

Tomorrow's Workforce Award Entrant: Russell McVeagh



Video link: <https://vimeo.com/album/4446506/video/229802292>

More than two thirds of law firm Russell McVeagh's 300 staff across Auckland and Wellington are Millennials.

Recognising that, Russell McVeagh understands the vital importance of attracting and retaining the best of this demographic and has made it a priority to learn what makes them tick.

"They're young, digitally savvy and they know what they want," says Russell McVeagh CEO Gary McDiarmid. "Millennials want to work in an organisation that values diversity, enables flexible and varied work, has an emphasis on collaborative networks, and is dedicated to staff health and wellbeing."

To meet those needs Russell McVeagh has launched a wide range of initiatives.

The process starts by recruiting top talent. Offering scholarships is one way of doing that. Russell McVeagh was the first law firm to recognise student talent through a scholarship programme (1999). It is open to all New Zealand schools and includes financial assistance with study costs, \$6,000 payment upon joining as a graduate, a senior mentor, and opportunities for work experience and attending social events. Each year 30 scholarships are awarded and the majority of scholars choose Russell McVeagh once they graduate. Currently 35 percent of the firm's partners joined as a summer clerk or graduate, and the first ever 'scholar', now heads the firm's Marketing Law, Media and IP team.

Another approach has been to manage Millennial's perceptions of the firm. Lesley Elvidge, HR Director says, "Our Myth Busters'-themed campaign aimed to better educate students on what life is really like at Russell McVeagh, as we discovered there was a chasm between how employees perceived the firm compared to how students - our potential future workforce - viewed it.

The campaign used audience-targeted language across posters, flyers and invitations, and leveraged social media. The Campaign won the New Zealand Association of Graduate Employers Best Print Campaign in 2016.

Russell McVeagh goes above and beyond to look after its people, once onboard.

The firm employs a life coach to run workshops with mothers or fathers to help them transition back into work, and also has a nanny service.

Its parental-leave policy includes 12 weeks of paid leave and a six-week lump sum on return to work) topping up the 18-week primary-carer government-paid parental-leave to full pay, regardless of gender, sexuality or role. Russell McVeagh also offers paid partner-leave for up to two weeks for non-primary carers and can also evidence that there is no gender pay gap across the firm.

Lawyers experience a higher incidence of depressive symptoms, when compared to other professions. Russell McVeagh takes this seriously and has a comprehensive wellbeing programme that supports staff in taking care of their mental and physical health, including partnering with well-known comedian Mike King, to bring the serious conversation of mental wellbeing to the firm and law students. It offers in-house resilience programmes, free and confidential counselling services, an on-site health nurse, catch-up days (days in lieu), unlimited sick leave, subsidised gym memberships and Healthy Living Groups.

Counselling service use increased in 2016, a positive result of increased encouragement to make the most of the support on offer.

Ensuring a flexible working environment is another focus.

Cutting-edge laptops, along with the latest software and technology including video calling and wireless noise-cancelling headsets, allow staff to easily work flexibly offsite/at home. To modernise and create collaborative, open work areas, Russell McVeagh has stand-up/sit-down desk options, and shared break-out/social spaces.

Millennials value "being a good corporate citizen." In 2016, Russell McVeagh formalised a sustainability action plan and held its first Sustainability Week, which included external speakers, a clothes swap, daily 'tip' emails, and a client panel. The firm undertakes a considerable amount of pro bono work for community and non-profit groups. Each team also spends one working day per year volunteering. In 2016, staff contributed an equivalent of \$1.35 million in pro bono work and charity days.

Solicitor Nathalie Harrington is one young Millennial who is enjoying Russell McVeagh's commitment to her generational needs:

"In my year at the firm, I have been able to get involved in a range of initiatives and activities that all make work a more exciting place to be. The firm has been hugely supportive in letting me pursue my own areas of interest and incorporate these into my work. I spent

several years living in China during primary school and have always retained an interest in China. The firm has funded ongoing Chinese classes which have a focus on business Chinese. In addition, the firm was able to accommodate travel to China with a Ministry of Youth Development delegation in 2016 and my attendance at various other China-related events, including the Chinese Premier's 2017 visit to NZ. The partners have helped me to understand what opportunities are available through the firm and how I can get the most out of my existing skills."

Emily Devaney, a summer clerk, had this to say about her experience at Russell McVeagh: "I chose to Summer Clerk at Russell McVeagh over an offer from another firm. Russell McVeagh made my decision easy. They took an active interest, not only in my potential as a lawyer, but also in getting to know me. They were perceptive and proactive and after the clerkship process were able to suggest team options I had never considered but ended up fitting in with well. The whole team seemed genuinely interested in my success, not just over summer but long term. I felt I was in safe hands."