

Top Tips for Junior Lawyers

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1. Considerations for LPC and Law students

If you're not planning on taking a gap year, apply for training contracts after receiving your penultimate year exam results. If you get a training contract with a firm that offers sponsorship, the LPC will cost you a lot less.

Apply for vacation schemes at the beginning of your second year. The deadline is usually sometime in January.

Think about which areas of law interest you when choosing optional subjects. If you're thinking of applying for training contracts in the city or magic circle, it's probably wise to choose corporate or commercial subjects to demonstrate your commitment to these areas from an early stage.

If you're thinking of funding the LPC yourself without a training contract, bear in mind that there are masses of LPC graduates competing with undergraduate students, mature students and people changing careers when it comes to obtaining a training contract. As if this wasn't scary enough, a significant number of training contracts (especially in the city/magic circle) are snapped up by law undergraduates at the beginning of their final year and those who took part in vacation schemes.

Be honest with yourself and make sure you'll completely committed to a career as a solicitor before you undertake the LPC, especially if you're not being sponsored.

Whilst at university (preferably in the years before you apply for training contracts) enhance your CV, for example with a position of responsibility of some kind, part time work, sport or voluntary work to demonstrate teamwork and problem solving skills. These are two of the main skills firms are looking for evidence of in your application.

Although this seems obvious, study hard for your exams. Without a 2:1 you'll find it even more difficult to obtain a training contract.

Undertake relevant work experience to demonstrate your commitment to a legal career. It doesn't have to be a formal vacation placement and it gives you something to talk about in applications for training contracts or at interviews.

Remember that the academic study of law is very different from law in practice. Just because you liked/hated a subject at university doesn't necessarily mean it will be the same in practice.

Lastly, know what you want from your career. For example, not everyone is cut out to be a corporate lawyer (although all the publicity would have us believe otherwise). Think about what interests you and try not to feel you have to do as your peers do. Think about what kind of work and lifestyle will make you happy.

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2. LPC Paralegals

Be aware of your billing: As a fee earner in a firm it is important to understand that your billing is what ultimately defines the value that you add to the firm. Ensure you understand how to make the most of the billable hours in your day.

Keep a record of your skills: include everything you acquire, with examples. These will be useful when applying to other firms as well when negotiating pay increases or promotions at work.

Keep up with legal developments: As a LPC Paralegal you are fresh from your years of studying the law. You are expected to be competent and knowledgeable about the law. Therefore, ensure you are up to date with the statutory and common law precedents in relation to the area in which you work.

Look the part: Take pride in your appearance - to be recognised as a potential lawyer you need to look like a potential lawyer.

Keep up to date with your work, admin, deadlines and files. Make it easy for others to work on your files in your absence. This will ensure you are always on top of your caseload and you will be recognised as a reliable and professional employee.

Raise your profile at work: make your name in-house and with other firms by participating in the local JLD and other professional groups.

Don't just identify problems with processes in the firm; always present a possible solution when highlighting problem areas to your employer. It demonstrates a real interest in the welfare of the firm and in improving efficacy.

Be aware of presentation: when writing letters to third parties, always ensure that the grammar and presentation is accurate. The way you are perceived by clients and outside the firm will eventually feed back to your employer. If it's positive, your value as an employee will increase.

Stay open to opportunities: if you're interested in legal aid work keep an eye on the LSC website and Lawcareers.net for LSC training grants awarded to firms. For example in 2008 the LSC awarded 150 training grants to Legal Aid firms to cover the training costs for 150 trainee solicitors.

Don't lose sight of the end goal: Keep on top of applications for training contracts and opportunities that will get you closer to securing one. It is easy to become bogged down at work and put off making efforts to realise your goals. If you are serious about qualifying then keep the momentum going.

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3. Handling interviews

Be prepared: make sure you've done your research on the firm that you are applying to. Make sure you know why you are applying for a particular firm as you are bound to be asked the question.

Practice your interview technique: considering possible interview questions. There are hundreds of websites on the internet with examples of questions that commonly come up.

Make a good first impression: wear your best suit, smile and make good eye contact. Arrive at your interview early. Arriving late will make you feel flustered which is likely to increase stress and anxiety.

Be confident: nothing shows confidence like a firm handshake and positive body language.

Stay calm: try not to let your nerves get the better of you. If you're asked a difficult question that you're not sure how to answer don't be afraid to ask for clarification. This demonstrates confidence and an ability to control a situation.

Don't appear critical of former employers: Most employers will look unfavourably upon a person who complains about a past employer as it demonstrates a lack of loyalty.

Be enthusiastic: show your enthusiasm for the role in the way that you answer the interviewer's questions.

Consider your strengths: be clear about what skills you can bring to the firm.

Be an interesting person: don't be afraid to discuss your hobbies and interests.

End on a positive note: Use the opportunity at the end of the interview to ask positive questions to demonstrate your knowledge of the role or the firm. Avoid the tendency to ask questions about pay or benefits at the first interview.

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4. Finding a training contract with a small firm

Investigate the possibilities: Large city firms are not the only place you will find a training contract. High street and medium firms can also take on trainees for limited places.

Do your research: Smaller firms may not have such extensive websites and it will take a bit more time to learn about the firm in order to impress during the interview. However, that does not mean the information isn't available. Keep an eye out in your local newspapers for any press releases the firm has made, check out their profile in Chambers and Legal 500 and ask friends and family what they know about the firm.

Make contact: Get in touch with your local JLD group. Speaking to the trainees and newly qualified solicitors that are members of your local JLD is an excellent way to get an insight into your local firms. Take down the names and email addresses of those working at the firm you are interested in, you may be able to use these to get some helpful tips.

Work experience: It can be easier to approach smaller and medium sized firms for work experience. They rarely have official vacation schemes in place. If you write in advance of a holiday period, sending a CV and a good covering letter you may be able to gain a couple of weeks experience in the firm. Note however this is likely to be unpaid experience but is a really helpful in-route.

Get in the back door: I could shower you with examples of trainees who were offered training contracts after they started in the post room. A lot of smaller firms are happy to offer training contracts to those who already work for them in a different capacity. Some firms require trainees to work for them as a paralegal in advance of their training contract. The firms view it as an opportunity to get to know you and your work. Don't see it as a slight on your ability to take an administration, secretarial or paralegal position, instead see it as your chance to shine.

Consider part-time study: Often smaller firms will not sponsor the LPC and it will be up to you to finance it yourself. Part-time study can allow you to fund the course whilst gaining useful on the job experience. There are a number of options available such as three year training contracts which run alongside the two year part-time LPC or building up 6 months 'time to count' reducing your training contract to 18 months by working as a paralegal or 'fee earner' for 12 months or more. Research these options before committing to the full time LPC.

Attend as much as possible: If you hear about a legal careers day or a talk being given on a legal subject of interest to you – you should attend. Sometimes smaller firms are in attendance and if they are niche practices they may even be hosting the talk. These are perfect chances to meet people from the firms and ask the questions which will put you ahead of the crowd.

Don't be taken advantage of: It is possible that you will find yourself in a position where a firm has been dangling a carrot for you but it never gets close enough to reach. If they are serious about offering you a training contract then they won't need to play games with you. If you are in this situation ask them to give you a timescale as to when they expect you to start your training contract and if you are still unsatisfied start looking around for a position in another firm.

Persevere: It may be that you take a few years to get your training contract in place. You mustn't give up though - the experience you are gathering in the meantime will be providing you with important life skills which you will find useful when your contract begins.

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5. Style tips for professionals

Figure out how to work that iron: Creased shirts are an absolute no-no. There is no excuse!

Make sure it fits: Don't reject a great suit just because the fit isn't quite right. Have it altered to ensure that perfect fit. Usually the store can do this for you, or find a good tailor. Don't be tempted to do a stitch-up job yourself. It will backfire.

Beware of being over-formal: As a general rule, men should avoid black suits. It can look too formal for the office environment. Ladies can be a bit more adventurous with colour, usually because there is more choice available.

Make a splash: why not inject some colour? Black and white can sometimes appear a bit too corporate.

Don't go overboard: Mixing patterns, e.g. stripes and florals, can be a recipe for disaster. Proceed with caution.

Pay attention to detail: If you are wearing a shirt, approximately half an inch of the shirt cuffs should be visible past your suit jacket sleeves.

Less is more: Men, novelty ties are banned! If you are desperate to add a touch of daring, cufflinks are a safer option.

Shoes make all the difference : Hobbling into a meeting does not give a good first impression. When it comes to shoes, go for comfort as well as appearance. All shoes should of course be polished to perfection. You'd be surprised how often clients notice scuffed and scruffy footwear.

Handle with care: Your suits will last longer if you treat them nicely. Try to avoid dumping them in a heap on the floor when you get home, no matter how keen you are to leave the working day behind.

Express yourself: Finally, don't be afraid to inject a bit of personality into your business wardrobe. Clients like to know there is a person under there, not just a corporate machine.

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6. Getting the best out of networking

Be Interesting: Brush up on the latest topics of discussion within the legal sector and generally. Have an opinion on everything, but keep an open mind. Before attending any networking event, think of some “ice-breakers”. Small talk is important to be able to establish trust, and realise that asking questions makes you a more interesting person as well as demonstrating an interest in your group. Equally be prepared to talk enthusiastically about your work and hobbies. Be proud of your achievements and be clear about what you hope to achieve.

Fail to Prepare, Prepare to Fail: Individuals who attend networking events without any preparation and succeed are rare. Think about what you want to achieve from the event, which sort of people are likely to attend, and to whom you would particularly like to be introduced. Find out in advance as much as possible about the event – who is organising the event and if there are any sponsoring firms; who is on the guest list; are there any guest speakers and what are they likely to talk about; what is the history of the building where the event is being held.

First Impressions: It is said that it takes only 10 seconds to form a first impression of someone, so a smart confident appearance is essential. Enter the room calmly and make a mental note of who is present, choosing carefully who to talk to first. It may be easier to join a group of three people, rather than a duo who might already be engaged in a deep conversation. Judgement plays a key part in deciding whether to engage in a conversation with somebody who is on their own.

Meet People as People First: When meeting people for the first time, be authentic and genuine. Be more interested in listening to others than talking about yourself. Many successful networkers participate in conversations but never dominate. Instead their full attention will be on the person speaking, remembering details which can provide useful opening lines the next time they meet. Not always an easy skill to master, but it is one that is sure to win you friends – and ultimately business.

Network with a Purpose: It's all too easy to fall into people collecting mode. Networking isn't about how many contacts you have, but rather the quality of the relationship you have with your contacts. A poor contact may know you by name or face, but knows very little else about you. A good contact will think of you when an opportunity arises, and may call you for advice on an informal basis. Ensure that you have meaningful relationships with all your contacts and don't overextend yourself so as not to commit yourself to what you cannot do.

Invest in your network: Building a network of contacts takes time, often requiring many years to nurture and mature. Reciprocity and trust is important. Don't always ask people to help you or give you something every time you interact with them. It's important to be helpful and to share resources and knowledge with one another. Uplift people in your network when they need it and they will do so back. See it as putting money in the bank for a rainy day. It's about building up your network before you need it. Keep connected to people in your network. After an event, follow up contacts within 48 hours, ideally with a telephone call if an email is likely to get lost among the recipients hundreds of other emails. Warm up long cold contacts and consider existing networks such as university alumni, colleagues from law school and your local community.

Make time to meet new people each week: Life can get boring if you only interact with people who think just like you or cover the same topics. Be a renaissance, cross-disciplinary networker. Think outside the legal sector and learn from approaching the law from different perspectives. Try to talk to everyone you meet about something you've never spoken about before.

And finally, if the thought of networking still makes you cringe...: Ask a question at a meeting or a conference. For the price of being watched and listened to by the whole room for a short time, people will remember you for being an active listener who is confident enough to ask a question.

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7. Conducting Legal Research

Know how to use paper and electronic resources. Paper resources are often cheaper to access and do not produce a truncated search, as is often the case with online databases.

If you're researching a specific topic, Halsbury's Laws is a good starting point as it will provide a summary of the law in a particular area. The footnotes will also point you to further research sources such as cases and statutes.

If you're not sure where to start looking, Justcite is a search engine which is neutral of any legal publisher. Consequently, it searches all legal research sources and provides citations, summaries and related case law related to the topic searched. It's especially useful if you know the subject of a case but not the name.

If you need to research in depth on the law in a particular area, practitioner texts can be very useful. Don't forget to check that they are up to date though!

If you're researching statutes, the most comprehensive source is Halsbury's Statutes of England, accessible in paper version or online in LexisNexis Butterworths. If you're using the paper version, remember to check the Cumulative Supplement and Noter Up for amendments.

To check commencement of a statute, check Halsbury's 'Is It In Force' (part of Halsbury's Statutes of England). Also you can check for amendments in the Current Law Legislation Citator.

To research European Law, useful general sources are Eur-Lex, Europa and (in paper version) European Current Law. To avoid a truncated search, you'll need to use different Boolean connectors: for 'and' substitute 'with', for 'or', separate search terms with a comma and for 'not' substitute 'except'.

Useful sources for researching precedents are Atkins court forms (available in paper or online at LexisNexis Butterworths) and the Encyclopedia of Forms and Precedents. Start by searching for your topic in the consolidated index and then locating the relevant volume and paragraph. Don't forget to check for amendments in the looseleaf service binders.

If you know the name of a case but not the citation, the Current Law Case Citator lists all cases since 1947 by party name. For very recent cases, look in the cumulative table of cases in the latest issue of the Monthly Digest. As if this wasn't enough, the citator will also refer you to a summary of the case in the relevant Current Law Year Book.

If you need to record your research in a report, present your results clearly using subheadings and don't forget to note down how you found your results.

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8. Communication skills

Never presume that a message has been understood

Despite thousands of years of human evolution, the art of communication has not been mastered and one's own assessment of a situation is unlikely to match exactly with the recipient's understanding of a situation.

Frequently test everyone's perception of a situation. Ask for information to be repeated and repeat information that you receive to ensure that your understanding of the task is correct.

Regular reporting is regular informing

Keeping everyone informed is essential to productive and effective teamwork and ensuring that deadlines are met. Spend time deciding when and to whom you should communicate and remember that information which informs one person may irritate another.

Update your team as to your capacity to complete current tasks and be realistic about your ability to undertake further work. When you are away from the office make sure your colleagues know your whereabouts and equally provide another point of contact for clients, whether a secretary or another member of your team, who they can contact in your absence.

The Hidden Agenda

Mark de Rond, in his book *The Last Amateurs: To Hell and Back with the Cambridge Boat Race Crew*, spent time accompanying the Cambridge Boat Race Crew through the selection process and training for the 2007 event.

Reflective of many law firms, the rowers' camp was a highly competitive, high pressure environment where a simple mix-up could mean delaying and occasionally comprising the end result.

He noticed that where messages weren't communicated effectively a hidden agenda developed. Coaches feared that rowers might start to undermine their authority, while the rowers thought that coaches had already made the selection decisions and were just looking for the right data to firm up what they already wanted to happen.

The reality, he says, is usually a lot less sinister than we think. "The problem is that many people cannot live with casual gaps. They need to develop casual chains about why things happen in the way that they do. If there is a gap, we tend to fill it up with bad stuff because we are inherently paranoid".

Be self-aware

Attempt to see the world through the eyes of others, in order to understand how you are perceived by others. We all have different working styles – some want to be told very explicitly what to do, while some people delight in being given a target and being allowed to figure out what to do. Everybody has a different style of listening, learning and taking instructions.

Verbalising problems

In some situations, face to face communication is preferable, even essential. Never deliver bad news by email and never put bad news in writing until having spoken with the recipient personally.

Never tell a client that a matter is going to be easy, as when the matter turns out to be more complicated than at first foreseen, you immediately risk losing your client's trust.

7. Time out

Finally, anyone familiar with reality TV will have seen the frustration that comes in only interacting with the same group of people day in day out. Whilst communication between group members generally improves over time, misunderstanding can easily escalate into full scale conflict when working in close proximity with certain individuals!

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9. Making effective presentations

Pick a subject you feel confident with and ensure your preparation is wider than the presentation.

Think about what you want to achieve from your presentation and use it as a benchmark for the content.

Make sure you give yourself enough time to prepare and practice delivering the presentation.

Use your introduction to set the scene by asking a question to the audience or announcing a shocking statistic.

Choose a maximum of five points for the body of your presentation and ensure you can deal with each point in sufficient detail.

Use examples and statistics to illustrate your points.

Don't read from your notes. It is better to use them as back up in case your mind goes blank.

If you are having a Q&A session, write down the top 10 questions you expect to be asked and try to prepare to answer them.

Repeat the question asked and look around at the audience to involve them and make sure that you do not let one audience member dominate your time.

Lastly, if you don't know the answer to a question, confess. Take the person's details so you can find out and respond to them later.

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10. What your employer wants

Be indispensable – the best compliment is for your employer to miss your presence when you are out of the office, even if you have left them with absolutely everything they need at their fingertips. Be that person who knows the file and the documents inside out.

Be willing – don't ever turn down work. If you really are too busy to do the task at that time, say that you can do it, but not for x weeks, days etc., then it is up to your employer to decide whether it can wait or whether they have to give the task to someone else.

Be meticulous - everything that leaves your desk should be as perfect as if it was going straight to the client, even if it is just a draft or an internal research note. Typos and bad grammar are easily avoided, yet can create a lasting impression. Check everything twice.

Be interested – nowadays, being a good lawyer is about so much more than simply knowing the law. Learn more about your firm so you can market effectively to clients and prospective clients, get involved in firm activities, and always think wider than merely your own department.

Be smart – you aren't going to be asked to go to that all-important meeting or hearing if you aren't giving off the correct image for the firm. Even if your diary is clear for that day, you never know when a client is going to come in with an urgent problem, so always ensure you are smart and presentable.

Be pro-active – look beyond the task that you are being asked to do. If you are asked to do a research note, don't just explain what the law is, explain how that law will affect the case. Also, are there any future legal developments in the pipeline which could affect the advice you give at a later stage? Always think about taking that extra step.

Be perceptive – learn to recognise your own strengths and weaknesses and accept when you may need to ask for help. If there is an area where you feel you would benefit from further training, seek out an appropriate course and discuss it with your employer. They will appreciate your commitment to professional development.

Be realistic – manage your employer's expectations. Don't ever agree to unrealistic deadlines. Your employer will be less impressed if it takes you two weeks to do something you said you would finish in one, than if you had said three weeks at the outset, then finished the task in two. Ask at the outset if a matter is urgent.

Be flexible – None of us like altering our plans but sometimes it has to be done. An urgent injunction may require you to down tools on everything else, including social engagements. You need to find the balance between being accommodating and being a doormat – drinks with your flatmates may well wait for another day, but that stressed out important client on the telephone might not.

Be approachable – If people enjoy your company and like working with you, then you will shoot straight to the top of the partners' lists as the assistant/trainee they want to bring into their team. Don't give off that “leave me alone” vibe even if you are having a tough day – you just might miss out on the opportunity to be involved in one of the most high profile cases your firm has seen.

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11. Getting involved in Pro Bono

Law Students

See if your university, college or law school run their own Pro Bono clinic or programme. Most law schools now offer their students the chance to get involved in pro bono work from day one. Ask your tutor about opportunities.

If there is no programme already established, put some pressure on your college to start up a clinic. The more people you have to start up a group the better. [LawWorks](#) can assist with starting up a new clinic. Look for pro bono volunteering opportunities outside of the law school. Many other organisations provide pro bono advice or require pro bono assistance themselves. Organisations such as the Citizens Advice Bureau have established clinics in towns and cities and many will welcome law students. Local charities may also appreciate the assistance of legal minds from time to time. It may be a case of trial and error, but stick with it and you will reap the rewards.

Before signing up for voluntary work be aware of what commitment is required of you. Do not commit to a position if you are unable to fulfil your obligations, in both time and energy.

Trainees and qualified solicitors

Check to see if there is a LawWorks clinic already established in your area. You can check this at <http://www.lawworksclinics.org.uk/index.htm>

If there is no clinic in your local area, get in touch with the local Citizens Advice Bureau. Alternatively, the local council may have a list of pro bono advice providers in the region.

Consider starting up a clinic yourself. Often law firms will provide support in establishing a clinic and populating it with qualified lawyers keen to make a good impression. Get a partner to campaign on your behalf and show commitment to it. If your firm is not able to support you, contact LawWorks and see what they can do to help.

Remember:

Do not commit to what you cannot do. Treat pro bono work as if it is paid work. Your level of professionalism, commitment and attention to detail should be of the very highest standard. If you cannot commit to your clients you should not be taking on projects.

Good client care is often even more essential in pro bono work. You will often be advising people who have no experience of the legal system or of lawyers at all. Treat everyone with respect and dignity.

Enjoy it! Although it may be hard work at times, pro bono work is ultimately very rewarding.

With notes from: <http://juniorlawyers.lawsociety.org.uk>

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