



Making the most of the clerkship experience

A CLERKSHIP PROVIDES THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE EVERYDAY WORK FOR THOSE WISHING TO PURSUE COMMERCIAL PRACTICE.

The clerkship application process will open shortly and, in all the madness of applications, interviews and eventually offers, the personal and professional benefits slip into a distant memory behind potential future job prospects, securing a graduate position and impressing your future employers.

The career pathways for young lawyers are broad and provide a wide range of opportunities. For those who eventually decide to take up a clerkship in commercial practice the experience can fly by very quickly and so it is essential to make the most of the experience.

The difference between the study of law and the practice of law

When embarking upon a clerkship I had confused expectations, both of myself and of the firms I worked for. There was constant internal pressure over how I was perceived, the quality of my work and whether the firm was the right place for me. However, when I reflect on the experience the clerkship proved very valuable to my personal and professional development, in particular as I commenced my commercial career.

For all I learned at law school, I had a limited idea of the actual everyday tasks of a junior lawyer. It can be easy to form an unrealistic expectation of the work required

to be done on a daily basis, particularly from an administrative perspective. The clerkships provided invaluable, hands-on experience and exposure to elements of legal practice I wouldn't otherwise have seen. They helped me to appreciate the importance of deadlines, understand that not all research questions have an answer, that real life legal problems are presented to you in a manner very different from university, and that in practice commercial reality is more important to clients than black letter law.

A clerkship also offered a significant and invaluable opportunity to understand whether this was something I could see myself doing full-time. Making the most of the short time I had in the firm gave me the best possible basis on which to make this decision.

Make the most of it

When reflecting on my own clerkships, there were some key points that assisted and enhanced my experience.

- Diversification - when doing multiple clerkships I clerked in different practice groups for each firm. This allowed me
- to see what I enjoyed and what I had a natural aptitude for;
- Making an effort to do work for other practice groups besides my own, workload permitting. This was as simple as talking to lawyers in the group I was interested in, or talking to my supervisor about opportunities to work across more than one group;
- Talking to people in the firm whose work interested me. People are very receptive to this and will make the time to chat;
- Accepting that legal practice, like every other business, has ebbs and flows and that this may impact the type of work available;
- Regularly seeking feedback and maintaining confidence. There was no time to dwell on where I had gone wrong. I had to learn from my mistakes and move on. The feedback was constructive and designed to improve the quality of my work;
- Making friends with my peers. When you stop seeing this as a competition it is an infinitely more enjoyable experience.

Approaching your first year

Having a true understanding of daily legal practice enables graduates to approach their first year with an open mind and realistic expectations about the kind of work they will be doing on a daily basis. Not every litigious task is exciting or involves attending court, and repeated requests for research can sometimes be frustrating and are mentally exhausting. These are all things new trainee lawyers and recent graduates need to appreciate and be honest about when starting their career.

Don't underestimate the value of a good mentor. They can come from surprising places and they do not necessarily come through formal programs. Informal mentoring relationships are equally as beneficial. Sometimes it is as simple as knocking on a lawyer's door and making an effort to talk to the people we admire. Seeing someone you respect achieving longevity and success in the law can help you stay focused on the bigger picture and work towards your goals. ■

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