

Applying for a Training Contract

Careers & Employability Service

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**Manchester
Metropolitan
University**

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Where to Start?

Securing a training contract has never been a more competitive business. The latest figures from the Law Society show that in 2009-10 4, 874 training contracts were awarded; whereas somewhere in the region of 8, 000 students will successfully complete the Legal Practice Course each year. From the point of view of the student, there can be a bewilderingly large no. of firms to choose from. Firms of solicitors can afford to be choosy and this underlines the importance of making a well-researched, highly-targeted application.

Students should first consider the following:

- which type of firm/organisation they would like to work for
- which areas of law they are interested in practising
- the relevant application timetable.

1. Types of firms

Large, commercial firms

These firms tend to be based in the City of London/West End or provincial city centres, often with offices in several cities. They will have a large no. of partners and concentrate on company/commercial law & commercial property deals. They could be dealing with mergers, take-overs & acquisitions, commercial litigation (eg. breach of contract), and other commercial matters, such as intellectual property, banking & finance, commercial lending and the insurance sector. Clients are likely to be large companies and the deals they are working on are potentially worth millions. Some large firms have offices overseas (often known as “International law firms”) and may offer a trainee solicitor the opportunity to work outside the UK, or alternatively spend some time on secondment with a client company. Some of these firms may also deal with some private client matters, for example in the areas of family law or probate; but these are likely to be wealthy individuals, this work is unlikely to be a large part of the firm’s work and is unlikely to be an area the trainee solicitor will be trained in.

Application timetable- 2 years in advance, usual deadline is July 31, 2012 for entry in September 2014. Students should apply in the 2nd year of their LLB studies (or final year of a non-law degree for students intending to proceed straight to the Graduate Diploma in Law.)

How to apply- firms usually have their own on-line application forms. As demand for training contracts at these firms tends to be particularly high, most firms specify a minimum class 2:1 degree and/or high A level grades e.g. minimum 320 UCAS points. Some firms may request CV/covering letter, but this is less usual.

Summer & Easter vacation placements are offered by many of these firms, often specifically aimed at 2nd year LLB students & final year non-law students. Competition for these places is often more intense than for a training contract! Some firms now assess vacation placement students for a training contract as part of the vacation placement.

Where to look - www.legal500.com, www.lawcareers.net, Training Contract & Pupillage Handbook, Prospects Law, Target Law.

Medium-sized firms

There are many “city-centre” firms which might better be described as “medium-sized”. As a rough guide, such a firm might have 5-15 partners, may still practise areas of company/commercial law or commercial property, but are likely to offer a broader range of practice areas outside purely commercial law (eg. family law, conveyancing, personal injury, employment law) or a more equal mix of corporate/private client work. Many medium-sized firms may also be based in satellite towns outside the city centre, or have offices spread across a few areas. Some medium-sized firms might also be described as “niche firms” (see below.) The key here is what areas of law are practised, and in particular the seats that a trainee solicitor will spend time in.

Application Timetable- Again, this tends to vary. Some firms will look to compete with the larger, commercial firms and recruit 2 years in advance, more typically medium-sized firms may recruit 12-18 months in advance. Students should check closing dates carefully. Some firms may recruit as & when they have vacancies, typically advertising them on Lawcareers.Net and/or the Law Society’s Gazette jobs section online (www.lawgazette.co.uk.) Some firms do not advertise and will accept speculative applications. A no. of firms are using the practice of offering a paralegal position initially, followed by a training contract if it is felt you have performed effectively as a paralegal.

How to apply - CV & covering letter, unless otherwise specified.

Where to look- a list of firms for speculative applications can be garnered using www.lawsociety.org.uk/choosingandusing/findasolicitor.law. Immediate vacancies listed on Lawcareers.Net and/or the Law Society’s Gazette (also searchable on-line at www.lawgazette.co.uk.) Job vacancies which are notified directly to the School of Law or MMU Careers & Employability Service will be sent to law students by e-mail in the regular careers bulletin. The Training Contract & Pupillage Handbook also covers a no. of firms (available online at Lawcareers.net.)

Niche firms

As the name suggests, these are firms which largely specialise in a particular area of law, for example personal injury or family law, human rights law or media law. They can offer advice & representation to clients in cases within the firm’s particular niche that require particular specialism. For example, a PI niche firm might be able to offer advice & representation in complex areas such as industrial disease & medical negligence. Some niche firms may not be able to offer training contracts as they do not practise enough areas of law. The Solicitors Regulation Authority requires that trainee solicitors be trained in a minimum of 3 different areas of law, mixing contentious & non-contentious work. Some niche firms may second a trainee solicitor to another firm of solicitors for a short period so that they can gain the necessary experience in other areas of law.

General practice/high street

Although something of an over-generalisation, this description tends to apply to “high street” firms which tend to serve a local area or community, rather than being based in a city centre. They are found in suburbs & satellite towns and as the name suggests, tend to offer a general range of private client legal services e.g. residential conveyancing, wills & probate, family/matrimonial work, criminal defence, PI work, employment law.

Application timetable- These firms often do not advertise vacancies and recruit from speculative applications, they may also offer paralegal work first before committing to a training contract. Firms that do advertise for trainee solicitors are likely to require an immediate start- current LPC students who will complete the course in July 2012 may apply , as firms may well wait for a strong applicant who will be ready to start working at that time.

How to apply - CV & covering letter, unless otherwise specified.

Where to look -

Again, www.lawsociety.org.uk/choosingandusing/findasolicitor.law is a useful starting point for getting a list of firms together to make speculative applications. Vacancies are usually advertised on Lawcareers.Net or the Law Society’s Gazette, those notified to us will be sent to law students via e-mail. Some firms are listed in the Training Contract & Pupillage Handbook (available online at Lawcareers.net.)

Legal Aid firms

Some firms specialise in providing a service to Legal Aid clients, and often specialise in areas such as criminal defence work, family/matrimonial law, childcare work, housing & welfare law, immigration work, mental health law, education law, community care work. They will hold a contract with the Legal Services Commission to undertake Legal Aid work in specified areas. Firms will advertise them in the usual places, such as Lawcareers.Net and the Law Society’s Gazette.

Application timetable – This varies, some firms advertise 1-2 years in advance, sometimes these positions are only advertised near to the anticipated start date. Many firms will recruit trainees from speculative applications. Some firms recruit students who have undertaken a period of legal work experience with the firm.

How to Apply - generally, CV & covering letter. However, law centres also offer training contracts and will generally not accept CVs, applications must be made by application form.

Where to Look- in addition to those mentioned above, the Legal Aid Practitioners’ Group website (www.lapag.co.uk) sometimes advertise trainee positions. Vacancies in law centres are also advertised on www.lawcentres.org.uk.

This information on types of firms is intended to give students a rough guideline on how to begin their research. Many firms do not fit into neat categories e.g. a large, city centre firm which specialises in all aspects of criminal work, and does no commercial law. Targeted research is the key - see the next section.

Training Contracts outside of private practice

Firms of solicitors are not the only organisations to offer training contracts. It is possible to complete a traineeship in a local government legal department, the Government Legal Service, the Crown Prosecution Service, magistrates' courts & with the in-house legal department of a private company in industry or commerce, amongst others. For those interested in working in local government, in addition to websites & publications already listed, trainee vacancies are listed on the Solicitors in Local Government website at www.slgov.org.uk/careers/vacancies.

2. Targeted research

Too many students adopt a "scattergun" approach to making training contract applications, sending out their CVs & covering letters to as many firms as possible, without considering whether or not it is the right type of firm for them and crucially the areas of law that the firm covers. For example, I spoke to a partner at a small Legal Aid practice which specialises in family & childcare law. She had received scores of applications from LPC students who were not taking any family law-related elective (such as Matrimonial Practice) and who were studying commercial law electives exclusively!

In addition to the Training Contract & Pupillage Handbook, the "I Need A Solicitor" function on the homepage of the Law Society's website (www.lawsociety.org.uk) can be a very useful resource for getting a list of firms together.

- search by geographical location & type of law
- gives number & location of offices, with full contact details
- crucially, how many lawyers there are, which will give you an idea of the size of the firm
- areas of legal practice
- whether authorised to take on trainee solicitors.

There is often a direct link to the firm's website. Students are often not sure how to best use this. In a covering letter, you will need to explain why you are interested in applying to a particular firm.

- (1) To ascertain whether a firm has a structured training contract recruitment scheme, see if there is a section headed "Careers", "Working For Us", "Recruitment" or something similar. There should then hopefully be a description of training contract vacancies, and crucially the **closing date and when the firm is recruiting for eg. September 2012 or 2013**. Also check **which seats a trainee will be trained in**.
- (2) View areas of legal practice - often comes with a good description of what each area of law involves.
- (3) View partner profiles- often gives details of important cases partners have been involved in. Some sites also have a press section, with the latest news of high-profile cases & transactions.

Do not simply copy into a covering letter or application form a general statement which is on the website and which is intended to advertise a firm to potential clients. For example, “I am applying for a training contract with Bloggs & Bloggs because you are a dynamic commercial law firm which understands the ever-changing & diverse markets within which your clients operate.” It will be obvious you have just copied it- research the firm and put into your own words why they have attracted you!

Lawcareers.Net

This website is particularly valuable. As well as showing **Immediate Vacancies**, it is possible to search for training contracts in the Solicitors section. Students should also register for LCN Weekly, a free weekly e-mail bulletin which has articles on topical legal matters and profiling different firms of solicitors. If researching a particular firm, then students can enter the name into the search mechanism on the homepage, as it will produce archived articles on that firm. There is also the extremely useful My LCN feature, which allows you to save and store information on firms that you are interested in applying to.

If a firm does not mention training contract vacancies specifically, it may well be that they recruit trainees (and often also paralegal staff) directly from speculative applications, or that they advertise vacancies as & when they need staff.

If making a speculative application, it is a good idea to ascertain which member of staff deals directly with such applications. This could be a recruitment partner or HR manager. Send your CV & covering directly to this person, as hopefully it will be read properly by the person who has a direct interest in recruiting trainees!

Keep a record of all the applications you have made. Do follow them up periodically- often firms will keep your details on file until a vacancy becomes available. You may also ask for unpaid work experience. However, firms will become antagonised if contact becomes too frequent, you do not want to come across as “hassling” too much.

Paralegal work

There is a separate hand-out on work as a paralegal. Students may wish to consider asking for paralegal work at the same time as applying for a training contract, particularly with medium & smaller-sized firms. In some firms, a period of time spent working as a paralegal is a prerequisite to being offered a training contract. It can also be a useful way of building up legal work experience and thus strengthening a student’s CV. Paralegal work could be undertaken after completing an LLB and before embarking on an LPC, or after completing the LPC, or alongside studying the LPC on a part-time basis. Firms now often require paralegals to have completed the LPC.

However, if students are contemplating taking up a paralegal position in the hope that this is intended to lead to a training contract with the same firm, they should ask for exact details of:

- (a) How long must they work as a paralegal before a trainee position will be offered?
- (b) Will they allow time off the training contract under the Time to Count Regulations?

In view of the competitive nature of the legal job market, students can find this a difficult situation. Any student needing further advice on this matter should contact Nick Touati, the School of Law Careers & Employability Advisor.

3. The curriculum vitae

There is an example of a CV on the next page. Please note the following points:

- Ensure your personal details are accurate
- Check spelling, punctuation & grammar
- The information in your CV should be easy to pick out & visually it should not look too “cluttered”. Imagine someone is initially just glancing at it. Would they be able to pick out key information easily?
- A CV should be a statement of fact, not opinion. Some students like to include a paragraph about their skills (often called a “Personal Profile”); I personally feel this is better dealt with in the covering letter.
- When describing legal work experience, try to think in terms of key legal skills eg. Interviewing, drafting, legal research, advocacy & negotiation. In addition, try to show what experience you gained of legal processes, procedures or documentation. Interviewing & advisory skills gained in volunteer positions can be particularly valuable. Can you express what you did in these terms? Look at the example on the next page.
- When describing non-legal work experience, try to think in these terms as well, although it will often be harder. For example, in a sales assistant position, it is highly unlikely that you will have done any drafting, but you may well have used negotiation skills eg. with clients or suppliers. Try to show any management, supervisory or organisational skills that you may have developed, as well as ability to work in a team, problem-solving & time-management capabilities. If you have supervised a team or organised an event, mention the actual no. of staff or event attendees, as this can impress.
- If applying to medium-sized or smaller firms, membership of local clubs & societies can be helpful as the firm may well feel it will help you to bring in business.
- Do mention impressive extra-curricular achievements in fields such as sport, music, drama, culture or community work. Do also include any interesting and different-sounding interests or hobbies that you may possess. For example, I recently advertised an LPC student who gained an interview on the basis of her Irish dancing achievements as it meant her CV stood out!
- Languages abilities should be mentioned, as many firms have European clients. Community languages such as Punjabi, Urdu & Hindi are also valuable if a firm has clients from these communities.

Joseph Kaplinsky

PERSONAL DETAILS

Address: 19 Woodcock Avenue, Whalley Range, Manchester M16 7PF

Telephone: 0161 258 6199

Mobile: 07945 612557

E-mail: j.kaplinsky@googlemail.com

EDUCATION

**2011-12 Manchester Metropolitan University School of Law
Legal Practice Course**

Electives: Corporate Law, Commercial Litigation,
Employment Law

**2008-11 Manchester Metropolitan University School of Law
LLB (Hons) Law- Class 2:2**

Modules included Commercial Law (63%), Employment Law (62%) & Contract (65%)

Final year dissertation: "Recent Developments in Marine Insurance Law" (62%), presented to Baker and Dunn Solicitors in a lunchtime seminar October 2010.

Mooting: Represented the University in the National Mooting Competition, achieving a quarter-final placing.

2006-08 Oadby Sixth Form College, Oadby, Leics.

A levels: French (B), German (B), History (C)

2001-06 King's High School, Oadby, Leics.

Achieved 8 GCSEs grades A-C including English Language (A) & Mathematics (B).

LEGAL WORK EXPERIENCE

**July-August 2011 Leicester Law Centre
Voluntary Legal Advisor- 1 Month**

- Advised a wide range of clients on a diverse range of legal matters, this placement allowed me to develop advisory & client interviewing skills, in addition to drafting skills
- Interviewed clients to elicit key information in housing & welfare law matters, then prepared briefing notes for solicitors (e.g. repossession, disrepair, DLA and ESA appeals)
- Attended at tribunal – DLA and ESA appeals
- Drafted particulars of claim in a housing law matter and completed appropriate court documentation

**July-August 2010 Cook & Co. Solicitors, Leicester
Work Experience Placement- 1 Month**

- During this placement I worked alongside the property partner and developed practical legal research skills, in addition to the ability to analyse & examine legal documentation
- Conducted legal research into property matters on behalf of partners and drafted lease documents
- Checked proof of title and undertook Land Registry searches in residential conveyancing transactions
- Inspected title searches and analysed enquiry & reply documents

EMPLOYMENT

**October 2007-present River Island, Manchester
Team Supervisor- Part-Time**

- Responsible for managing & motivating a team of 7 sales staff, this role has developed my ability to handle responsibility, in addition to strong customer service, negotiation and problem-solving capabilities
- Thrive successfully within a competitive business environment, ensuring that team sales targets are regularly exceeded, thus developing strong business acumen
- Negotiate annual individual performance plans with my team members and delivery of stock with suppliers

INTERESTS & ACHIEVEMENTS

Badminton Represented Leicestershire U-18 at badminton and represented Manchester Metropolitan University in the national BUCS competition. I have recently joined Chorlton & District Badminton Club and am now part of the planning committee which is organising the Christmas Bash, a social event at which about 100 people are expected to attend, proceeds of which will go to charity.

Debating I am a keen debater and regularly attend and take a part in debates organised by the University Debating Society. I am also a member of the Student Law Society and, alongside another student, presented an argument opposing the viewpoint "The Legal Services Act: The End Of The Legal Profession As We Know It?" at a recent meeting.

Jazz music I also enjoy listening to jazz music and collecting jazz records, as well as reading books on the history & development of jazz music from its early days to modern times.

ADDITIONAL SKILLS

- Substantial experience of conducting internet legal research, including use of packages such as LexisNexis & Westlaw
- Strong IT capabilities, fully conversant with Microsoft Word, Excel & PowerPoint
- Strong conversational ability in French & German
- Full, clean UK driving licence + own transport

REFERENCES

Mrs Sandra Smyth
Principal Lecturer
Manchester Metropolitan University School of Law
Sandra Burslem Building
Lower Ormond Street
Manchester
M15 6HB

0161 247 3500
s.smyth@mmu.ac.uk

Mr Alan Crawley
Manager
River Island
Market Street
Manchester
M1 1AB

0161 245 7277
A.Crawley@ri.co.uk

4. The covering letter

The covering letter gives you the opportunity to sell yourself and expand upon areas of your CV which you feel are impressive. It also gives you the chance to discuss your skills & personal qualities. As far as possible, it should be tailored to the individual firm that you are applying to. You should try to cover the following points.

- interest in law & motivation to become a solicitor, or why you are applying for this particular position
- interest in particular areas of law you wish to practise
- what attracts you to the firm that you are applying to
- particular skills and qualities that make you look attractive to the firm.

In order to illustrate these points, you may wish to discuss your studies at degree and/or LPC level, your final year dissertation and in particular, any legally-related work experience that you may have. This could also include volunteer work done at a Citizen's Advice Bureau or a law centre, or volunteering for a charity. Mature students may have previous work experience which is not necessarily legal, but could be helpful in a future legal career. For example, someone who has worked as a social worker may have a thorough knowledge of social services and the legal framework within which criminal law operates, and may have already prepared cases for court proceedings.

When discussing skills & personal qualities, always back up what you say with evidence. For example, a student I advised wanted to talk about her ability to rise to a challenge and her problem-solving abilities. She gave an excellent example of having been on a canoeing trek where she had to work in a team to navigate across various rivers & streams!

Emphasise any particular achievements that you are proud of and also the skills that you feel you have developed. If you have any interests which are a bit different, it may be worth mentioning them. Firms are currently inundated with applications from hopeful law students; impressive achievements & unusual interests may just help your application to stick in the mind of the person reading it and thus help you to get an interview. It can also provide a good point for discussion at the interview.

Finally, don't waffle. Concentrate on writing "bite-sized" paragraphs and you should try to make your points concisely. You are writing a covering letter, not an essay or dissertation!

Have a look at the examples on the following pages. The first one relates to the Joseph Kaplinsky CV, above.

19 Woodcock Avenue
Whalley Range
Manchester
M16 7PF

1 October 2011

Mr Robert Grimble
Grimble & Grimble Solicitors
247 High Street
Oldfield
OL7 5AP

Dear Mr Grimble,

Training contract position commencing September 2012

I am writing to you to apply for a training contract commencing in September 2012. I am currently studying for the Legal Practice Course at Manchester Metropolitan University, which I will complete in July 2012.

I believe that I am a good candidate for this position as I have work experience (both legal and commercial) which has given me the skills and experience to effectively deal with clients and other professionals and to manage files.

I am particularly attracted to Grimble & Grimble because of the variety of litigation work that you undertake and the range of clients that you clearly attract and my areas of chosen academic study align with the key areas delivered by your firm. My success in reaching the quarter-finals of the National Mooting Competition, allied to my experience of participating in University debates, indicates that I would enjoy success as a solicitor-advocate. The fact that your firm regularly represents clients at employment tribunals and encourages fee-earners to do their own advocacy is another reason why I feel that I would be able to make a successful contribution to Grimble & Grimble.

The challenge of manoeuvring a client through the litigation process is one that particularly appeals to me. Furthermore, I believe that I possess the ability to think strategically and commercially, a vital quality when attempting to achieve a practical outcome for a client. My understanding of commercial imperatives is evidenced by my continued success as a team supervisor at River Island, operating as I do within a highly competitive and target-driven sales environment.

In addition to the above, I feel that my non-academic achievements, particularly in the field of badminton, are evidence of my energy, commitment and determination to succeed.

I enclose my CV for your consideration. I am available for interview at any time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Leave enough space for your signature

Joseph Kaplinsky