

# Learning to cope with

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE CAN GO A LONG WAY IN MAKING THE LIFE OF A TRAINEE LAWYER A LOT EASIER.



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Starting out as a trainee lawyer is a challenge. Remembering the location of the stationery cupboard is hard enough, let alone knowing which of your tasks to prioritise, or the meaning of r 35.05 of the *Civil Procedure Rules*.

To help you understand the expectations that firms have of you in the first couple of years, the *YLJ* interviewed partners and principal solicitors at Arnold Bloch Leibler, Corrs Chambers Westgarth, Freehills, Gadens Lawyers, Lander & Rogers, Mallesons Stephen Jaques, Slater & Gordon and the Victorian Government Solicitor's Office about their expectations of trainee lawyers.

## What sort of work/life balance do you expect trainees to adopt?

- We want people with a balanced life and expect trainees to have wide interests.
- Extracurricular interests should be encouraged. They are good for wellbeing, broadening horizons, lateral thinking and creating networks.
- Trainees should adopt a work/life balance that is similar to their colleagues'.
- Demonstrate a commitment to meeting client needs but enjoy a life outside work.
- We want trainees to be healthy and focused, not burnt out.
- Sometimes you will miss extracurricular activities to get the job done.

## How can a trainee lawyer impress their supervisor and gain their trust?

- A great attitude: show enthusiasm and interest and be accessible.
- Provide high-quality pieces of work efficiently.
- Make life easier for your supervisor.
- Inform your supervisor about developments and manage deadlines.
- Listen, ask questions and follow instructions.
- Get involved in the broader firm and its activities.
- Show you are a team player and offer assistance to colleagues.
- Be professional, punctual and responsive.

# great expectations

- Respect other employees and build working relationships around the firm.
- Make suggestions beyond your specific instructions.
- Engage in discussion with colleagues, don't be passive.

## How do you expect trainees to prioritise work and practical legal training?

- Practical legal training and learning must take priority over billable work.
- Trainees tend to prioritise work but getting admitted is the main goal.
- Communication is key. Give colleagues adequate warning about your availability.
- Discuss workload issues with your supervisor or buddy.
- Just say no if you do not have capacity to complete a task.

## What is your reaction to the idea that a trainee should be first in the office and last to leave?

- Rubbish! Nonsense! Abhorrent!
- A trainee's hours should reflect their workload.
- Sometimes long hours are required but if you have finished your work, leave.
- Enthusiasm can be expressed in other (better) ways.
- Working efficiently and managing your workload effectively is more impressive – work smarter, not longer.
- This behaviour (without cause) is transparent and unlikely to impress.
- This may indicate poor time management or slacking off in the day.

## What mistakes are acceptable and unacceptable from a trainee lawyer?

- Most mistakes are acceptable.
- Errors of drafting, procedure, strategy and sometimes the law are acceptable.
- Trainees will make errors, as they are still developing skills and experience.
- Trainees should learn from their mistakes.
- We want trainees to feel they can “fess up” to errors.
- Simple mistakes cast doubt over whether a trainee can get the substance right.

- Take advantage of resources available to reduce errors and ask questions.
- Mistakes deemed unacceptable include:
  - errors due to lack of proofreading (typos, grammar);
  - repetition of the same mistake/s;
  - basic errors of law; and
  - mistakes due to unethical or dishonest practices.

## What can a trainee lawyer do to progress their career?

- Take ownership of matters.
- Show an interest in the broader context of a matter beyond your discrete task.
- Go the extra mile to cultivate each client relationship.
- Develop a reputation for having a good work ethic.
- Volunteer for a variety of tasks, including the less glamorous.
- Establish networks within the firm: fellow trainees, junior lawyers, support staff. Contribute to the office culture.
- Learn as much as possible.
- Don't rush: initially, just fit into your team and perform your role very well.

## What are career-limiting moves for trainee lawyers?

- Errors of judgment which indicate poor ethics or dishonesty.
- Failing to be upfront about errors: ‘fess up early.
- Inappropriate behaviour at firm functions.
- Not being true to themselves.
- Most problems relate to attitude not competence.

## Can trainees do anything without instructions in order to show initiative?

- Suggest the next steps and do not wait to be told what to do.
- Trainees can't provide advice but can project manage aspects of matters.
- Assist clients without providing advice (such as returning phone messages for the partner).
- Do that bit extra – draft a letter your supervisor has not yet done.

- Initially, all pieces of work will be checked by a colleague.
- Depends on the partner, group and working relationship. You will get a feel for it.
- If you think a task should be done, do it. I just won't bill your time if it wasn't needed

## Can trainee lawyers be too enthusiastic or try too hard?

- Trainees should be themselves and act naturally.
- We encourage participation and enthusiasm – you can't have too much.
- Trainees should try not to over-promise and under-deliver. Be realistic about your capacity and speak up if you need help.
- We prefer trainees to just get on with the job.
- Honesty and integrity are important as a practitioner. Over-enthusiasm is transparent and may appear false.
- No, but trainees should exercise emotional intelligence about when to show enthusiasm (that is, pick your moments).

## How can a trainee lawyer demonstrate leadership?

- Get involved in firm committees or initiatives and organise social events.
- Get involved in professional/community organisations.
- Suggest how to progress a matter before receiving instructions.
- Seek opportunities to project manage appropriate smaller tasks in a large matter.
- Mentor and delegate work to seasonal clerks.
- Participate in seminars.
- Graduates should focus on the basics – be proactive, enthusiastic, smart, commercial, reliable – the rest will snowball.

The key to a successful trainee year is having the right attitude. If you participate and communicate, are enthusiastic, perceptive, genuine and consistently deliver excellent work, you should pass the year with flying colours. ●

**JENNIFER WRIGLEY**  
is a lawyer at Corrs Chambers Westgarth.