

So you want to be a Judge's Associate...

Sharon Theedar

Becoming a Judge's Associate is an attractive alternative for lawyers who want to practise at the Bar or have a change from practising as a solicitor. After interviewing a number of Judge's Associates from varied backgrounds, Sharon Theedar tells us what it's all about.

The Judge's Associates Sharon interviewed all had different backgrounds. Two had come straight from law school and one had worked for two years at the Victorian Government Solicitor. Another Associate, who has held the job for thirteen years, had not studied law but had been a Law Clerk at court for a number of years. Another had started the job straight from law school and was motivated by her love of research, having worked in law libraries in the past. Another Associate had been a barrister for about seven years and then became involved in publishing a family law journal. Two Associates interviewed had decided that they wanted to become barristers after having completed Articles. In their view, being a Judge's Associate was the ideal way to make the transition because it assisted them in understanding Judges' thought processes and enabled them to feel comfortable in the Court room.

MAIN ROLE

Most of the associates interviewed saw their role as facilitative. The role is varied and involves legal research mainly using CD Roms, liaising with the public and the legal profession, obtaining legal precedents, empanelling juries and generally ensuring the case in question runs as smoothly as possible. Associates may also be required to act as Court appointed Examiners to take evidence for external tribunals or evidence by deposition. This involves swearing in witnesses ("Examination De Bene Esse") and generally ensuring that the evidence is satisfactorily recorded for subsequent use at trial. An Associate's role will vary according to the Judge. For example, some Judges prefer to do their research themselves while others prefer to delegate.

EQUIPPED FOR THE BAR

For a future barrister, being an Associate has distinct advantages. Associates become familiar with Court

procedure, including small things that are often overlooked such as how Orders are authenticated. Associates often find themselves in high pressure situations searching for cases and making last minute preparations before trial. However the job does have its more glamorous side. There are the social events which Associates attend including the opening of Parliament House and the Legal Year at St. Paul's and St. Patrick's Cathedral and the Melbourne General Synagogue (one Associate interviewed met the Chief Rabbi of New York at that event).

COURT CIRCUIT

Approximately fourteen Judge's Associates go on Court Circuit in the country. Circuit involves a total of four weeks away per year, taken separately. Accommodation is very basic. One Associate interviewed had been to Wangaratta and Warrnambool and enjoyed the experience, however, not all Associates shared this view.

DEMANDS & REWARDS

Associates who had experienced life as a solicitor fully appreciated the benefits of not having to keep time sheets and meet a budget every month. The hours are less demanding than that of a solicitor, the average working day starting at approximately 8.30 am or 9.00 am and ending at 5.30 pm or 6.00 pm. The salary generally ranges between the mid to high thirties and the employment term is often to two years, depending on the Judge. There is no official training course to become a Judge's Associate although most Associates interviewed had a "mentor" for one week.

APPLYING FOR THE JOB

Judges rarely advertise vacancies. The standard procedure is to send your application to the Associate of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court or the Associate of the President of the Court of Appeal. It will then become circulated when the next vacancy arises. An applicant can specify which division they want to work in.