, have followed the work. All the major offshore law firms have offices in the Channel Islands, says Ian Parr of Grist Legal in Southampton, UK, and all offer legal work of the highest quality, coupled with a high quality lifestyle. "In short," he says, "they offer City quality work without City stress."

Offshore excellence

Firms based in the Channel Islands tend to focus on the financial services industry, says Hanna. As such, the main practice areas are banking and finance, trusts, capital markets, investment funds/hedge funds, and corporate. A number of the firms practising in the islands are full-service firms, which means, says Law Staff's Isabelle van Delden, they offer private client, fiduciary services, real estate, employment, and litigation services in addition to the investment-based work.

Parr says that, without exception, the law firms on Jersey and Guernsey are experiencing significant growth as a result of their reputation for offshore service excellence. A greater presence globally has meant that they are able to reach into the newer international markets that are also exhibiting substantial growth at present. "New business is being won consistently, which places greater demand on the need for lawyers," says Parr. "With minimal unemployment on the islands, such demand must be satisfied from across the globe."

Clamouring to get in

Hanna reports that lawyers are clamouring to work in Jersey and Guernsey, as the Channel Island firms are still relatively small and there are



obvious benefits to living offshore both financially and in terms of lifestyle. As a result, he says, firms will only recruit lawyers who have worked at a high level in their own jurisdiction. This, of course, makes the employment market highly competitive, as the firms all do similar work and are seeking similarly qualified and experienced candidates, says Parr. Hughes-Castell's New Zealand manager, Robyn George-Neich, agrees: "The reality is that these are relatively small markets. There are never going to be thousands of positions vacant..." By seeking lawyers who have worked in the top tier firms, she says, the firms get the assurance that they have the type of experience needed in an offshore firm, namely of good quality, complex transactions.

Corporate lawyers are the ones most sought after, says Parr, particularly those with experience in Funds work that has been gained with another major offshore law firm. He also notes that recent major

trust law changes in Guernsey has meant there is now a demand for STEP-qualified trust lawyers.

It is easier for overseas-qualified corporate lawyers to make the transition, says Hanna, as they do not need to requalify and can work as a foreign lawyer under the supervision of a partner in the firm. However, litigators cannot appear before the court unless they have requalified. This is a lengthy process, he says, which involves practising on Jersey for at least two years (on Guernsey it is three years) and sitting a series of examinations. "Litigators who want to move to the Channel Islands and act as advocates must give serious thought to the requalification process," he says.

Interestingly, George-Neich says that the firms she works with, Maples and Calder and Ogier, also look for an attitude from candidates that demonstrates their ability to live in small island communities. She says they prefer lawyers who are committed to the firm long term (ie not those who intend to leave after a year) and to the island lifestyle.

As with firms in the Caribbean, Channel Island firms will hire direct from New Zealand.

The benefits of a low tax regime

Hanna reports that the salaries at the junior end of the scale tend to be lower than those being offered at the magic circle firms in London. However, he says, "As the tax rate is capped at 20 per cent, [they] should be at least on a par with those lawyers based in London". And, of course, progressing through the firm, "the gap closes significantly, resulting in a similar, if not better, financial package, coupled with a better lifestyle".

So, what are the salaries? Newly or recently qualified lawyers can expect in the region of £40,000, says van Delden, whereas those with five years' quality experience might attract in the region of £70,000.

A slower pace of life

Hanna warns that working in an offshore jurisdiction should not be seen as an easy option. "The top firms work on large, cutting edge, international deals that can require some lengthy stints in the office." However, he says, generally the working day does tend to be shorter offshore and the billable targets lower.

From a lifestyle point of view, Hanna says there are not the same opportunities offshore that exist in London, New York, or Hong Kong. "The pace is slower and the social scene is more low key." He suggests that if you're a lawyer looking for the "bright lights", then working offshore may not be for you.

On a positive note, Parr says that no matter where you live on the islands, you'll never be more than 20 to 30 minutes from the office. And firms based there provide high quality legal work: "Whichever law firm you work for in the Channel Islands, another quality dimension will be added to your CV."