

INTERVIEW: Creating a Culture of Growth, with Vaibhav Adlakha

Contributed by



Th. Anna Ingimundardottir



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DISABILITY



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Vaibhav Adlakha is an associate in Reed Smith's Global Corporate Group. He has experience in advising on State Aid and Public Procurement obligations, Risk Management, drafting Policies and Risk Exposure Profile. Vaibhav's practice also includes public interest tests, national security concerns and price control references, key legal themes that have characterised the competition landscape in recent years. Vaibhav has trained at Reed Smith LLP sitting in Admiralty, Banking & Finance, Knowledge Management, Competition and Antitrust, as well as Financial Regulation. He qualified in September 2018 focusing on Competition, Financial Regulation and Knowledge Management. He has co-authored many articles and client alerts published both internally and externally.

Vaibhav is an active participant in our Diversity & Inclusion initiatives and a member of our LEADRS group.

In this Q&A, Vaibhav was in conversation with the Chambers INSPIRE Chair for Age and Disability, Th. Anna Ingimundardottir.

Could you describe your career journey so far and, in particular, how you came to work for Reed Smith?

My career journey has been tough, yet enlightening. Born in India with a disability, I was just happy to have an education and did not even dream of having a career. It was not until I moved to the Netherlands that I thought about studying law after finishing high school at the American School of The Hague. The teachers at my school gave me the confidence that I could do anything and that if I wanted to do law, that is what I should aim for.

Having successfully come through law school and completed the LPC I realised, for the first time, that my disability was an issue when applying to law firms to become a solicitor. After being unsuccessful in a number of interviews, I tried to explore alternative careers. In order to understand what having a legal career with a disability would entail, I decided to get some work experience in various fields, including government departments, human rights, and human resources and as an in-house legal analyst.

All of the work experience was related to the legal field, as I wanted to see where my skills would fit and what other options there were if I could not become a solicitor. I simply wanted to use my skills and gain valuable experience in order to prove to myself that I can also work and be a contributing member of society.

These experiences were extremely enriching because they not only taught me the skills needed to become a good solicitor but also made me understand the expectations of clients and colleagues the requirements of the service industry and how I would be able to adapt within the work environment. However, I missed the commercial aspects of being a lawyer and decided to give it a last shot by applying for a training contract at Reed Smith through Employability.

At Reed Smith, I went into the interview process with no expectations. However, this time I felt confident and more prepared to navigate the legal profession. I was honest with Reed Smith and myself about what I wanted to achieve and how Reed Smith could be the perfect environment for me. Reed Smith focused on my ability rather than my disability, recognising my potential as a contributing member who can help the firm prosper and grow.

Having now reached my final destination, I can say that my journey was an enlightening one because I enjoyed the process of self-discovery and the learning experience. I know I have a long way to go and I still do not know what my career limits are or how long my journey will last.

Nevertheless, what I am very sure about is that I want to enjoy the journey as long as it does last and ensure that I am known more for my legal work than the fact that I am a lawyer in a wheelchair.

How does Reed Smith ensure you have the support and equipment needed for your work?

Whilst Reed Smith considered me for my ability, they also considered my disability to ensure that I can fulfil the expectations the firm has for its people. Even before I started my training contract, they worked with me for two years to get the office environment set up for my needs. I have cerebral palsy and am quadriplegic. This means that I have limited movement in my arms and legs and use a wheelchair. They worked on making the doors automatic and ensuring that there were disabled toilets on every floor. My computer was prepared with special software – Dragon Naturally Speaking, Read and Write Gold etc. – and a large screen. The firm also worked with Access to Work and insisted that I have a full-time personal assistant to enable me to operate at the same level as other trainees and associates, without my even requesting it.

The majority of law firms are willing to make physical adjustments to help people with a disability, but Reed Smith focused on my capability and strengths. They encouraged me to meet current trainees to understand the work and the expectations that supervisors, colleagues and clients have. This helped me understand how I need to prepare

myself to meet those expectations. Reed Smith helped me shape my training contract and worked with me to combine my ambition with their business requirements, which allowed me to contribute in a timely, effective and practical manner.

Reed Smith gave me an identity as a lawyer rather than as someone who is disabled. Most importantly, they made the mental adjustment to give me work that focused on my strength and ability. Whilst most firms are flexible when it comes to client needs, Reed Smith is also flexible when it comes to retaining and developing the talent that they see in their people.

What are some of the mistakes you think workplaces should avoid making when supporting employees with disabilities?

The biggest mistakes people in workplaces normally make is to have pre-conceptions of what a person with a disability can and cannot do. They sometimes try to overcompensate without realising that what people with disabilities actually want is to have the same expectations and to be treated in the same way as everybody else. Hence, the aim of any proposed adjustments should not be to make them feel different but to bring them to the same level as others. Any pre-conceived notion regarding where they can add value within the firm without collaborating with them and taking account of their ambitions, may unintentionally lead to uncertainty and a feeling of isolation in their mind. That is what firms need to guard against.

Related to this is the fact that those who receive extra support as a result of their disability may be seen in a different light by colleagues and clients. Therefore, while integrating a person with a disability into any team, the firm must ensure that they are treated like other employees with a path to grow and develop to be able to find their sense of value.

What advocacy work can law firms do to support employees with disability?

In terms of advocacy work, firms should be trying to make the profession itself more inclusive and diverse. 'Looking

for Excellence and Advancement of persons with Disabilities at Reed Smith' (LEADRS) was set up in 2012 and works tirelessly for the advancement of people with disabilities. It advocates not only recruiting and retaining the talent but also works towards enhancing policies that not only affect Reed Smith but also its clients and the legal profession. LEADRS ensures that the firm continues to attract the right talent and has played a key role in changing its recruitment policy so that everybody has a fair shot.

The mental health task force, which is part of the LEADRS, makes sure that people with unseen disabilities are not ignored and that the firm remains a place where they feel accepted and, more importantly, wanted. Therefore, LEADRS tries to ensure that everyone at the firm is aware of 'disability etiquette' so as to feel comfortable working either as a person with a disability or with a disabled person. Reed Smith has also signed up to the **DIFID Charter for Change** at the Global Disability Summit to remain at the forefront of facilitating change.

Reed Smith understands that the sense of responsibility and purpose should go far beyond its own doors. It should stretch beyond the legal profession to reach all professions and clients to have a more inclusive and diverse society. Reed Smith continues to work towards this endeavour.

How can workplaces generally, and the legal profession specifically, become more inclusive and supportive to employees with disabilities?

The easiest step is to understand the needs of every employee and provide physical adjustments accordingly. However, the most important step is to make mental adjustments – it is something that every person in the firm needs to do.

From the perspective of a person with a disability, you need to understand the requirements of the profession you are going to be working in and how you may need to adapt to work with your limitations, in order to be a contributing force within the firm itself. For people who are working with disabled colleagues, the adjustment is more about understanding that they are a valuable part of the team, if the focus is on their ability and strength. This will require an

understanding of how different individuals work best along with a realization that the traditional ways of working may not always suit every individual. If this mind set is prevalent throughout the organization, then everyone can add value.

The journey from disability to ability has never been an easy one. How you perceive yourself and how others may perceive what you can and cannot do is paramount. Therefore, it requires an understanding of both your strengths and limitations together with collaboration with the firm and a support system that helps inspire you to progress and become who you want to be.

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