

Emerging Diversity and Inclusion Award Entrant: Russell McVeagh



Discovering Māori and Pasifika graduates didn't want to work for them came as an unpleasant surprise for a leading New Zealand law firm, which had recently implemented a long-term Diversity Project.

Russell McVeagh has more than 300 staff working in its offices in Auckland and Wellington and welcomes a diverse range of applicants and employees. But last year, the law firm received feedback from a lecturer at the University of Auckland law school that Māori and Pasifika students were "self-selecting out of the recruitment process" for its summer internship and graduate roles.

"It seemed there were a lot of assumptions made by these students about what working for a commercial law firm such as ours meant, both from a work and cultural perspective," says Russell McVeagh HR director Lesley Elvidge.

The feedback was particularly disappointing as the firm had kicked off its Diversity Project only the year before, examining its commitment to diversity in all its forms, initially concentrating on gender diversity, then expanding the initiative to focus on cultural and LGBTTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender and Intersexual) diversity.

"This difference between external and internal perceptions showed a chasm between how we perceived our firm, what working here is like and how students, our potential future workforce, viewed it - a big issue for us," says Lesley.

After discussing why more Māori and Pasifika students weren't attending Russell McVeagh application information workshops presented annually at New Zealand universities as part of the firm's university recruitment programme, the company decided it needed to

demystify what a commercial law firm is about for this group of students to ensure that the way they viewed the firm matched up with the reality, both in terms of what working for Russell McVeagh is like and the type of work its staff do.

And to encourage a more diverse range of students to apply to the firm, it needed to make sure Russell McVeagh offered an inviting and comfortable environment for them to work in.

At the beginning of 2016, Russell McVeagh launched a recruitment marketing campaign following a “myth busters” theme, using summer clerks to showcase its diverse workforce.

“We realised that it was important for students to see faces like their own working at Russell McVeagh,” says Lesley.

Since 2003, Russell McVeagh has offered a Māori law scholarship with varying degrees of success. As part of an overall stocktake of diversity initiatives, the firm reviewed this scholarship offering to figure out how to best target and support Māori students.

“This year, we are exploring the possibility of a partnership with Tuputoa, a Māori and Pasifika corporate pathways programme, to introduce a Māori and Pasifika specific internship opportunity as a more effective way of supporting Māori and Pasifika talent,” Lesley says.

Russell McVeagh decided to reach out to Māori and Pasifika law student associations at the universities and work with them to run specific workshops with their students. The workshops aim to explain what commercial law is about, including the practice areas, the clients, the work, the opportunities and the working environment. They also open a dialogue about why someone would or wouldn't want to practice commercial law, addressing any specific concerns, and discuss the application process, offering practical advice on how to apply and the interview and job offer process. Lesley felt that Pagen Plaizier, HR advisor and previously a Māori law student and Endeavour scholar, was the ideal person to run the workshops.

Internally, Russell McVeagh implemented unconscious bias training for the recruitment team (both HR and partners) and introduced a range of cultural awareness seminars for staff, run through Arapai with Māori academic and former politician Sir Pita Sharples. The seminar topics include Māori and Pakeha relations, Māori business engagement and pronunciation workshops as part of Māori Language Week.

The initiatives are supported by Russell McVeagh's Board and the firm's partnership, with CEO Gary McDiarmid acting as a media spokesperson and making a public commitment to diversity on behalf of the firm.

Since introducing the campaign and university workshops, the numbers of Māori graduate applicants has remained relatively stable compared to 2015, however the number of Pasifika applications has increased by 42 per cent.

“Five candidates who were brought through to the first or second round of our recruitment processes this year had attended the Māori and Pasifika workshops we ran and two of those candidates were subsequently offered summer clerking positions with us,” Lesley says.

Feedback from university staff and the Māori and Pasifika law student groups was positive and Russell McVeagh hopes to extend the workshops to three new student associations this year. It has committed to sponsoring a Pasifika conference for law students from around the country, and will continue to look for additional opportunities like this in the future.

The firm realises that they have a long way to go but Lesley says they are excited to have a leadership commitment to this initiative.

One graduate application received by the firm this year reads:

“Tēnā koe Pagen... I enjoyed meeting you to learn about how Russell McVeagh is fostering Māori in the legal profession. This is fundamental to me in my search for an employer that fits my values. As the first of my whānau to get a degree, it is vital to me that I encourage education for our tamariki. During my work over the summer with KPMG, this was a key theme being raised by leaders in the Māori business sector: that Māori economic development is dependent on the capability of our people in generations to come.”

Lesley also reports enthusiastic participation in Russell McVeagh’s internal cultural seminars, with about 45 attending each Auckland session, and around 15 at the Wellington session.

Feedback from staff in a recent survey indicates that the diversity initiatives are making a positive impact on the firm culture already.

"I've had a number of conversations about diversity and identity since I started working here, there certainly is an awareness of the need to better encourage and foster diversity in our workplace. I think it's awesome that the recruitment process now includes workshops for Māori and Pasifika law students."