THE TIMES

‘I wanted to know a girl from a state school could succeed at a City firm’

When I accepted a training contract at Dechert I hoped to work on high-profile cases with an international element. I wanted to travel and use the foreign languages I’d studied for years at school and university, make friends and confirm my belief that a girl from a state-school background and with a non-Oxbridge education could succeed at a high-flying City firm. I achieved all those aspirations.

I was also eagerly looking forward to earning some decent money after five years of further education, even while I mourned in anticipation the loss of my social life and damage to my emotional wellbeing. I was so wide of the mark and am still at the firm five years on.

The first seat of my training contract, in the International Dispute Resolution department, did not disappoint as I was flung headlong into the preparation for an expedited trial in litigation about comparative advertising between two household retailers. I helped to draft witness statements and, for some, had sole responsibility. I also became involved in litigation relating to the diamond broking industry. This was more like it! I was enthralled by the way the industry’s key players operated and it was fun visiting the offices of the client and hearing about their dealings.

I went back to Dispute Resolution a year later, for my fifth seat. Dechert operates a six-seat training contract so you can tailor your experience to gain varied or focused experience. Meanwhile, I had completed seats in finance and real estate, financial services and corporate and securities, but I missed the variety of quality work and the high level of client contact that litigation offers.

The work began with a pending appeal to the Supreme Court for a hedge-fund client. We had instructed Jonathan Sumption, QC, in what ended up being one of his last appearances in front of the Supreme Court before he became a Supreme Court justice himself. It was amazing to work with him and just being in the Supreme Court was awe-inspiring.

Our appeal succeeded and the decision was a landmark ruling: it’s exciting to have been part of that law-making process. I also became embroiled in one of the “oligarch” cases, in which we acted for a former-Soviet metals magnate. That was to take up much of the next two years (including evenings and weekends), requiring me to travel all over the world. I even learnt some Russian.

Of course these are the highs of my training. But the small intake at Dechert ensures you will make friends and get to know everyone, so that you have the support of colleagues in stressful times.

Litigation is not for everyone: some people find its adversarial nature,and the huge commercial cases, overwhelming. And you mustn’t take personally the aggressive letters that are sent in the most fiercely fought cases. But if you’re bright, organised and calm under pressure with good interpersonal skills, being a litigator could take you places.

Sarah Fidler is an associate at Dechert LLP