



SOCIAL MOBILITY REPORT

Making law more accessible

2022/23
ANNUAL REVIEW



The sky is the limit

Walker Morris provides highly tailored, long term, strategic advice to multinational and public and private listed companies globally. Our diverse collection of lawyers and professionals carry an entrepreneurial spirit and work incredibly hard to elevate clients to greater success.

Executive Summary

Every one of us is touched by the law, and every person – regardless of background – with the drive and skills required should have the opportunity to study and practice it. All too often, however, law is portrayed as out of reach for all but a select few.

It's time to do away with that idea for good. I wasn't privately educated. I didn't go to a top-tier school. I didn't always know that I wanted to be a lawyer. In fact, at Walker Morris, three quarters (73.8%) of our solicitors, including partners, went to state schools.

Many of us were told by school advisors, teachers, and even parents that law 'may not be right for us', and we heard that view echoed by commentators and politicians – but we stuck with it.

Our team is proof that people from every background can deliver world-class legal work for clients, day in and day out. Unfortunately, misconceptions about law's exclusivity continue to limit the industry's diversity and shrink the talent pool.

The first step to addressing this issue is understanding it, so we carried out a survey of 2,000 14–18-year-olds. The survey included questions related to careers advice received in schools, perceptions of the legal industry and perceived barriers to accessing careers in law.

So what did we find out?

Our research found that four in ten (38%) young people have been advised against pursuing their chosen career path. Law wasn't offered as a GCSE or A-level option for 46% of students, and just 16% have considered going into law.

One in five students (18%) believe they can't pursue law because they don't have a family connection, and 14% think that a private education is a requirement. More than one in ten (12%) feel discouraged by the lack of representation of people like them in law.

Our sector urgently needs to improve its communication with students. It's our responsibility to emphasise that anyone can become a lawyer, and that beyond just good grades, it's about communication and working well under pressure.

People from lower-income households (those with incomes under £30,000) are 8% more likely to be discouraged from studying law than those in households that earn above that. Four in ten (40%) believe they would struggle with university fees if they studied law, and the same number are worried about the time commitment and complexity.

This is especially true as the cost of living continues to rise. A university education and legal qualifications are expensive, and this also limits access for young people.

What can we do to help?

We must continue to offer – and raise awareness of – alternative routes into law, such as scholarships and apprenticeships.

Perceptions of the industry are changing. Today, many firms are more inclusive and diverse than ever, but there's a lot of work still to do. At Walker Morris, we are working to help pupils, schools and careers advisors to tear down outdated ideas about what it takes to be a lawyer.

Empowering people who have long been excluded from law is good for the industry, it's good for firms, and – most importantly – it's the right thing to do.

MALCOLM SIMPSON,
MANAGING PARTNER AT WALKER MORRIS



Introduction



Today, the system actively turns bright, talented young people away from law.”

In the UK, many students who choose law are privately educated. Those that aren't are often – wrongly – told the legal profession isn't for them. This discouraging environment has produced an industry with limited diversity of thought and perspective – and that's a problem.

Today, the system actively turns bright, talented young people away from law. People from less privileged backgrounds are told that law is out of reach, and the focus on university as the only route into the profession pushes great candidates into other fields.

Diversity makes for better law firms. They can offer the best advice from a variety of perspectives and see opportunities that more homogenous teams may miss. It's in everybody's interest to welcome people from all walks of life into law – so we decided we needed to examine the root of the problem.

We surveyed 2,000 14–18-year-olds from a variety of backgrounds to understand what they're being told about working in law, how they feel about it, and what their plans are. The results highlight the scale of the problem.

16%

of students have considered a career in law

Four in ten

believe they would struggle with university fees if they studied law

Nearly half

of students want to do something “interesting”

38%

of young people have been discouraged from pursuing their preferred career path

8%

of students from lower-income households were more likely to be discouraged from studying law

A third

of students want to do something “rewarding”



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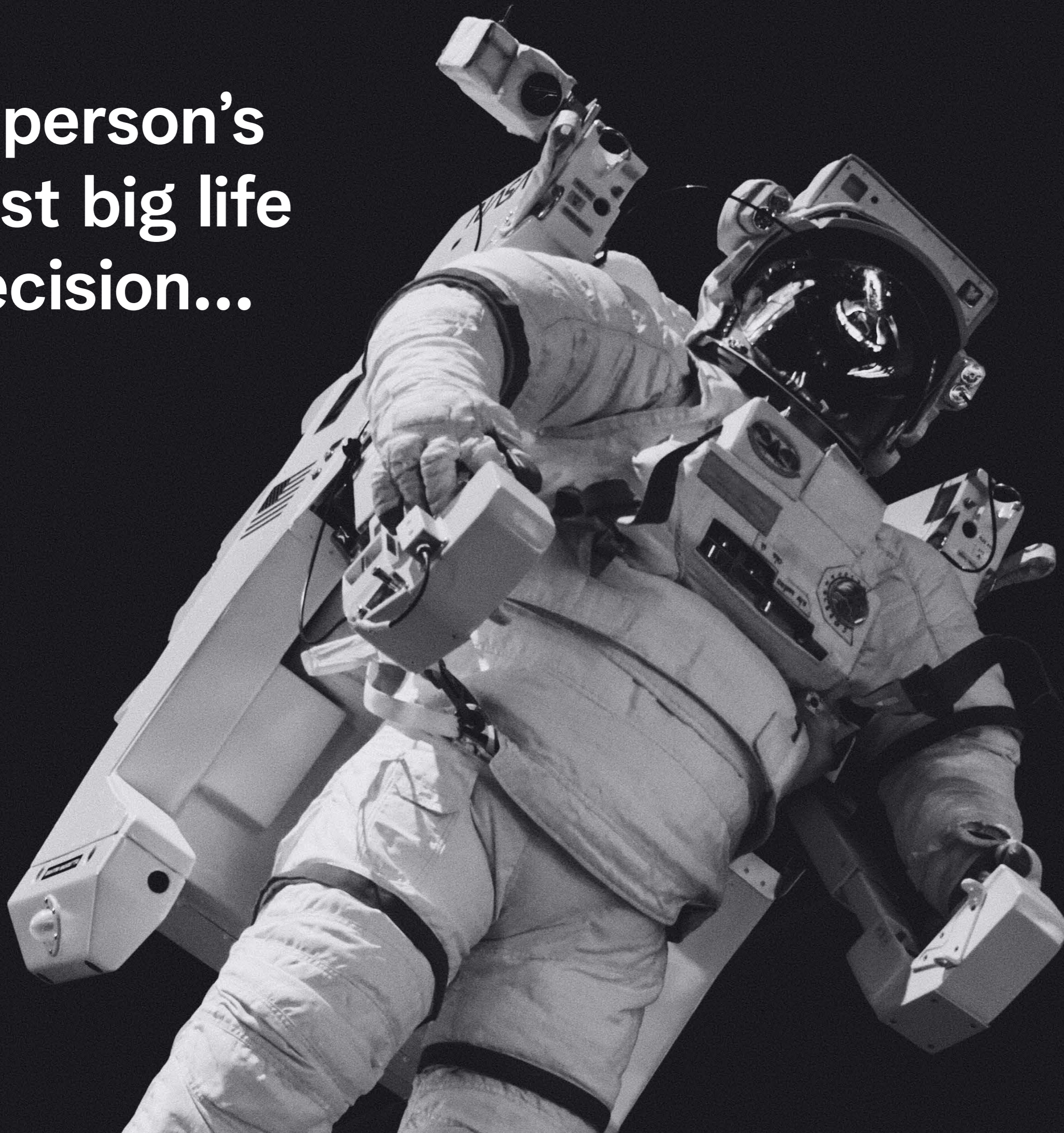
I've had conversations with the team, and even our most talented solicitors were once told that they couldn't be a lawyer because of their background or financial circumstances. Yet here they are, delivering outstanding City-quality work every day.

We need to dismantle the misconceptions young people and many older generations – hold about a career in law these days.

It's simply not true that prestigious universities are the only way into the industry, or that people from less privileged backgrounds can't thrive. Law is for everyone.”

SIMON CLARK
GENERAL COUNSEL AT WALKER MORRIS

A person's first big life decision...



Our data makes alarming reading for schools, their careers departments and law firms. Too many teenagers who want to become lawyers – our future colleagues – are being turned away.

Young people make important career decisions at an early age. From the age of 13, students begin to narrow down their options, beginning with their GCSE choices. They continue to narrow them at A-level and when they choose a diploma or degree.

A 13-year-old child is extremely susceptible to what adults say, so being discouraged at this young age can have a serious impact. It is our responsibility as professionals to ensure that all students have access to accurate, unbiased guidance from a young age.

To drive this change, law firms must adjust how they engage with schools and students. We must highlight the variety of routes into law and the variety of roles available in the industry.

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I was discouraged from pursuing a career in law when I was studying for my A-levels.

A careers advisor told me that they ‘didn’t think I was the right fit’.

At the time, I thought she was saying that I wasn’t clever enough. Today, I see that there was more to it than that. During my early years in law, I always felt like I was on the back foot, as though I had to work harder than everyone else to get where I needed to be. I know that this is a familiar story for others from ethnic minorities and working-class backgrounds.

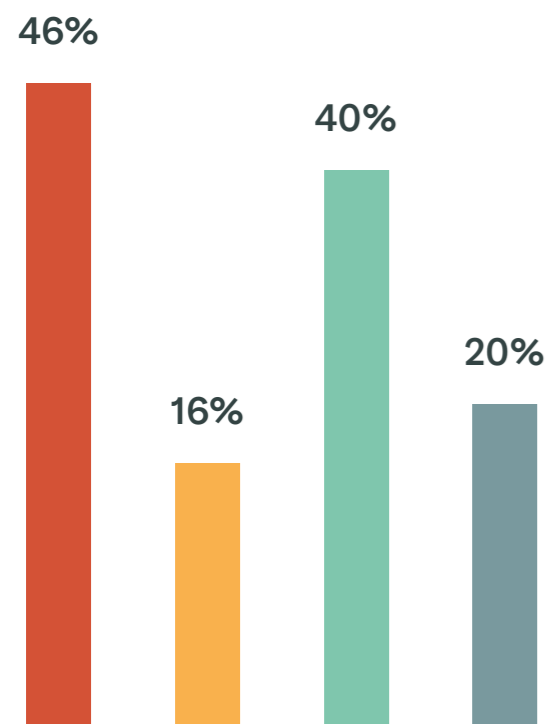
I didn’t have a close family member to advise me on university, and I didn’t have family or friends in the legal profession who could help me to get a training contract. But I persevered and made it happen. When I was fully qualified, in 2015, I joined Walker Morris, and I was promoted to a partner in May 2022.”

CARLY THORPE
PARTNER AT WALKER MORRIS



What stands in young people's way?

There are many obstacles that students need to overcome to pursue a career in law, and some groups face more obstacles than others.



Almost half (46%) of students say that their school or college doesn't offer law as a GCSE or A-level.

Just 16% of students have considered a career as lawyer or barrister.

40% of students also reported that the time it takes to qualify discourages them from studying law.

The additional requirements needed for a legal qualification are also prohibitive, according to a fifth (20%) of students.

Many students also have serious misconceptions about what is involved in studying law and who can participate. Understanding and changing these perceptions is the key to creating a more diverse field of legal professionals.



Nearly one in five students (18%) believe that law students need a family or social connection at a law firm to succeed in the field.

But that's not all...

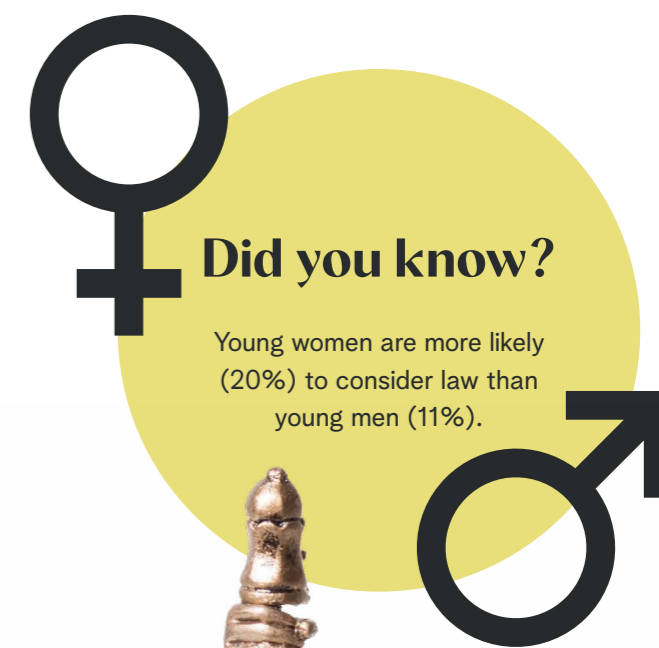
Whilst attitudes are changing, some 14% still believe that a private school education is necessary to support a law career.

12% of respondents are still concerned about lack of mental health support in the sector.

The same number 12% are also dissuaded from law because they don't see people like them in the industry.

These numbers do represent progress. As a firm where almost three quarters did not attend private school, we're challenging preconceptions about the educational backgrounds that can lead to a career in law. We're also extremely proud of the work that we are doing on diversity and mental health, but it's too soon to celebrate.

Every student deserves straightforward, accurate information about law so that they can make the right decision for their future.



Did you know?

Young women are more likely (20%) to consider law than young men (11%).





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With our headquarters based in the Leeds City Region we've a richly diverse pool on our doorstep, in which we are proud to invest.

As a firm we recognise that individuality is the lifeblood of our business and without it, we're limited as people and as an organisation.

For the future of our firm and the wider industry, it is so important that we can encourage young people – whatever their background – to consider law as an interesting and exciting career option.

We are committed to increasing the diversity of our workforce, provide opportunity for all and make everyone feel they can be their whole selves at work.”

JEANETTE BURGESS
REGULATORY PARTNER AND D&I LEAD AT WALKER MORRIS

Money is a major factor

The steep rise in the cost of living is making it harder for students to stay in education and low-salary training. Those from the least well-off families are likely to be hit first, worst and longest and will be put off from choosing a career that demands a long training period before qualifying, such as law.

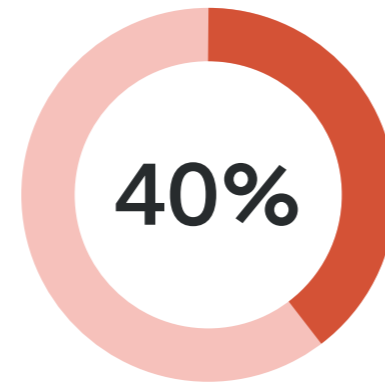
At the same time, the potential to earn a good salary over the course of their career is a significant draw to young people from all backgrounds. However, it's clear that this alone isn't enough to counteract the institutional discouragement that many students face – especially those from lower-income households and minority backgrounds.

Unlike many other fields, entering law as a university graduate involves a lot of expensive additional training, such as the Legal Practice Course (LPC). The time and financial commitment involved turn many students away.

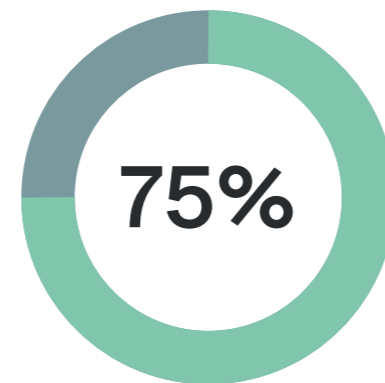
The new £5,000 Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) route, which was introduced in 2020 to expand access to the legal field, has had mixed results so far. Many firms still only recognise the LPC.

However, many students are not told that there are alternative routes into law, such as apprenticeship. Legal apprenticeships are available for positions including solicitor, paralegal, probate technician or a chartered legal executive.

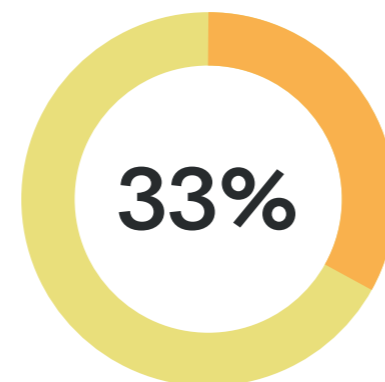
They offer a more hands-on approach to teaching, with students spending 20% of each working week studying and the rest working in a law firm. At Walker Morris, we employ 16-18 year olds with little or no qualifications into the business as apprentices and we train them for a year.



of students believe that university fees for studying law are too high.



of students said that the most important factor when choosing their career is that they can earn enough to live well and look after themselves.



of students place a good work-life balance ahead of earning well or doing something they enjoy.



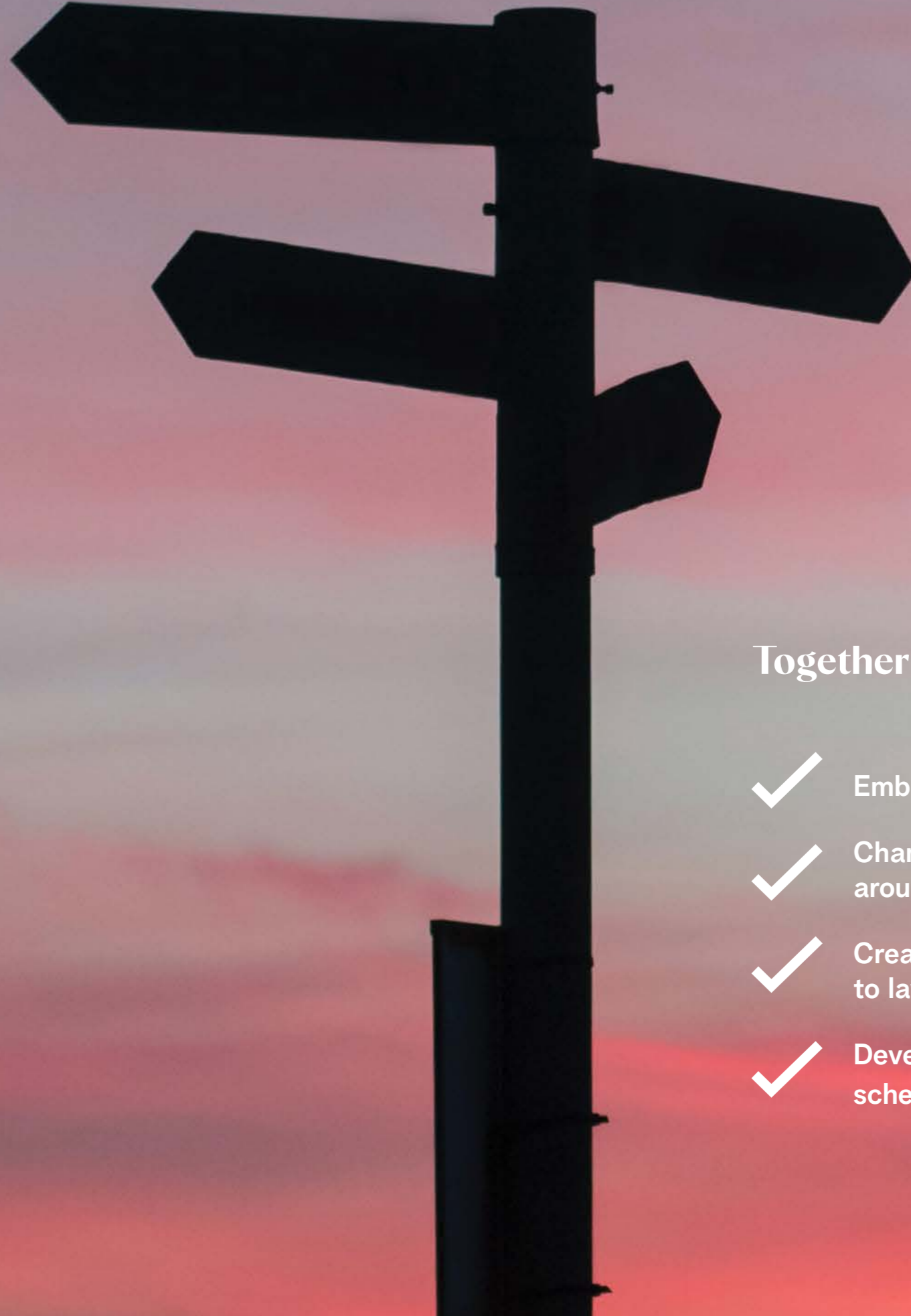
As a firm where only 25% of Partners had a privileged education – much lower than most law firms – we're particularly committed to tackling the social barriers faced by many in our community.

Alongside our work with local high schools and universities, we are continuing to support apprenticeships by hiring 16-18 year olds with little or no qualifications into the business and train them for a year. We've got a great track record of employing them on a permanent basis after they've completed their training too.

This is important to us at Walker Morris, as our people are central to our success and we want to keep exploring ways to help eliminate obstacles into the profession and help to improve opportunities for all."

SIMON CLARK
GENERAL COUNSEL AT WALKER MORRIS

What do law firms need to do?



It is every law professional's responsibility to understand our industry's issues and work collaboratively to overcome them. Limited social mobility and diversity are two major challenges we face today, and while the industry has begun to make progress, there's a lot of work left to do.

First, embrace inclusivity. If every law professional has the same small set of life experiences and went to the same handful of schools, the sector is worse off. Professionals in all roles must work to create a culture of inclusivity in their firms where there is real willingness to enlist, reward on merit and create diverse teams.

At the top levels, decision-makers can implement policies that support people with different needs, such as flexible working, sponsorship, training, mentoring and mental wellbeing initiatives. This isn't easy and it isn't cheap – but the cost of not doing so could be even greater.

Law firms must also change the narrative around law for young people. This involves building close working partnerships with schools and colleges to ensure that young people can make an informed choice about a career in law.

Even a small amount of time spent correcting people's misapprehensions or answering questions can change the trajectory of a student's life. Law professionals can work with career advisors and visit GCSE and Sixth Form students in schools or at career fairs to set the record straight.

It's also important to create greater access to law through a variety of routes. Firms should consider dramatically ramping up the work experience, training, internships and mentorships. Nothing compares to really working in a law office, yet these opportunities have long been kept for only the most outstanding or well-connected students.

Finally, firms should develop their own social mobility schemes. Looking at the extent of the problem within your own organisation can be uncomfortable, but it's a necessary step toward changing for the better.

At Walker Morris, for example, one of the focusses of our three-year Ambition 2024 strategy is levelling the field for talented candidates with lower educational achievements and those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Together we can...

- ✓ Embrace inclusivity
- ✓ Change the narrative around law
- ✓ Create greater access to law
- ✓ Develop social mobility schemes

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As part of our commitment to eliminating obstacles into the legal profession and helping tackle social barriers faced by many.

We are working with Ahead Partnership as a partner in our work.

They have introduced us to Bishop Young High School in Leeds where we have been working with students to help them choose a career they may not have considered – maybe even within a law firm!

As part of this we've delivered a guest speaker assembly where two of our lawyers attended the school to speak about their career, and we have also arranged a 'speed networking' session with 12 volunteers from our team. In this session students had the chance to ask questions about our colleagues' background, career and what it's really like in a law firm.”

TRACY FOLEY
HEAD OF HR AT WALKER MORRIS



Creating a better future

Misconceptions and exclusivity still hold our industry back. They limit our thinking and turn talented young people away. To welcome the best and brightest from future generations into our industry, we need to challenge the beliefs that discourage people from studying law. This change in mindset is also good for firms, as it broadens the talent pool and diversity of thought they have available.

We're already working in partnership with universities and have introduced blind CV recruitment, removing factors such as name, gender and age to help to eliminate unconscious bias.

We must find new ways to work with educational institutions and challenge longstanding misunderstandings of our field. Changing our industry will be difficult, and it will take time – but it's the right thing to do.

We've made a start, but we know that there's more we can do. To hear more about what we're doing and to help us deliver more options for young people, please contact HR@walkermorris.co.uk.

