

Empowerment Award Entrant: Russell McVeagh



Russell McVeagh has answered calls from its employees for more sustainable work life practices with a raft of meaningful initiatives.

The law firm's Diversity Project, launched two years ago, was designed to examine its commitment to and support of diversity at the firm in all its forms, with a key aim to support women in their legal careers.

Russell McVeagh is a premier commercial law firm with nearly 350 staff and partners based in Auckland and Wellington.

The challenge for a corporate law firm (unlike other businesses) is that there is only one career path available to lawyers in the firm. Russell McVeagh has had real success at bringing top female lawyers through to partnership, but it wanted a formal platform to be able to achieve more. The firm identified a need for a diversity project by including questions on gender diversity in its bi-annual Employee Engagement Survey for the first time and then analysed responses on a male/female basis.

The questions were designed to help the firm gauge the view of its staff on diversity issues and the response was encouraging - the highest survey participation rate ever - with more than 90 per cent of staff members participating.

The feedback indicated that Russell McVeagh could be doing more. Female solicitors in particular reported challenges around career progression, but all of the firm's solicitors wanted more sustainable working life practices and career management assistance. From this survey, the firm's Diversity Project began.

The next stage was to engage an external consultant to undertake a gender diversity study. At the same time, the firm did a stocktake of what it was already doing. In April 2015, both the study and the stocktake were presented to the firm's partnership, and specific immediate, short and long-term initiatives were identified for implementation.

Some of the highlights of Russell McVeagh's project are below.

Staff now have increased opportunities for flexible working. Beginning in November 2016, the firm is upgrading its IT to enable further flexibility whenever required which includes tablet technology and video conferencing. 'Catch up time' (for when a staff member has been working hard and requires special leave in recognition), has been introduced. More than 100 staff members have taken up this option.

Russell McVeagh has introduced staff 'charity days'. Staff, in particular junior female solicitors, told the firm giving back to the community was important to them - five teams so far have taken up the opportunity to give back.

The firm has implemented a new partner leadership programme. It recognised early on in the Diversity Project that support for diversity begins at the top. The first cohort from the six-month programme is due to finish in September 2016 and the second group will start straight after. This is a market-leading initiative.

The firm has also introduced a mentoring framework, with 11 formally matched mentors/mentees currently working together. Cross-team 'mentoring' - providing female role models to teams without senior women role models - was trialled successfully in the property team.

And for staff returning from maternity leave, there is new training and increased support. Russell McVeagh pays for a one-day workshop run by Career Dynamic, plus the option of having some confidential one-on-one sessions with a specialist 'return to work' coach. In addition to the increased training, there are other supportive policies for mothers returning to work.

In the recruitment area, all team members have now been trained in unconscious bias, with another three workshops booked for partners, senior associates and senior managers. To help share diversity stories, Russell McVeagh established an Inspirational Speakers Programme. The idea of the programme is to have a range of partners and clients share personal diversity stories and lessons learnt with staff.

The Inspirational Speakers Programme was inspired by three of Russell McVeagh's junior female solicitors, who wanted a forum for women in particular to hear the personal stories of our partners and clients and to discuss relevant career management issues.

Russell McVeagh's partnership is committed, prepared to own and drive the Diversity Project forward. A quarterly reporting regime for the HR team to report to the Board has been put in place to show whether diversity initiatives are working. Practice group diversity sessions are held to gauge success and inspire new initiatives and a new diversity working group has been established, reporting into the Board.

Plus the firm is in the process of doing another employee engagement survey, which will be the real indicator of how far it has come.