

A country practice

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I was working as a paralegal at a top Melbourne law firm when I realised that my aspirations of being the next Ally McBeal were slowly, yet certainly, being shattered. I had vivid images of starting my day with a perfect coffee, just like Ally. Unfortunately my days usually ended, not started, with an unsatisfying, not perfect, coffee – and I did not drink it for a wonderful kick-start to the day, but instead for the purpose of trying to squeeze a few more workable hours out of the day.

As for the glamorous trials, well, there were certainly plenty of those and I was involved, but I was tucked away in the background. I was the one that had waded through boxes of possible evidence, stood at the photocopier for weeks on end,

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spent long nights sticking barcodes on every page of evidence and then making sure that every page had been scanned properly.

Don't get me wrong, I loved the work that I did and the opportunities that I was given, but I soon realised that I had a different image and idea of the legal profession and it was that other idea that I wanted to pursue.

The time came to apply for Articles and, much of the horror of my friends, I decided to apply for Articles in the country. I was ready for my “sea change” quite a bit earlier than most people. Before I knew it I was back in Gippsland where I had grown up, and within a day of starting my Articles I knew that I had made the right decision for me.

I don't think that many people can say that they loved their year of Articles, but I certainly can. From day one I was given a wide range of work and a lot of responsibility. Within a few months, while my Melbourne based friends were sorting through boxes or researching, I was seeing clients and had my own case load. Throughout the year I had fantastic guidance and everyone in the firm was willing to help me out – from explaining a difficult area of law to me to showing me the best way to get the most out of Friday night drinks.

Three years on and I am still at the same place and still loving it. What do I love best about my country practice?



Well, on the top of my list would have to be having a car park right outside my office and not having to worry about public transport. No, seriously, it would have to be the great variety of work that I do, the people that I work with and being part of a community. There is something gratifying in your client coming up to you in the supermarket and thanking you for doing their last will, or sorting out their family law matter. Even more gratifying is when your client classes you as their “family solicitor” and you have a long and rewarding legal relationship with them.

The flexible and shorter working hours would also have to be one of the things that I love the most about working in the country. I would be lying if I said I never have long days or don't have to go into the office on the weekend, but those occasions are not that frequent. A usual day for me is an 8.30am start, finished by 5.30pm and an hour for lunch in between.

It is also rewarding working with other experienced practitioners who not only value your work but who also treat you as an equal team member. Other practitioners in the area are also very friendly and more than happy to help me and other young solicitors out.

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Every day brings a new challenge and I am constantly learning. As a country practitioner you need to have an understanding of a vast range of areas of law. One of the things that I miss about not working in a large Melbourne firm is being able to pass a tricky tax question to the tax department. Instead, these days I am the tax department, I am also the litigation department, the wills and probate department, the construction and conveyancing department and all the other departments in between. Having such a broad understanding is fantastic but it can be a disadvantage when friends and family call on you for your free knowledge on numerous matters, and they expect your knowledge to be infinite.

While my dream of being the next Ally McBeal is now over, my legal career is only just beginning. I look forward to being able to continue practising in the country for years to come. I am, however, still searching for the perfect morning coffee.