

LEARNING ABOUT LIFE (AND LAW)

AS HARD AS THE JOB APPLICATION PROCESS SEEMED AT THE TIME, ONCE YOU'RE INTO WORK YOU QUICKLY REALISE THAT IT WAS JUST THE BEGINNING.

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THE FIRST FEW WEEKS . . .

There are some things in life you never forget. For the graduating law student, one of those moments is when you find out you have been offered an articulated clerkship or now traineeship.

That job offer, in many ways, is the culmination of years of study.

You've bought a new suit, found out your first rotation and researched the partner you will be working for.

You're thinking, yes, I'm ready to start articles.

However, we found that you can't really be completely prepared for the articles year. When it comes down to it, everyone is nervous about starting a new job, worried their legal skills won't be good enough and unsure about the firm's expectations.

Regardless of how much you might feel ready to start the next stage of your life, beginning full-time work is an enormous emotional and mental challenge.

Gone is the freedom to structure your days around your needs and the ability to catch up on sleep mid-week. Staying in bed on a cold morning is no longer an option. In a matter of moments you've gone from endless summer to four weeks leave a year. This was tough for us as this was our first full-time job since finishing uni.

Of course, everyone's experiences of the articles year will differ. We spoke to clerks from various law firms and found that while there were commonalities, each person offered unique insights into their articles year.

Perspectives and challenges varied according to the articulated clerk's previous work and life experiences.

While many people have found it difficult adjusting to working life, the emotional intensity that accompanies starting work will inevitably settle down and a new life routine will soon emerge.

Having just finished our first rotation of the articles year, we feel that we very much still have our training wheels on. We

hope this article gives you an insight into our experiences and some of the things we have learned so far.

WORK BEGINS

It won't be long before you are asked to do legal tasks. On a practical level, the following tips may be useful to keep in mind when starting work within your practice group:

- When going into someone's office, always take a pen and paper. On many occasions popping in to give a lawyer a quick answer will turn into "While you are here, could you check this for me?".
- Be ready to discuss any research you have prepared and explain your conclusions.
- If you find an answer on Google, it is advisable to check its accuracy in a legal resource.
- When tasks are urgent, resist the urge to impress your colleagues by rushing back to them as soon as you find an answer. Rather, double check that the answer is right.
- When taking notes at a meeting, try to make sure that your notes are comprehensive and will make sense to other people when reading the file.
- Don't sit in your office mulling over something for too long. Ask the junior lawyers and library staff for help. Don't be afraid to ask questions and further clarify the instructions you have been given. You are not expected to know everything.
- Ask your secretaries lots of questions. They have excellent knowledge of how the firm and the people in your team work.
- Get involved in your firm's sporting or community activities. Not only is this good fun, it gives you a chance to get to know people outside the work context.
- Keep a pair of comfortable walking shoes in your office (this makes delivering documents around the city a much more enjoyable process).
- Silence in lifts is okay.

Looking back, it is important to make the most of the orientation period and try to get to know your fellow articled clerks. Not only will these people make your work enjoyable, they are the ones who will be there for you with lunch and coffee during the hectic times.

One articled clerk we spoke to said:

"Your 'fit' in a law firm as an articled clerk comes down to personality and how you 'get along' with colleagues, from ACs to partners. I have found this surprising as it doesn't matter how brilliant you are, your ability to work effectively with others is a key."

For us, starting full-time work felt like a ticket of admission into adulthood. You no longer get to buy a concession ticket on public transport, people treat you with more respect in shops and you realise that you pay more tax than you used to get paid.

In some ways, starting work also felt like we had gone back to high school.

You're thrown together with a group of new people and you just need to make it work. While unrealistic that you'll be best friends with everybody, it is important to treat everyone with complete respect and courtesy.

This will go a long way towards establishing a positive reputation within the firm. As an articled clerk you are very much a work in progress, and often you will be evaluated on your attitude towards work as much as the product you produce.

A friendly, "can do" attitude is a great asset, and most importantly, never be "too busy" to say please and thank you.

It is easy to be intimidated when you are surrounded by so many experienced professionals, who seem to know all the answers and appear to have little self-doubt. It is important to remember that your partner was also once an articled clerk. No one starts at the top, and for that reason it is important not to be too hard on yourself.

The articles year is meant to be a year of developing your legal skills, asking the silly questions and identifying the areas of law which really interest you. At times you wonder whether you will have HR racing for your interview file wondering how you ever got the job. Don't worry. This has happened to everyone.

On a lighter note, many important lessons are not found in law textbooks.

Much to our chagrin, we have discovered that there is no code for recording some of your time as "Social Administration".

While we have resisted the urge to make a suggestion to the senior partners to this effect, we have found a practical solution to this problem. When visiting colleagues always carry around a pen and notepaper. This way the people you pass in the lifts and the corridor will think you are a diligent articled clerk intent on finding work rather than a thirsty articled clerk trying to find out where everyone is going for drinks on Friday.

THE PUZZLE BEGINS TO FIT

Believe it or not, it doesn't take long for you to start to feel a part of the team.

It is exciting and rewarding to see the way your research is incorporated into a client advice, or to be asked what you think about a legal issue.

An articled clerk we interviewed said: "Now that I can reflect back on the last five months I do see that I have started to mould out of being a uni student into a junior lawyer. My memos are getting more succinct, the emails are shorter and the amount of responsibility I have been given on matters has increased exponentially".

The past six months have taught us so much not only about the law but about ourselves.

There have been tough moments, but this has been offset by plenty of enlightening moments, such as realising you have learned something new.

Initially this may have been accessing the voicemail without a cheat sheet, but in time it may be receiving a letter saying that you have got your pro bono client off an unfair public transport fine.

It seems we are set to continue learning. As one articled clerk put it: "I've just figured out who everyone is, what their little quirks are and I have to rotate to a new group to start all over again".

Sometimes it feels like two steps forward, one step back, when there are a potentially unlimited number of steps ahead.

Our journey into the law has just begun. While at times it hasn't been easy, it has been an interesting and challenging journey – a journey that has so far given us the motivation to keep on walking and see where the path leads us. ■