



Training for the Legal World: an Educational Tip!

Haresh Sood - Barrister

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Introduction

I am not sure what has actually changed; however, something definitely has. When I was at college and law school, I was taught some valuable rules about contacting people for work experience and training. For example, whenever guest speakers came in, one thing I was told was ***'ask a question to illustrate your determination, dedication and commitment'***. Moreover, I was taught to make contact and liaise with people to network and build relationships for the future. Whilst this still may be the case for many, I do find the calibre of trainees and students varies more than ever. Given the level of work experience requests I receive, I have laid out the key qualities the legal profession requires which trainees and work experience students should consider.

My experience as a teacher

As a teacher of law in the past, I have dealt with many students and encouraged them to take up work experience wherever they could. I even recall setting up placements for my students when I used to teach in Birmingham. Unfortunately, some of the students declined the placements or chose not to take them because the ***'law firm was not reputable enough'***. I always used to tell them, ***'Take what you can as placements are hard to come by'***. I appreciate some people may have their eyes set on the top law firms or Chambers in London, but you must start somewhere. I have then re-met some of these students a few years down the line, who have told me they left the idea of becoming a lawyer as they thought it was so difficult to get a placement! Over the years, I have had many students do experience with me. However, in many cases, I have noticed that there is a sense of commitment or thirst missing which I and many others used to have. Whilst I have had some excellent students work with me, some have been focussed on the wrong outcome. If a student asks me how much they will get paid by the hour or tells me they must leave by a certain time, this does not sit well with me. I have always given the guidance, that you must give to get. I am not advocating that people allow themselves to be exploited, but they need to demonstrate the thirst to learn and get ahead. By giving extra hours or travelling to Court in treacherous weather conditions or skipping your lunch break to research case law, are all signs of a good trainee.

The difference in the legal world

Unlike many professions, the legal world works all hours of the day. If you are looking for a 9-5 job or a flexi hours position, the legal world may not be for you. Whilst I appreciate some lawyers work fixed hours in law firms, the majority of them that I know will work erratic times which sometimes are part and parcel of the job; In turn, this means trainees and work experience students may be required to do the same.

The do's and don'ts

I have made a list for students/trainees as to what I deem to be the essential requisites.

1. Do not sit texting on your phone or be logged onto social media. Show some attention to the task at hand and appear enthusiastic. Whilst this may sound like it is common sense, you would be surprised, how many trainees or students I have caught texting under the desk, or in-between case files, hiding their phones.
2. Be reliable. Do not leave it until the last moment to say you cannot turn up (unless an emergency). I have had students cancel on me literally minutes before a hearing whilst waiting for them. I have had excuses such as sudden migraines or petty reasons.
3. Be honest. If you genuinely do not know something, ask! I appreciate this is not always easy, but if it is at all possible, ask and do the task properly, opposed to poorly.
4. Appear enthusiastic to find out something. Express that you will take the task on, even if you know it will be difficult. I learned the art of masking your inner feeling about something quiet early on with enthusiasm even if you detest it.
5. Do not create obstacles. So many students I know have created obstacles saying they cannot do this or that because of whatever reason. This is a turn off.
6. Embrace opportunities. I had one student I offered the chance to attend a networking event full of lawyers as they searched for a training contract. Instead, they insisted that they brought their partner in case they got bored. When I explained this would not be possible, they decided not to attend; A missed potential career opportunity!
7. Be grateful to the employer/advocate, do not expect them to be grateful for you.
8. Go over and above. If you have finished the task that you had been given, ask if you can assist with something else. Do not spend time having coffee laughing and joking with other trainees. Be the one that looks dedicated.

The fruits of good networking and work experience

I am still in touch with people I met along the way from more than 25 years ago when I was at college finishing school. These relationships still bring me results today because of how I handled those relationships and maintained them. Nurture a good contact, you never know who you may need where and when.

A final message

If you want to get ahead in law, the key requisites are dedication, commitment, and reliability. Whilst this may sound unusual to be writing about in this issue, it comes from the lawyer and teacher within me having worked with many trainees and students over the years. In all the time I have practised, I have only come across a handful who share the same values I have, and they have mostly got ahead in their career. I have on occasion asked people for a CV/Resume and been sent something so off-putting that I wonder how enthusiastic they really are. Therefore, pay attention to what you write on this.

Conclusion

In short, I strongly suggest law students pay attention to the changing nature of the legal market. Always research the type of lawyer you will be working with. If you are going to work with a direct access Barrister such as myself, know how the profession works. Moreover, learn about the regulatory rules around the profession and do some research. Finally, listen to what you are given as feedback. You need a thick skin. If you are told to improve on something, work on it (Obviously watch out for people who bully, discriminate, or harass you). I forever thank people who trained me and taught me what I learned, even if it was hard to listen to when being told. Today, I do believe there is a change in attitude now towards working hard. However, if you want to get ahead in law, there is nothing but hard work which can also be very enjoyable.

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Haresh is a Barrister at Clerksroom who takes instructions on a number of matters. Haresh was a finalist at the Law Teacher of the Year Awards held by Oxford University Press in 2010. He used to be the Head of Law at Handsworth Grammar School Sixth Form, and he has taught Law to many students right up to LL.B Level. Haresh is an avid fan of engaging law students in the early stages of their career to allow them to see what the profession is like. He learned the benefits of this from his training at Smalley's Solicitors and Trent Chambers in Nottingham.

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