

# A Trainee Solicitor's Handbook

Your questions answered

Compiled by BCL Legal in association with the TSG

**BCL** Legal

The BCL Legal Trainee Solicitor's Handbook has been completed in association with Trainee Solicitors' Groups across the regions to provide you with a comprehensive guide leading up to qualification. Working closely with BCL Legal throughout your career will give you access to the full range of opportunities that will enable you to make informed decisions now and in the future. Congratulations on getting this far! May we take this opportunity to wish you well in your future career.

## **BCL Legal**

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If you would like more information or a one to one consultation please contact BCL Legal at [info@bclegal.com](mailto:info@bclegal.com) to arrange a meeting.

**Good luck!**



## ••••• Introduction to BCL Legal

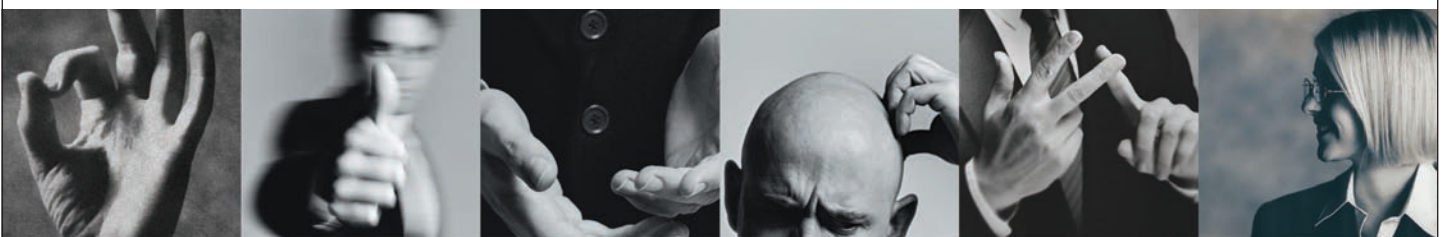
With many years' experience of successfully placing legal professionals, the consultants at BCL Legal can help you find your first post qualification opportunity whether you are looking to work in commerce and industry, private practice or the public sector.

We work in partnership with private practices, large blue chip organisations and the public sector across the UK and have developed a market leading reputation for recruiting the right people into the right jobs. We are a specialist legal consultancy and pride ourselves in our understanding of the market that you work in. BCL Legal operates at all levels from Paralegal to Partner. We are able to offer advice; support and more importantly present opportunities to you so that you can make informed decisions at every crossroad of your career.

We operate out of offices in Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Reading and Bristol and we are committed to providing the highest possible service to you and our clients alike.

## ••••• Planning your Career

As a Newly Qualified Solicitor it is important that you qualify into an area of law that interests you. As much as possible disregard the personalities within the department and concentrate on 'the letter of the law' as this will be the only constant throughout your career. The area of law that you qualify into will have a huge impact on your future career. As much as possible try to think further ahead: Do you think you would like to work in-house or overseas later in your career? Do you want to be a partner? Do you think you might want flexible working hours in the future? Would you like to have a non fee earning role, for example as a PSL or in business development? A successful career will involve a lot of thinking, planning and organisation. It's worth starting now.



## ❖ Managing your Career – Get on the right track

Right now you are likely to fall into one of the following categories:

- 1** You have been offered the ideal role with your current employer
- 2** You are competing with your colleagues for one or more vacancies with your current employer or you simply haven't been told if you will have a job on qualification
- 3** You know that the job you want is not available with your current employer/you want to leave your current firm
- 4** You are hoping to go abroad or in-house or work as a locum
- 5** You want to leave the legal profession

### 1. Staying at your firm

Fantastic news. If this is the perfect role for you and it satisfies your long term career aspirations, accept the job. Try to return to this department for your final seat. Keep in touch with BCL Legal for up to date salary comparisons and general career management information.

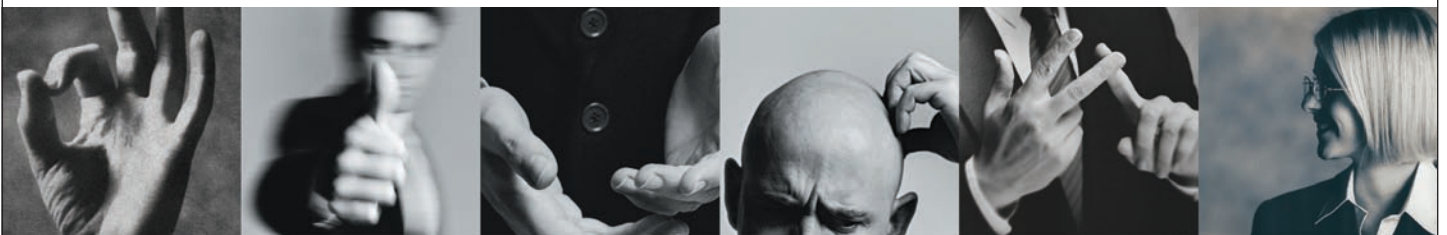
Even if there is an opportunity to stay at your current firm qualifying into a discipline that was your second choice, you should consider any offer very carefully. Read 2 below as you may want to consider other options at the same time.

### 2. Keeping your options open

This can be a period of great frustration and is well known as 'the waiting game'. It is essential that you are aware of all the opportunities available at this time in your career. If you rely on your firm to retain you when you qualify you could end up missing the boat as many firms won't decide until as late as July. Ensure you are choosing the disciplines based on the work you have done and the skills you have. If you had a lot of fun with the people in the department this can often taint your view. It is unlikely you will be working with these people in five years time. It is very difficult to change discipline years after qualification because of the necessary re-training involved and associated salary cut so it is important that you qualify into a discipline that you enjoy working in. Ideally you will have more than one choice of discipline so can take advantage of more opportunities. It is now that you need to consider what type of work you want to do within your chosen field, the location and how far you would commute for the perfect job and whether the firm has a good reputation for the field of specialisation you are seeking to work in. You should always use the same recruiter to search for jobs in both disciplines so that he or she can manage the process carefully for you.

### 3. Get job hunting

Form a good relationship with a legal recruitment consultant. The consultants at BCL Legal have been finding jobs for newly qualified solicitors for over ten years and have considerable experience of dealing with law firms at this crucial time. We know it's time critical, it's scary and everything is 'up in the air'. We are here to try to take the panic and 'not knowing' out of the process.



We will advise you of the jobs as soon as they arise. As many firms will want to offer jobs to their current trainees first, jobs often don't come to the surface until late Summer and sometimes past September, into October and up until Christmas. If you want as much certainty as possible, have two or even three choices of disciplines, be clear in what you want to achieve and register with BCL Legal early. We recommend registration 6 - 7 months before qualification. You may also want to consider transferring your training contract. This is easy to do and it means that when you do qualify you are already part of the furniture.

#### **4. Something different**

Moving in-house offers a very different career to private practice. You will become a manager of legal services, you will usually report to the board of directors and have other non-legal duties. You will learn all about the business and the sector it is in and become an expert on avoiding and managing risk on a daily basis. Most in-house lawyers have a more general practice than a private practice solicitor. You will often be involved in an array of commercial disciplines from advising on contracts to organising projects, to providing employment law advice or preparing for litigation. Most jobs are for lawyers with at least one year PQE within commercial disciplines including PFI, commercial property, employment, construction and competition.

If you are looking to take your work abroad it is likely that you will have worked in a non contentious discipline. If your firm offers secondments or has offices abroad you should register your interest, if not, there are increasing numbers of opportunities in Dubai, Hong Kong, Australia, America, Europe and the Cayman Islands. Opportunities are again likely to be for those with at least one year PQE and will be limited to those who have worked in a reputable, probably a top 50, law firm in banking, corporate, competition, commercial or projects.

Many lawyers are seeing the benefits of working as a locum and law firms and in-house departments are much more locum friendly than they have ever been. There may be the opportunity of working in a temporary position if on qualification you do not find the right opportunity for you. This however is not something to rely on. Locum opportunities are unpredictable by their very nature. Organisations use locums to cover for maternity or long term sick leave or when they are going through busy periods. Temporary contracts can offer flexible working, the opportunity to gain exposure to different areas of law and the potential of a permanent position.

#### **5. Something completely different**

The legal profession is not all Rumpole of the Bailey and Ally McBeal. It's seven chargeable hours a day, clients who complain if the job isn't done today, lots of filing cabinets in a sometimes archaic, hierarchical structure. There are always other options. Remaining in the law but without the fee earning pressure, there are opportunities for professional support lawyers in all commercial disciplines. You will normally need at least three years' PQE before you can make the switch. Outside of legal practice many lawyers have opted to teach, either in primary schools or for legal education providers including Universities, the College of Law and the BPP law schools.

We hope this isn't you. But, unfortunately the law isn't for everyone. If you find yourself in this position we will do our best to help.



## •••• Opportunities in the Regions

### Leeds and Newcastle

BCL Legal has one of the largest teams in Yorkshire and the North East servicing candidates across Private Practice, In-House and the Public Sector.

We act for firms and organisations as far north as Newcastle, in the east to Hull, down to Sheffield and stopping in the west at the Pennines. Lincolnshire is also covered from here.

The UK's second biggest legal centre after London, the Leeds legal community continues to expand with new firms coming into the city every year. The financial strength and confidence of the Newcastle firms has been demonstrated by their commitment to expansion throughout the country. Watson Burton has an offering in the city as well as in Leeds, the Dickinson Dees York office is housed in the prestigious Chocolate Works development. In Sheffield, DLA has invested heavily in city centre flagship premises, surpassing the firm's Leeds offices. Other 'Steel City' commercial firms such as Nabarro LLP, Keeble Hawson, Wake Smith and HLW all remain committed and thrive in this buoyant legal scene.

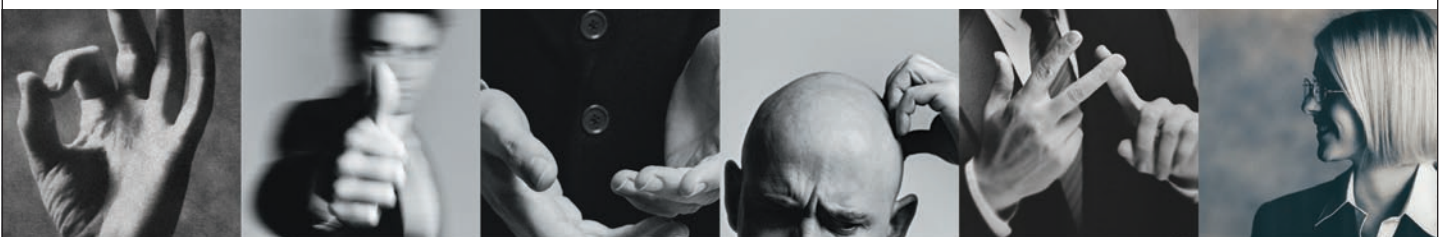
BCL Legal has a strong foothold within legal departments in commerce and industry and works with clients across a broad range of sectors from financial institutions including HBOS, Skipton Building Society to food giants Northern Foods and Asda.

### Liverpool and Chester

Liverpool enjoyed significant regeneration as it prepared for "Liverpool Capital of Culture" in 2008. The landscape and famous skyline has been transformed whilst the city centre has been modernised radically, as has the legal market place.

There are currently seven top 100 UK practices based in Liverpool, three with their head offices in the city.

Despite the modernisation, Liverpool retains its unique character and charm. There are more listed buildings in Liverpool (outside of London) than anywhere else in the UK. The new bars and restaurants have enhanced the already vibrant nightlife scene in the city, with a greater variety of eateries and diverse range of pubs and clubs to suit all tastes.



We have seen an influx of lawyers from London and one regional practice which has its roots in Liverpool has recruited seven former Magic Circle partners over recent years.

The picturesque suburbs of Southport, Wirral and surrounding areas offer excellent retreats away from the hum-drum of city life (whilst remaining easily commutable) and which city can boast three open golf courses and a variety of water sports within a 45 minute drive of the city centre?

Bank of America (MBNA) holds one of the region's largest in-house legal teams and other well known organisations include Princes Foods, Littlewoods, Vertex, Pilkington and The Royal Liver.

### **Manchester and the North West**

The Manchester team is the largest in the North West and is dedicated to recruiting in private practice, in-house and the public sector for both permanent and temporary job seekers. We also have a dedicated consultant who is a specialist in the recruitment of newly qualified solicitors to advise you at this critical stage in your career. The North West region includes the beautiful Lake District of Cumbria in the north down to Cheshire in the south.

Ever since Manchester's regeneration effort began in earnest at the end of the 1990s, the city has developed into a fantastic place to live, boasting all the trappings of the capital whilst maintaining its village feel. Whilst the legal community includes national giants DLA Piper, Addleshaw Goddard and the like, we have a unique regional and niche firm offering which caters for those seeking an alternative but which also provide good quality work without the necessary social sacrifice.

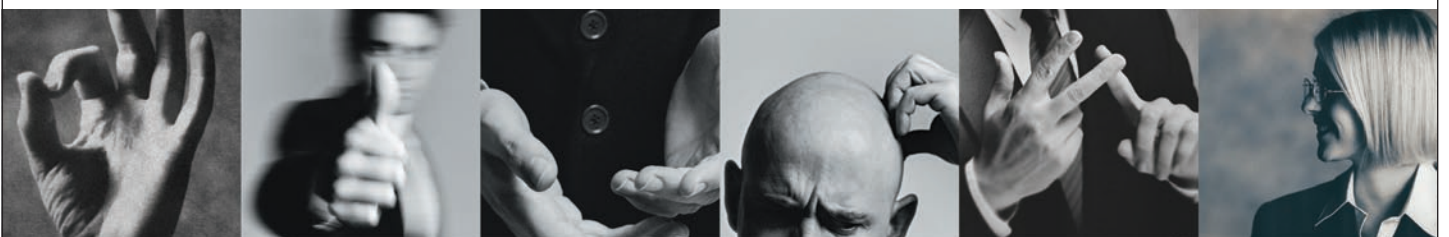
Preston, the third city of the region, has had a recent facelift and through a succession of firm mergers now has some big name practices including northern stalwarts DWF and Brabners Chaffe Street.

There are also a number of PLCs and household names offering a range of in-house opportunities. BCL Legal has more in house consultants in the region than any other agency and our portfolio of clients include United Utilities, Urban Splash, CWS, Amec and Pets At Home.

Many lawyers originally from the north have returned to their roots in recent years or relocated simply to enjoy the thriving city, where you can enjoy good quality of work and still walk down the street and see somebody you know. Speak to a consultant at BCL Legal who can advise on where to live, what life really is like in the north and where to work.

### **Thames Valley**

Principally the Thames Valley is home to Reading and Oxford as the key legal centres within which exists some of the best legal talent in the UK. With national firms Osborne Clarke, Olswang, Shoosmiths and Charles Russell all with regional offices based here along with regional heavyweights Blake Lapthorn, Morgan Cole, Manches and IBB to name a few, the choice of firm is first class for any aspiring newly qualified. If the London market isn't able to offer you the area of law you wish to specialise in or if London life is not for you but you don't want to leave the South East, the Thames Valley is the perfect choice.



### Home Counties

As with the Thames Valley, the Home Counties offer all the benefits of London whilst not being based in the City. This not only applies to being within commutable distance of the nation's capital but also in terms of the quality of work offered by the region's leading law firms. Home to many City lawyers, the combination of quality of work and quality of life are a big attraction. With 'City' style firms Clyde & Co, Charles Russell, Stevens & Bolton, Shadbolts and Cripps Harries Hall there is very little compromise on quality. It offers true country living with City quality of work with more in the way of countryside than you would think with Surrey being the most wooded county in Great Britain!

### South Coast

Portsmouth and Southampton offer many attractions, principally its many seaside resorts and maritime areas for which they are famous with two of England's largest ports lying on its coast. But it's not all sunshine and sands, the South Coast offers a good choice of law firm if you fancy life by the coast but also want to work for a large commercial law firm. Heavyweight firms Shoosmiths, Bond Pearce, Lester Aldridge, Blake Laphorn and Clarke Willmott all have large offices here. Still within easy reach of London and all of the capital's major attractions, the region also offers a milder climate than most areas of the British Isles.

### Bristol

From the Bristol office we recruit for firms in the city itself, Cardiff and Exeter as well as towns across Gloucestershire, Somerset, Devon, Cornwall, Wiltshire and the Thames Valley.

The city boasts many high profile top 50 and top 100 law firms like Burges Salmon, Osborne Clarke, TLT, CMS Cameron McKenna, Pinsent Masons, Beachcroft, Clarke Willmot, Bond Pearce and Bevan Brittan. If the prospect of working with FTSE 100 clients and dealing with top quality work isn't enough, life outside of work is positively kicking! Whilst steeped in ancient history, the social scene is far from archaic. There is an endless selection of bars and restaurants along the waterfront and lining the streets that will satisfy everyone's tastes. Bristol is home to a variety of festivals and regattas, ranging from the Balloon Fiesta to the Bristol Community Festival. Shopping wise Bristol has all the names you would expect from a major regional capital and the biggest city in the South after London. Last but not least the scenery the region can offer is fabulous with plenty of open spaces, such as Leigh Woods, the Ashton Court Estate and the fabulous Durdham Downs with views over the Gorge and Suspension Bridge. What about the commute to work? Most professionals who choose to live in Bristol are within a 20-minute walk from the city centre, housing options are attractive and affordable with modern waterside developments a plenty.

### Birmingham and the Midlands

Birmingham is the UK's fastest growing legal market with a number of commercial firms having opened offices in the city in recent years.

The largest firms in the city such as DLA Piper, Eversheds, Hammonds, Pinsent Masons and Wragge & Co act for a national and international client base and the majority of the FTSE 100 retain one or more Birmingham firms as panel solicitors. This makes Birmingham an excellent alternative to leading London firms and there is considerable movement of lawyers between top London and Birmingham practices.



In addition to the very largest firms there are another 10 to 15 commercial firms based in Birmingham who act for national and major regional clients as well as undertaking some international work plus there are many smaller firms advising local as well as regional businesses. There is also a thriving insurance market and an increasing interest in private client services.

Outside Birmingham there are strong practices in all the region's cities and larger towns with Nottingham, Leicester, Derby, Northampton, Stoke on Trent and the Black Country each boasting several major law firms who draw their clients and lawyers from the same pool as their competitors in Birmingham, Leeds and Manchester. Amongst the more picturesque parts of the region, Shrewsbury, Warwick, Leamington Spa, Stratford on Avon and Worcester all have Legal 500 listed firms of real quality.

### **East Anglia**

Comprising Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, East Anglia is often overlooked as a legal and commercial centre. In fact all of the region's cities enjoy a thriving legal scene which reflects the region's key role in the Agricultural, Transport & Shipping, Technology, Biotech and Telecommunications sectors.

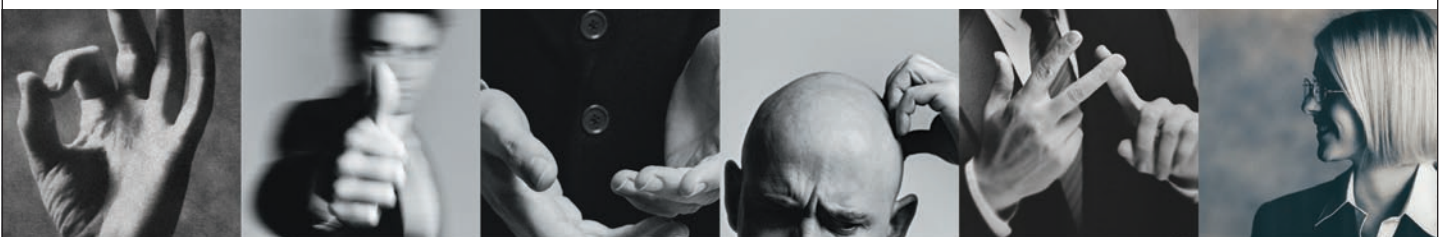
Cambridge has the largest legal market in the region helped by the worldwide reputation of the University of Cambridge and the myriad of spin-off businesses in the area. The city's success in the technology arena had made Cambridge the number one destination for venture capital investment anywhere in the world outside the United States. Major firms include Mills & Reeve, Eversheds, Hewitsons and Taylor Vinters together with smaller offices of London and international heavyweights Dorsey & Whitney, Taylor Wessing and Charles Russell.

Ipswich has a number of major commercial firms most notably Ashton Graham, Birketts and Prettys who enjoy a national client base with particular strengths in the Agriculture, Transport and Telecoms sectors. Eversheds still retains a thriving office in the city focused on insurance, projects and construction work.

Norwich is the traditional capital of East Anglia and has the most diverse legal market. Mills & Reeve, Howes Percival, Ashton Graham, Steeles and Birketts dominate the corporate and commercial scene. There are also a significant number of smaller, long-established commercial firms.

Peterborough, Bury St Edmunds and Newmarket also boast nationally recognised firms with Greenwoods and Kester Cunningham John being the most notable amongst them.

East Anglia is one of the leading markets in the UK for private client and agricultural law. Mills & Reeve is a national player in both of these fields with most larger firms retaining substantial private client teams and specialist firms such as Barker Gotelee and Roythorne & Co adding weight to the region's reputation. Suffolk is a major centre for bloodstock and horse-racing related work.



## ••• CV & Interview Advice

It is essential that you present yourself in the best light possible and we can help you with drafting the perfect CV and preparing for the interview. Most of the time you will be in a competitive process so you need to ensure you have done all your preparation so you can sell yourself and your skills and knowledge.

### Preparing your CV

The CV will form the basis of any interview. Please see the CV precedent at [www.bcllegal.com](http://www.bcllegal.com) for guidance. You will need to set out your CV in a concise structure and ensure it is relevant to the position for which you are applying. Detail the experience you have had during all your seats in bullet point format and spend more time describing the work you did whilst in the discipline into which you wish to qualify. Ensure that you are very familiar with the cases and transactions that you list in your CV as any interviewer is likely to focus on these points. Do not over exaggerate as you may, to your embarrassment, be caught out. If you have assisted on a £multi million completion whilst in the corporate seat for a blue chip company tell them. Do not worry if the CV runs over more than two pages, although it is important not to waffle - be punchy and factual. Highlight any involvement in business development and marketing you have had and always add a paragraph about your interests outside of work.

### The interview

Consultants at BCL Legal are trained to advise you on how to best present yourself at interview so please ask if you would like to practice. Most interviews last around one hour. There may be a panel of interviewers but more often, especially in first interviews, there will be one or two members of staff present.

Most of all, be yourself and enjoy the meeting. An interview is an exercise in establishing common ground. Treat the interview as a two way process and have relevant questions prepared. Not only will this reassure the firm that you have thought about the process but it will also allow you to gain in-depth information to assist your decision about whether the firm is for you.

### Where & when

Print a map and take it with you. Take the telephone number of your consultancy and the firm in case you get lost. Allow a fifteen minute margin for error and to befriend the reception staff.

### You

It sounds obvious but always ensure you make a good impression. Take extra care to look your best, wear your smartest suit and polish your shoes (even if you are attending an interview on a dress down Friday). Carry any bags or files in your left hand so that your right hand is free to give a firm handshake. Ensure you maintain eye contact with all the interviewers and show your enthusiasm for the role and what you know about the business.



## CV

Remember that your CV will form the basis of any interview and discussion with your potential employer. Do include and even emphasise areas you feel comfortable talking about. This way you can often predict the questions you will be asked at interview. Read your CV before the meeting and even take a copy with you. If you can, use the interests and hobbies section, to develop a rapport with your interviewer.

## ❖ Do your homework

- **Web sites:** Read the firm's own web site, be aware of the type of work they do and the type of clients they deal with. Many firms have archived documents and articles which you can read and which will give you lots of background information. Legal 500 and Chambers & Partners will tell you about specialist areas of law, recommended individuals at the firm and the percentage split of work across the practice.
- **Trade press:** The Lawyer, Legal Week, the Law Society Gazette and their web sites publish current information about firms, so they are all worth checking at least the week before and especially the week of the interview.
- **Ask your consultant:** Your consultant should be able to tell you more about the firm's culture, their interview style, if there are likely to be any written or verbal tests as part of the interview process etc. At BCL Legal we also store press releases that are relevant to each firm which will also be worth reading before the interview.
- **Due diligence:** Ask your friends and colleagues if they know anyone who works at the firm you are interviewing at so you can ask them some questions beforehand.

**What makes us different is WHO we know...**

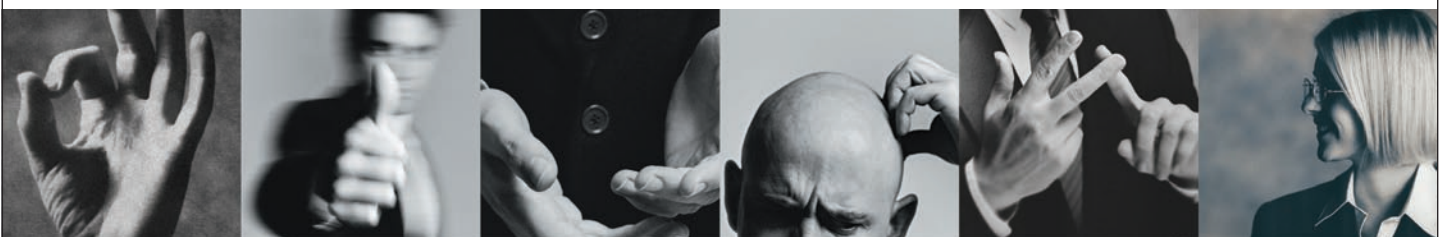


## ••• Interview Questions

Prepare your answers to questions below. Ensure you don't waffle your answers, try to give real examples to back up your answers whilst being brief and to the point. The questions will often be deliberately open ended. This ensures that you do not answer just yes or no. Below is a non exhaustive list of some questions you may be asked.

- Why are you not being retained on qualification? Why do you want to leave the firm you have trained with?
- What do you enjoy about your current role? What do you not enjoy?
- Why have you applied for this job? What do you know about the vacancy?
- Why are you looking to join us? How much do you know about us?
- What have been the key achievements in your professional and non-professional life?
- Where does your initial interest in law stem from?
- What successes have you enjoyed in your current role? How did you achieve these?
- How would your boss/team describe you?
- What do you want to achieve over the next 2/3/5 years?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- How good are you at: time recording, dealing with targets; organising your day; prioritising?
- When have you ever worked under pressure?
- Give an example of how you have worked as part of a team
- What difficulties have you encountered in your current job and how have you overcome them?
- What is your ideal job?
- How IT literate are you?
- What do you like to do outside of work?
- What motivates you?
- What is the reason why your academics might not be better?

You will need to prepare some questions to ask at interview. A good interviewer may already have answered most of your questions. Ideally you will have developed a good rapport with the interviewer and will ask questions throughout the interview rather than save them all to the end. Here are some suggestions.



## ❖ Questions to ask at Interview

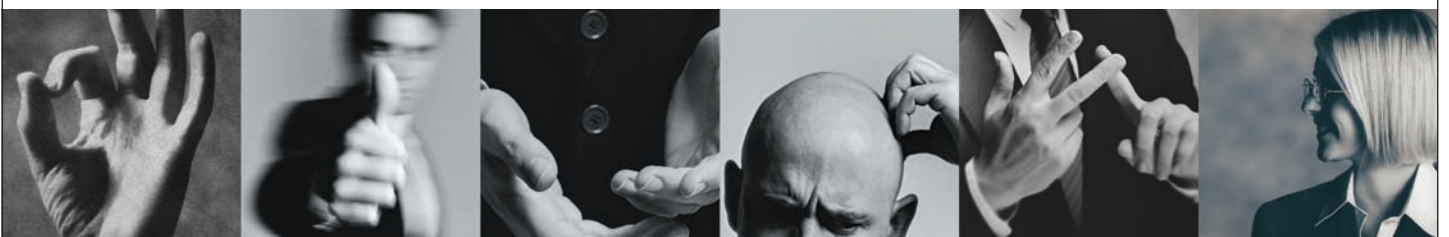
- How has this position become available? (i.e. growth or replacement?)
- How would you describe the culture of the organisation? Team spirited? Open door policy?
- Is the office open plan or cellular?
- What are the future plans of the business/department?
- What types of individuals are in the department currently?
- How do you appraise the performance of your staff?
- How many files on average does each fee earner handle?
- What type of work would I handle in this role?
- Does the organisation encourage marketing by younger members of staff?
- How many chargeable hours are staff expected to bill per month?
- What IT systems do you have in place currently?
- How much training, support and development opportunity will there be?
- What are the long term prospects for the person who gets this job?
- When am I likely to hear if I have been successful at this stage of the process?
- What is the next stage of the recruitment process?

**DON'T** fidget, yawn or look bored; give rambling answers avoiding the question, reply with yes or no, start negotiating salary, mention any concerns or reservations at this stage.

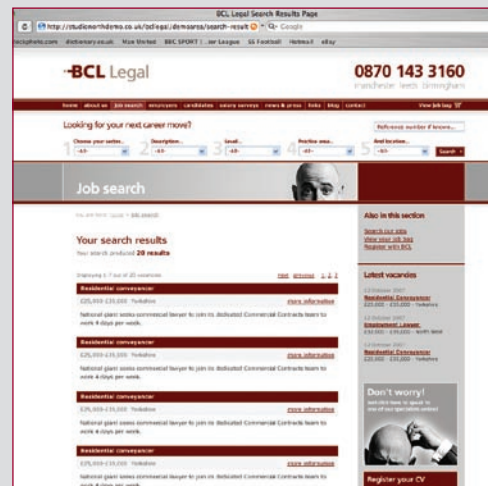
### “ I registered with a couple of agents before I was recommended to speak to BCL Legal.

I met with three consultants at BCL Legal as I was keen to keep my options open and within a week they had arranged interviews for me at four firms and a week later I received a job offer. The consultants have been very approachable and are always willing to help. I have found the preparation they provide before an interview to be excellent. They have given me the information I need to pitch myself at the right level at each interview. I feel confident and trust that the consultants at BCL Legal are going the extra mile to secure what will be the best position for me on qualification.

Newly Qualified Solicitor  
Manchester



## •••• The web – bcllegal.com



Our website is updated daily with details of each new vacancy we receive from our clients. At any one time we will have hundreds of legal jobs in each region within private practice, public sector organisations and commerce and industry.

You can set up a 'job streamer'. You will be able to add the criteria you are searching for and receive email alerts of jobs that match the criteria you have selected. This way you will always be informed of jobs literally within minutes of us taking the instruction from our client.

You will also find a CV precedent, salary survey results and general useful information to assist you in getting the perfect job.

For more information visit [www.bcllegal.com/job-search.htm](http://www.bcllegal.com/job-search.htm)



## •••• Contact Us

For more information on legal opportunities in your area, please contact a consultant at one of our offices:

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**What makes us different is WHO we know...**

