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Getting into law



Why law?

The law governs many aspects of our lives, for example, if you are buying a chocolate bar, driving a car or employed to do a job. This means there are many different areas of law that you may consider working in such as commercial law, family law, criminal law and human rights law. Here are just a few reasons to pursue a career in law:

Do a first class job

“By far the most rewarding aspect of being a barrister is simply doing a good job by being thoroughly prepared, and by giving a client the best chance of winning their case”.

George Hayman, barrister and QC at Maitland Chambers

“The most rewarding part is being able to help clients get the result they want to achieve.”

Jane Leech, associate and professional support lawyer at Stephenson Harwood

Variety

“I was drawn to a career in law for several reasons: the varied nature of the work, as a solicitor you get exposure to the different industries/sectors your clients operate in; the fast paced nature; and the encouragement to be creative – you are really pushed to think outside of the box.”

Khadija Haider Khan, associate at Stephenson Harwood

Be challenged!

“My career takes me out of my comfort zone on a constant basis, which means that it is undeniably challenging, but ultimately one that is highly rewarding and enjoyable.”

Joab Wayne, associate at Stephenson Harwood

International dimension

“The international opportunities that a legal career offers appealed to me, as I find interacting with clients from around the world and working with multiple jurisdictions very interesting.”

Poppie Bouch, trainee solicitor at Stephenson Harwood

Always learn something new

“I liked the fact that practicing law is very much a blend of black letter law and commercial skills and that you are so engaged with people every day, be that your team or your clients. I liked that I would be constantly learning and that the work would always be different and challenging.”

Sarah Bryant, associate at Stephenson Harwood

What skills do you need?

There are many different roles within the legal profession including: solicitor; barrister; paralegal; barrister's clerk; and legal administration. Whichever legal career you ultimately pursue, your work will involve a high level of diversity and a range of tasks, which are likely to need the following skills:



People skills

"People skills, good manners and a smile – all cost nothing but can have a profound impact on your career."

Al-Karim Makhani, solicitor and vice president of legal technology company

"Patience and understanding how people work. Sometimes listening to people is the biggest skill – allowing someone else to talk can actually give you more helpful information. There will be set backs – but they are what they are and it is important to try and remain calm in front of the client and get the set back resolved as quickly as you can."

Darren Fodey, partner at Stephenson Harwood

"Listening and understanding – these two skills are important in a whole host of situations; from finding out what your client wants to achieve, corresponding with the other side, liaising with the court and interacting with your colleagues."

Jane Leech, associate and professional support lawyer at Stephenson Harwood



Attention to detail

"Attention to detail – solicitors need a good eye for detail to be able to pick up, even what may appear to be minor discrepancies which can affect meanings of contracts or the outcome of a dispute."

Khadija Haider Khan, associate at Stephenson Harwood



Resilience

"Resilience is critical. Judges, clients, opponents, and instructing solicitors can all be demanding at times. And the workload can be heavy. It is important to remain calm and considered in order to do a good job for your client."

George Hayman, barrister and QC at Maitland Chambers



Industry awareness

"I think the most important skill is commercial awareness and an understanding of the marketplace in which clients operate. This is something that takes years to understand, but is important to start developing as early as possible by keeping on top of current affairs and reading relevant publications."

James Gracey, trainee solicitor at Stephenson Harwood



Take a different view

"Determination and tenacity – I cannot see around corners, but I like to look at things from different angles and to find paths through problems."

Stephen Roberts, partner at Stephenson Harwood

"Keeping calm and taking time to really think about something before diving right in to it before you understand what you're doing will save time and hopefully prevent silly errors."

Sarah Bryant, associate at Stephenson Harwood



Accountability

"The most important skill is to accept personal responsibility for everything you do. Make every piece of work the best you can and, if something goes wrong, don't make excuses or blame others, simply learn from your mistakes and make sure that you don't repeat them. Accept and embrace the fact that you'll need to be constantly learning and improving."

James Styles, consultant at Stephenson Harwood



Solicitor

Typical tasks

- Providing legal advice
- Drafting correspondence and legal documents
- Liaising with and taking instructions from clients
- Managing, organising and negotiating the deal or case
- Conducting legal research

Skills needed

- Ability to write clearly and with precision
- Good organisational and time management skills
- Able to work well with a range of clients and people of varying authority
- Comfortable working to tight deadlines under pressure
- Good team player, with ability to work independently and with initiative
- Able to conduct in-depth legal research

Career path

The routes to qualify as a solicitor in England and Wales are changing. From autumn 2021, to qualify you will need to:

- Have a degree in any subject (or equivalent qualification or work experience and also includes the apprenticeship route)
- Pass both stages of the SQE assessment – SQE 1 focuses on legal knowledge and SQE 2 on practical legal skills
- Have 2 years' qualifying work experience
- Pass the character and suitability requirements as set out by the Solicitors Regulation Authority

Inside view

Ayo Oketunji

Associate at Stephenson Harwood



“When I was younger I liked debating and arguing my point of view. I do a lot of that now – it’s about getting across your point of view. On a day to day basis I advise clients on disputes that are normally dealt with in the courts and negotiate on their behalf. I work on the preparation for the case, with the witnesses, help with evidence, and if it doesn’t go to trial then with the settlement.”

Mariam Basher

Trainee solicitor at Stephenson Harwood



“The most rewarding part of my role is being able to assist a client and see a project through from beginning to end, from head of terms, through discussions with the client, negotiating with the other side, to a set of documents that you and your team have prepared to accomplish what the client set out to do.”



Barrister

Typical tasks

- Taking instructions from solicitors on behalf of their clients
- Advising clients on the best strategy for bringing or defending a claim
- Drafting official Court documents (statements of case) and skeleton arguments
- Representing clients in court in England and Wales, and overseas when appropriate
- Marshalling and distilling large volumes of documents, sometimes under time pressure
- Liaising with the entire legal team

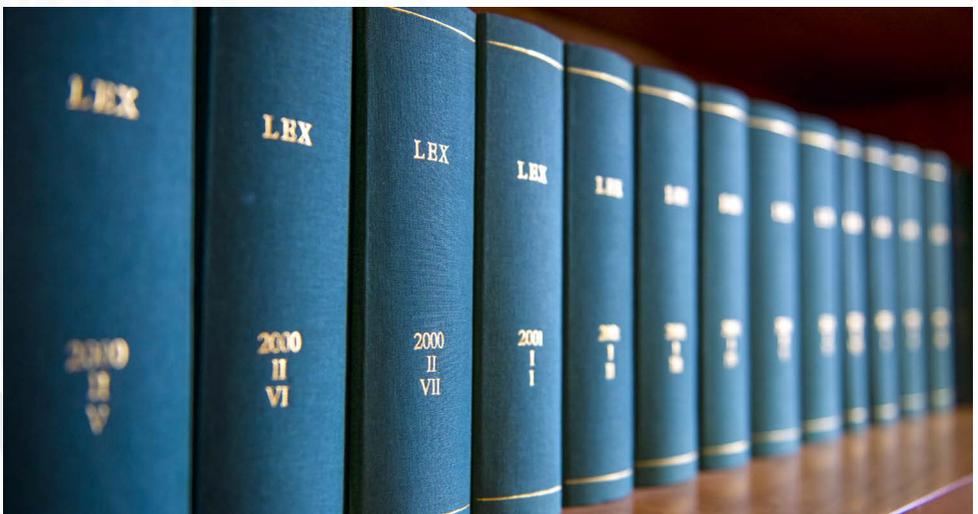
Skills needed

- Strong drafting and writing skills
- Ability to work with clients, to build trust, and engage with people
- Legal research skills
- Ability to work under time pressure, and handle large amounts of work
- Persuasive advocacy skills

Career path

In order to qualify as a barrister in England and Wales, you will need

- A degree – if that degree is not a qualifying law degree, you will need to complete the law conversion course
- The Bar Practice Training Course (or BPTC)
- Satisfactory completion of pupillage (working under the supervision of experienced barristers typically for one year)



Inside view

George Hayman

Barrister and QC at Maitland Chambers

“The key aspect of a barrister’s life is oral advocacy, and I was attracted to public speaking and arguing points on behalf of others. However, advocacy is only one aspect of the role. Others include dealing with clients, and thinking tactically about how best to structure and then present a client’s position most attractively. In that respect, it is a creative job, especially when it comes to crafting written skeleton arguments and thinking up appealing ways of making the points that are available to a client.”

Georges Chalfoun

Barrister at 3 Verulam Buildings

“I represent clients in large commercial disputes, usually with an international angle. My day to day work involves a lot of preparation for my cases (reading documents, thinking about arguments, looking at previous cases), and then every once in a while I will attend a hearing (which can take weeks and sometimes months) where a judge (or an arbitrator) will decide a dispute.”



Professional support lawyer

Typical tasks

- Design and deliver technical legal training and write articles for clients on new developments in the law
- Draft standard form template documents so the fee earning lawyers never start from a blank sheet of paper when trying to draft a document for their clients
- Organise and help lawyers share their knowledge with each other

Skills needed

- Can develop excellent working relationships at all levels and roles
- Excellent drafting, research and presentation skills
- Exceptional accuracy and attention to detail
- Understanding of different learning styles
- Ability to acquire, consolidate and practically apply knowledge of the law.

Career path

Professional support lawyers would follow the same career path as solicitors and might move to a knowledge management role when they are usually at least five years qualified.



Inside view

James Styles

Consultant at Stephenson Harwood



"My job is to make sure the people are kept up to date on the latest legal developments, to train people on core legal concepts and to help find solutions to problems when they come up on deals."

Jane Leech

Associate and professional support lawyer at Stephenson Harwood



"I assist those working within the commercial litigation group (and the wider firm) on procedural matters. I also organise training for the group to ensure that they are up to date on matters of law and procedure relevant to their particular practice area. In addition we organise a separate training programme for trainees and paralegals, taking them through the various stages of a case and to make them aware of the situations they are likely to encounter."



Paralegal

Typical tasks

- Assisting lawyers and solicitors
- Writing letters, emails and speaking to clients on the phone
- Researching the law, and published legal articles online and hard copy
- Looking after diaries
- Compiling bundles of documents ready for court cases
- Creating and organising case files
- Filing documents at court
- Attending small claims court on behalf of clients
- Attending tribunals on behalf of clients
- Writing reports on cases
- Interviewing witnesses including expert witnesses
- Drafting instructions to counsel

Skills needed

- Communication skills
- Research skills
- Organisational and time management skills
- Problem-solving
- Attention to detail

Career path

As paralegals can offer legal assistance, it is vital they are educated and trained in legal systems, legal procedure and trained to perform legal tasks. There are many routes into a paralegal career, but many employers look for recognised paralegal training and qualifications such as:

- NALP Paralegal practice award, certificate, diploma
- Postgraduate paralegal diploma
- Law degree
- An award in legal studies
- Legal secretary certificate or diploma
- Chartered legal executive
- Paralegal apprenticeship

Inside view

Sabrina Akram

Paralegal at Stephenson Harwood

“My job is to make sure the people are kept up to date on the latest legal developments, to train people on core legal concepts and to help find solutions to problems when they come up on deals.”

Kieron Davison-Pearce

Paralegal apprentice at Stephenson Harwood

“My job involves supporting the solicitors and the professional support lawyers. On a day-to-day basis, I could be researching specific points of law for a case, proof-reading documents before they are sent out, drafting letters or documents for clients such as a deed of amendment, or creating court bundles for trial. So far, the best part was when I had the opportunity to go to the Court of Appeal. It was an amazing opportunity to witness what I’d learnt about the justice system, and see it come to life and the case I’d worked on come together.”

Lauren Walsh

Paralegal apprentice at Stephenson Harwood

“I provide administrative and legal support across the practice group. I find that time management is essential when working on a number of matters, so I’m often liaising with fee earners to keep them updated on my progress. I currently sit in the commercial litigation group; my day-to-day work involves preparing court bundles for trial, drafting letters for clients or counsel, conducting research on past precedential cases, and updating files regularly. Tasks vary each day and there is a lot of variety. The highlight of my apprenticeship so far has been the opportunity to work on high profile cases and complex tasks. I have been able to gain an understanding of litigation procedures, such as disclosure and document review. I have also been given the opportunity to work closely with associates in the practice group – it has been exciting to learn from them first-hand.”



Barrister's clerk

Typical tasks

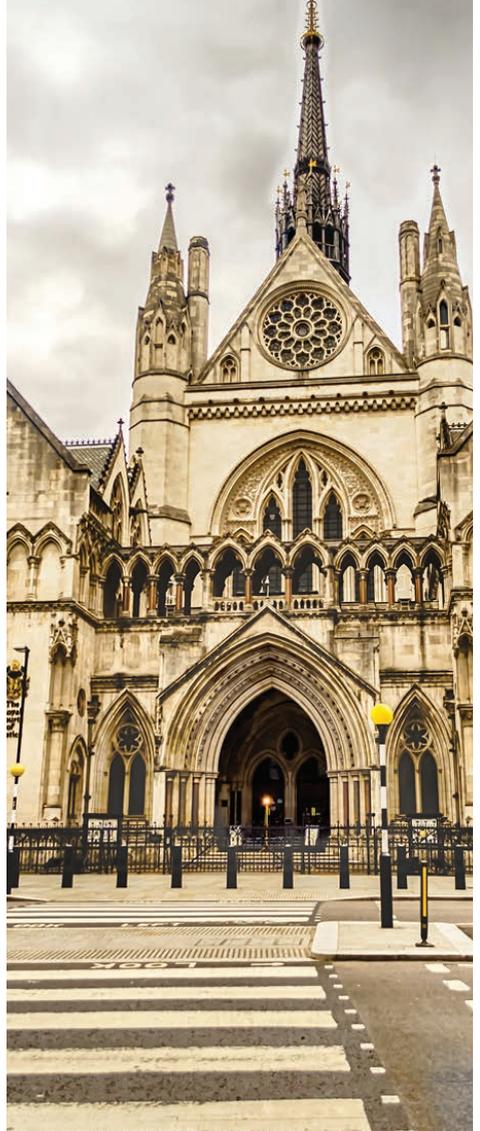
- Manage the day to day running of the barristers' chambers
- Deal with incoming enquiries for work
- Help allocate that work appropriately
- Plan that work into busy schedules
- Agree fees for the work
- Contribute to business development/ marketing

Skills needed

- Organisation
- Ability to build good relationships
- An ability to remind yourself to stop sometimes to think clearly
- Be aware of the needs of others around you
- A good memory

Career path

The Institute of Barrister's clerks offers access to training programmes providing tutoring in a range of relevant business techniques that are aligned with the job, to help support career development.



Inside view

Stuart Pullum

Senior practice manager/clerk at a barristers chambers at
3 Verulam Buildings

“The role of a barrister’s clerk/practice manager can be a challenging and pressured one. You work for chambers (which is not a company or a partnership, but a group of barristers, often drawn together as they have a common and collegiate interest in the same kind of legal work, in order to share business costs), but within that structure, each barrister operates as an individual business. That can bring competing interests, which can be challenging to manage. You must constantly consider the balance of chamber’s interests as a whole, the individual barrister’s interests, and above all, the interests of the client, in order to ensure that an excellent and seamless service is being provided. The bar is, after all, a service industry – without clients, it would not exist.”



Legal administration

Typical tasks

- Providing administrative support for partners, solicitors, and trainees
- Maintaining filing systems (both paper and electronic)
- Printing, scanning, photocopying and bundle/ebible preparation
- Assist partners with financial management including billing, expenses, debt management and ensuring invoices are processed
- Assisting with taking on a new client including performing conflict searches, completing on-line anti-money laundering processes and requesting documentary evidence for compliance purposes
- Diary management for lawyers including arranging meetings/appointments with both internal and external clients, booking restaurants, seminars, travel and accommodation etc.
- Screening calls and taking appropriate messages
- Drafting (non-legal) letters, emails, notes, engagement letters, agendas, presentations and spreadsheets and actioning responses

Skills needed

- Attention to detail
- Excellent communication and ability to interact with people at all levels
- Advanced Microsoft office skills, together with other IT software
- Literacy
- Strong organisational and time management skills
- Teamwork and ability to work autonomously

Career path

You do not need specific qualifications to work within the legal secretarial team, but you will need excellent administrative and organisational skills.

Base entry level roles (apprentice team administrators or team administrators) usually require GCSE in English and Maths at grade C or higher. Desirable (but not essential) is a legal secretarial qualification or business administration qualification which can be achieved through local colleges or via an apprenticeship programme.

If you are successful in a team administrator role after a couple of years, you may wish to apply for a personal assistant or other business service administration role. You could also go on to be a team leader, and co-ordinate a team of administrators and personal assistants.

Inside view

Sian Wheeler

Personal assistant at Stephenson Harwood



"I think the most challenging aspect of my work is learning the different needs of each of the lawyers I work with, as each person works differently. The most rewarding part of my work is knowing that in even the smallest of tasks that I help with can make a big difference."

Rachel King

Personal assistant and deputy team leader at Stephenson Harwood



"My role consists of working for four partners and three associates. The role is very varied and I assist the fee earners with tasks such as diary management, travel booking, assistance with billing, and opening new files for clients. As part of the team leader role I assist with interviewing and recruitment, managing holiday bookings, managing appraisals and probation periods."

Amy Kavanagh

Junior personal assistant



"The most challenging is juggling everything together at once. Being able to prioritise workload when you have work coming from every direction. Always keep calm. Getting good feedback is very rewarding."





Business services

Not all employees in a law firm are lawyers. There are a number of departments which contribute to the day to day running of a law firm. A law firm needs IT professionals to maintain and develop the IT systems. It needs accountants and finance professionals to ensure that the bills are being paid and the finances of the business are being carefully managed. It needs human resources and training professions to ensure that the people are developed and supported across all levels.

HR

Typical tasks

- Providing advice to the partners/managers in the firm to attract and retain the best people
- Drafting employment contracts, letters confirming arrangements for maternity leave and international secondments
- Responsible for the induction and integration for new joiners
- Managing flexible working requests
- Managing performance of employees including managing probation reviews and appraisals
- Conducting exit interviews and summarising trends
- Acting as a first point of contact for employee relation issues and when necessary handling disciplinary hearings, grievances and performance discussions
- Designing approach to reward and benefits
- Developing and maintaining people policies, know-how and HR guidance documentation

Skills needed

- Relationship building and interpersonal skills
- Resilience and a pragmatic approach
- Service focused
- Organisational skills and time management
- Attention to detail and excellent drafting skills

Career path

Entry in to the HR profession does not necessarily require any formal qualifications, although many opt to study for the CIPD qualification in Human Resources Management.

Learning and development

Typical tasks

- Design and deliver training sessions and development programs
- Work with professional support lawyers, partners and managers to advise on career and people development
- Identify training needs and skill gaps
- Send out surveys and gather feedback on programmes

Skills needed

- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Client service skills
- Excellent written English
- Presentation skills
- Teamwork
- Organisational and time management skills
- IT
- Attention to detail

Career path

You don't need a degree to start a career in learning and development but it is advantageous if you have a university degree or a professional qualification from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).



Business development and marketing

Typical tasks

- Work closely with partners on developing their key client relationships to win more work
- Assist and manage pitches (a presentation to potential new clients)
- Create customised documents highlighting our expertise across all practice areas
- Manage the legal directory submission process, producing high quality submissions
- Produce and deliver client events
- Assist with targeted client research
- Review competitor activity and make recommendations on our approach

Skills needed

- Ability to influence senior people in the business and develop relationships
- Resilience and openness to challenge and change
- Good written communications with a good eye for detail
- Good organisation skills
- Proactive with a positive attitude
- A supportive and committed team player
- Innovative and open to new ideas, with the ability to challenge where necessary

Career path

There is no set career path for a career in business development. Many managers will study at university in a general/non-vocational degree. Many will then take the opportunity to study after university on a part time basis for a CIM (Chartered Institute of Marketing) qualification to show commitment to a career in marketing/business development.



IT

Typical tasks

- Managing the IT systems for the law firm
- Answering queries and calls from employees to assist with IT issues
- Making improvements such as software and equipment upgrades
- Set up IT equipment and systems access for new joiners and providing training on the systems
- Managing equipment requests such as phones, laptops and desk equipment for new joiners or for desk moves

Skills needed

- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Teamwork
- Organisational skills
- Technical IT knowledge
- Project management

Career path

There is no set career path for a career in IT. Roles are available to school leavers, university graduates and experienced professionals. Some careers start at the 1st line level and develop through the support teams to technical specialists or management roles. Others study specific areas of IT at university or in their spare time such as IT security.

Tips to be successful



Darren Fodey

Partner at Stephenson Harwood



"It's fair to say that my background goes to show that anyone who tries hard and puts effort into understanding their subjects and doing well – from GCSE level and beyond – has the possibility of being successful in a career in the law. I was the first person in my family to have gone to university – and the opportunity of a legal career is what drove me to put the effort in and work hard."

James Gracey

Trainee solicitor at Stephenson Harwood



"Do as much research as possible to understand the role of a commercial solicitor in a law firm. Whether you attend events, read online blogs or speak to people with experience in the industry, building up as much knowledge about the legal profession as possible is a good place to start."

George Hayman

Barrister and QC at Maitland Chambers

"It is critical to think through what sort of work you wish to do and whether you are suited to it. One of the best ways of working these things out is by getting work experience."

Al-Karim Makhani

Solicitor and vice president of legal technology company

"Talk to people in the industry you're interested in. If you don't know anyone, use LinkedIn and other online tools to reach out."

Georges Chalfoun

Barrister at 3 Verulam Buildings

"If you don't have access to mentors in your immediate family or friends group (I didn't), find them elsewhere. If you look, and ask, you will find that there are a great many lawyers (both solicitors and barristers) who will be more than happy to share their experiences and advice, if only they are asked."



Mariam Basher

Trainee solicitor at Stephenson Harwood



“Think about what specifically attracts you to working in a law firm. Is it a specific area of law, or an industry that you are interested in or have some background knowledge on? This will help you select which law firms to apply for, because there are a lot, and also will help you to show in your applications why you have chosen to apply for that law firm specifically. It is better to make a focused application.”

Poppie Bouch

Trainee solicitor at Stephenson Harwood



“In an interview use all of your extra-curricular activities to demonstrate a variety of skills outside of academics, for example, being part of a sports team or having a Saturday job can demonstrate that you are a team player and well rounded.”

Jane Leech

Associate and professional support lawyer at Stephenson Harwood



“As with all careers, there will be set backs along the way. However, do not let that put you off. If there is something you really want to achieve, enthusiasm and stick-ability will get you there.”

Joab Wayne

Associate at Stephenson Harwood



“Take advantage of any and all extra-curricular opportunities that are available to you. This will develop your skills and provide you with a range of experiences that you can draw from, which will prove invaluable when coming to write application question answers, as well as at interview.”



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