

Student to lawyer: 20 tips for a smooth transition



This is an abridged version of the LAWPRO article: “20 tips for a successful transition” – a guide for law students through the transition from student life to legal practice. See practicepro.ca/20newlawyertips for the full article.

- 1** Honestly assess your strengths and preferences to identify what makes sense for you in terms of the type of firm and area of law you want to practice.
- 2** Consider all the options: big firm, small firm, solo practice, government, in-house. Don’t just pursue the opportunities everyone else is pursuing – reflect on what is the best fit *for you*.
- 3** Create and prioritize a list of your options (from your most desired choices, to alternatives you’d accept).
- 4** Identify what makes you unique and use that to sell yourself.
- 5** Consider if you have what it takes to be a sole practitioner. Take our self-assessment quiz on page 19 to help you decide.
- 6** Be prepared to work within the realities of articling, the Law Practice Program (LPP) and the job market. Strive to be both positive and realistic.
- 7** Be prepared to deal with uncertainty. You can’t control all the factors that influence your career path; but you can commit to making the best decisions possible under the circumstances.
- 8** Be ready to adapt to changing circumstances and external factors. Your vision of the kind of practice that’s right for you will likely evolve as you gain experience. Be flexible and open to opportunities.
- 9** Prepare your resume and the supporting information you will use to sell yourself in interviews. Consider including writing samples and references – with appropriate permission.
- 10** Contact potential employers in the order in which you have prioritized your options. Research employers online – or even better: network with friends and family to learn about opportunities.
- 11** Don’t have an existing network of contacts? Begin building one! A good first step is to polish your social media presence. Visit practicepro.ca for our article “The essential LinkedIn Dos and Don’ts for law students.”
- 12** Make a good impression at a job interview by preparing answers to the probing open-ended questions you’re most likely to be asked. (See our list of sample questions at page 20).
- 13** Once you have a job, get delegated tasks done right by understanding parameters and deadlines and asking for feedback.
- 14** Good client communication is essential. See the Fall 2011 edition of *LAWPRO Magazine* for useful articles about communication.
- 15** Find a mentor who can help you improve your skills. There are mentoring programs available from the Law Society (lso.ca), the Ontario Bar Association (oba.org) and the Advocates’ Society (advocates.ca).
- 16** Make time for ongoing marketing and client development efforts. For marketing tips go to practicepro.ca/20newlawyertips, to see the original “Student to lawyer: 20 tips for a successful transition.”
- 17** Be nice! The legal world is very small – you will meet the same people over and over again – and your reputation will get around.
- 18** Have a life outside of law to help deal with the stresses of the job. While at school, you can find help for serious stress from on-campus providers; or contact Homewood Health at myassistplan.com to access confidential member assistance services.
- 19** Take care of yourself physically and mentally to avoid burnout. See article “Where to look for help” on page 21.
- 20** Trust your instincts, think long-term and be prepared for unexpected turns in your career. ■

Sample interview questions

Prepare in advance to increase your chances of a successful interview. How would you answer these questions?

Background questions:

- Tell me a little about yourself. What made you decide on law school?
- What do you hope to get out of a legal career?
- What do you know about [our firm]?
- How do you think [our firm] can help you achieve your career goals?
- If you took out a full-page ad in the newspaper and had to describe yourself in only three words, what would those words be?

Independence/sense of self/judgment:

- Describe what success means to you.
- Do you think of yourself as a risk-taker, or someone who plays it safe?
- How would you describe your standards of performance?
- Describe a (recent) situation in which you had to quickly establish your credibility and gain the confidence of others. What did you do?
- What do you think has contributed most to your success so far?
- What are some of the things (weaknesses) you are still working on in yourself?
- Describe a time when you had to take on something very new or different and you had little or no guidance and support in doing so. How did you handle it?
- A senior partner left an assignment for you before leaving on vacation. Now, you can't reach him/her and don't understand the assignment. What do you do?

Conscientiousness/work ethic:

- Describe a situation in which you had to work under pressure. How did you handle it?
- Do you anticipate problems effectively or just react to them?
- Tell me about a time when you went beyond the call of duty or delivered results beyond what was expected. Why did you do that?
- How would you clarify an unclear assignment?
- What kind of work environment are you most comfortable in (structured/unstructured)?
- Tell me about a time when you were assigned an unwelcome task. What did you do?
- Have you ever made an error in judgment that you had to address with your employer? How did you handle it?
- What part of your current workload do you find most challenging?
- What distinguishes you as a candidate?

Motivation/initiative:

- Would you describe yourself as a self-starter? If so, why?
- Would people describe you as a competitive person?
- Describe two things that motivate you at work.
- Give me an example of something you've done that demonstrates initiative and willingness to work.
- What kinds of responsibilities are important to you in your work?

Achievement/accomplishments:

- What work or personal accomplishments are you most proud of?
- What accomplishments gave you the most satisfaction?
- Have you ever accomplished something you did not think you could? How did you do it?
- Give me an example of how you have shown initiative.
- What is the most challenging thing you have ever done?
- What would you consider to be a stimulating work environment?
- Describe a significant risk you took to accomplish a task.

Interpersonal skills/communication:

- Describe a (recent) experience when you worked in a team environment. What was your role?
- Describe a situation where you had to give constructive criticism to another person. How did you go about this?
- Can you describe a situation where you worked for a difficult boss? What happened and how did you handle it?
- Have you ever had to resolve a conflict with a co-worker? How did you resolve it?

Organization:

- Describe your study habits.
- How do you manage your time/organize your workload?
- Describe a situation in which you've faced competing priorities. How did you handle it?
- How do you plan to achieve your career goals?
- Tell me about a time when you organized a project/completed a job where the directions were vague.
- When you are under a lot of stress, what is your typical reaction?