

A law firm is being sued over age-discrimination

A City lawyer is suing his former employer for age-discrimination. This unusual procedure among jurists shows the growing awareness of the new regulation in this matter among employees.

A senior City lawyer accuses his former partners of age discrimination. Peter Bloxham, the 54-year-old former head of restructuring for Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, will take the stand at the London Central Employment Tribunal to give evidence against former colleagues in the elite City of London law firm. Mr Bloxham, who now works for Prudential, the insurer, was one of the first people to file a claim of age discrimination after the introduction of new legislation last October. More than 1,500 claims have been made since, but Mr Bloxham's is the first issued by a senior lawyer against his former partners. Ronnie Fox, founder of the law firm Fox and an expert on partnership issues, said that the case was "extremely unusual" because "most professional services firms go to great lengths to settle disputes privately". After a day of administration, during which the tribunal chairman will decide the order of business, some of London's top lawyers are expected to give evidence. As of last week, Mr Bloxham's legal team had submitted only its intention to call one witness : Mr Bloxham himself. Neither Mr Bloxham nor his lawyers, Dawsons, would comment on the exact nature of the claim, which relates to changes to Freshfields' pension scheme. It is understood that Mr Bloxham will argue that the changes – which cut the amount that partners would receive in retirement – were discriminatory because they affected partners differently according to their age. Although other age discrimination claims have already come before the Employment Tribunal, it is ironic that the first major case involves a claim against a law firm. Lawyers predict that the Freshfields case will rekindle business fears about age-discrimination claims. A recent survey by Berwin Leighton Paisner (BLP), the law firm, found that almost one in nine employers has received an age-discrimination claim since the practice was officially outlawed last year. Rebecca Harding-Hill, a partner in BLP, said : "The findings suggest that employees are aware of the age regulations and are willing to take action." According to the Employment Tribunal, 972 claims were made between October and the end of March. Since then, the pace of claims has increased, with 600 filed in the past three months. Ms Harding-Hill said : "It is still early days for companies to see the full impact of the new legislation and employees' increasingly heightened legal awareness could lead to a dramatic increase in claims."

(The Times, 09/07/2007 : "City lawyer in age-discrimination battle")