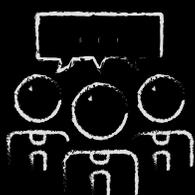


Student to Lawyer

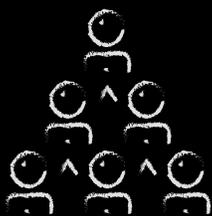
20 tips for a successful transition



Sole Practitioner



Small Firm



Big Firm

CHOOSE YOUR ROLE

There isn't a magic formula for mapping out a career in law. You will make some decisions on where you would like to go, but there are many things outside your control which will impact where you end up. Factors such as economic conditions, personal circumstances, and even a bit of luck will affect the career path you will follow.

Some law students have a very strong idea about the area of law they ultimately see themselves practising in. Other students may have no idea, or perhaps an idea of areas of law they would prefer to avoid. Your thoughts may change as you go through law school. Whether you already have an articling position, an LPP placement, or are still searching, it is worthwhile to spend time organizing your thoughts about the direction you would like your professional life to take. This can help you make better choices. This article outlines some tips and self-assessment questions that will help you find your way to a satisfying and successful legal career.

1

HONESTLY ASSESS WHAT MAKES SENSE FOR YOU

Regardless of what stage you are at in law school, you may have an idea of where it is you would like to end up. That could be in Toronto at a large Bay Street firm, a sole practitioner in a small community, or somewhere in between. When it comes to areas of law, work hours, working environments, types of work, remuneration and many other factors, Bay Street lawyers, smaller firm and solo practitioners live in very different worlds. Ask yourself what makes sense for you. This is a very personal question. Be honest – very honest. You will be happier and more successful if you can find the place where you best fit in. Do your best to figure out where that is.



2

A QUICK REVIEW OF THE OPTIONS

In Ontario there are nearly 27,000 lawyers in private practice (i.e. lawyers who work at a firm serving clients). The largest firms have several hundred lawyers. The smallest have a single lawyer. A job at a large firm may mean a bigger salary, and in some cases, a bigger time commitment. Some lawyers enjoy and thrive in the big firm environment, others do not. One-third of the lawyers in private practice work in sole practices and one-third work in firms with just 2-10 lawyers. There are a few thousand Ontario lawyers that have a corporate or “in-house” position. And while it is probably not something that many students contemplate as they are in the midst of working hard to get through law school, ultimately the realities of practice or other personal circumstances cause some to leave private practice and even the legal profession.

PLAN

3

CREATE A LIST OF OPTIONS

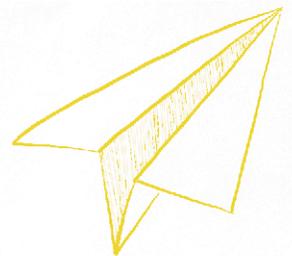
Where do you want to go? Consider your preferences and what you think makes sense for you. Write out a list of your options. Your list should include the most desirable options as well as others you might consider if your preferred choices do not work out. Think

broadly and keep alternatives open. You may have specific firms in mind, but you should keep an open mind and include groups or categories of firms that would be of interest.

4

WHAT MAKES YOU UNIQUE?

Every law student is unique, and the key to selling yourself is to tap into your own uniqueness. To do this, consider the work and personal experiences you have had, the education and training you have completed, and any other skills that you have learned before entering law school. Identify what makes you stand out from the crowd. This will let you sell yourself with more confidence and will also help you make choices about job opportunities that are the best suited to your abilities and preferences.



5

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A SOLE PRACTITIONER?

One-third of the nearly 27,000 lawyers in private practice in Ontario are sole practitioners. As a solo, it's great to have the freedom that comes with being your own boss, but you also have full responsibility for all aspects of the operation of your law practice. Do you have what it takes to be a sole practitioner? See the self-assessment quiz (below) to answer that question.



Are you ready for sole practice?

The chart helps identify your strengths and weaknesses and gives you a better idea of whether you're cut out for solo or small firm practice.

Ask yourself whether you possess some or all of the skills listed below. Rate your skills by circling the appropriate number, using a scale of 1-5, with 1 as low and 5 as high.

Skills

Getting clients

- projecting confidence in your skills
- networking

- client service follow-up
- asking for referrals

- identifying client needs
- tracking competitors

Rating

→	1	2	3	4	5
	LOW				HIGH
→	1	2	3	4	5
	LOW				HIGH
→	1	2	3	4	5
	LOW				HIGH
→	1	2	3	4	5
	LOW				HIGH
→	1	2	3	4	5
	LOW				HIGH
→	1	2	3	4	5
	LOW				HIGH
→	1	2	3	4	5
	LOW				HIGH

Marketing

- advertising/promotion/public relations

- annual marketing plans
- marketing strategies

- advertising copy writing
- pricing

Financial planning

- cash flow planning
- bank relationships

- management of credit lines

- monthly financial statements

Accounting

- bookkeeping

- monthly profit and loss statements/balance sheets

- quarterly/annual tax preparation
- billing, payables, receivables

Administrative

- scheduling

- payroll handling

- benefits administration

Personnel management

- hiring employees
- motivating employees

- general management skills

- firing employees

Personal business skills

- oral presentation skills
- computer skills

- fax, email experience
- written communication skills

- word processing skills
- organizational skills

Intangibles

- ability to work long and hard
- family support
- ability to work alone

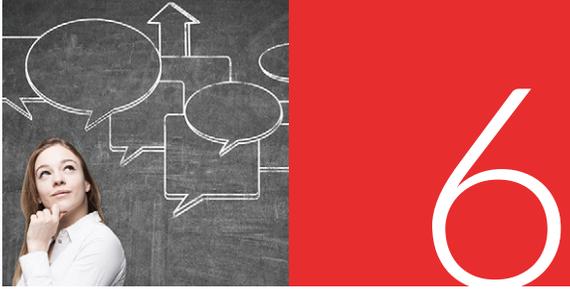
- ability to manage risk and stress
- ability to deal with failure

- ability to work with and manage others

How did you do?

- If your total is less than 20 points, you should reconsider whether owning a business is the right step for you
- If your total is between 20 and 25, you're on the verge of being ready, but you may be wise to spend some time strengthening some of your weaker areas
- If your total is above 25, you may be ready to start a sole practice

Total:



A DOSE OF REALITY – THE JOB MARKET

After you have determined what you think your preferred career path will be, you need to consider the job market. Finding an articling position or post-articling job may be difficult right now, although the introduction of the Law Practice Program in 2014 expanded the options for students. Unfortunately, you may end up taking a position that will not be your ideal in terms of size of firm, area of law or geographic location. These factors are beyond your control. You will need to work with them and make the best choices you can in the circumstances in which you find yourself.



BE PREPARED TO DEAL WITH UNCERTAINTY

Making decisions about your career path when you are a student is not easy. There is a great deal of uncertainty as there are many choices and limited information on which to base decisions. This uncertainty is compounded by many factors and unknowns beyond your control. You will not be able to eliminate uncertainty. Accept that there is an element of risk and chance. Work to gather all available information and make the best decision you can in the circumstances.



BE READY TO ADAPT

After you have assessed your preferences and mapped out your options, you should have an idea of where you want to go and what you need to do to get there. However, your personal circumstances and external factors can change. Make sure you consider new or changing circumstances and be alert for new opportunities. Your preferred path may change based on your articling or LPP placement experience or the work you end up doing in the early years of practice.



PREPARE YOUR RESUME AND SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Prepare the bundle of information you will use to sell yourself in interviews. This includes a resume that highlights your background and why you are unique – remember, you want to stand out from the crowd. If you have them, collect writing samples to show your work. Identify your references and contact them for permission.

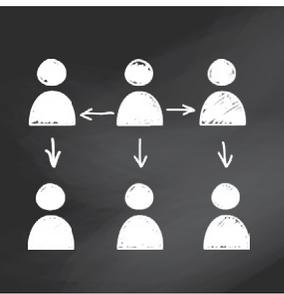
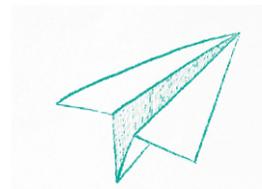




10

CONTACTING POTENTIAL EMPLOYERS

Contacting potential employers takes some legwork. Start with your most preferred options and work down your list. Go online and review firm websites; talk to friends and colleagues to get information about the firms you are considering. An inside introduction can help, so look to see if someone you know knows someone at any of the firms that interest you.

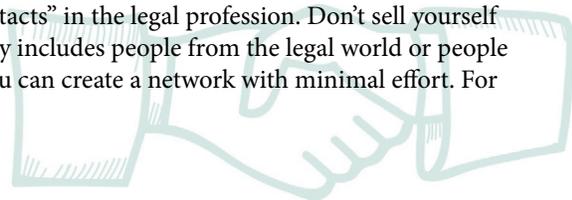


11

GET NETWORKING



For lawyers and students the process of networking is aimed at increasing your contact with individuals who may be clients, know about career opportunities, help open doors, or provide support. Networking involves developing new contacts, as well as tapping old ones. Informal channels can also help with networking, and even with finding a job. Many law students initially think they do not have “contacts” in the legal profession. Don’t sell yourself short. If you are active on social media you already have a network that probably includes people from the legal world or people that are connected to people in the legal world. If you aren’t on social media, you can create a network with minimal effort. For example, see page 26 for an article about how to get started on LinkedIn.

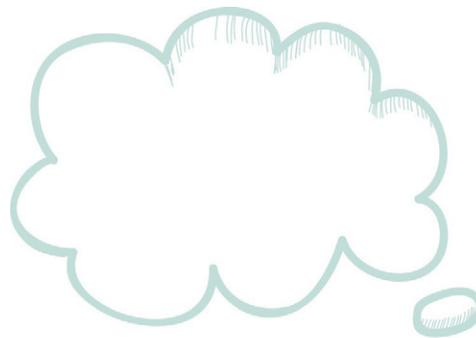


MAKING A GOOD IMPRESSION AT A JOB INTERVIEW

When it comes to getting a position, making a good impression is critical, both in your articling and LPP interviews and in any future interviews you might do. You can make a positive impression with good answers to the many difficult and awkward questions that will be asked of you. These questions are often fairly standard and you can and should prepare answers for them. See page 11 for a list of some of the questions you can expect in an interview for a position at a law firm.

How would you answer these job interview questions?

Job interviews can be very stressful. It’s not easy to answer questions about yourself, especially when they are open-ended questions that address your personality, work habits, ability to do teamwork and so on. Good answers are the key to a successful interview, and hopefully a job offer. The questions asked at job interviews are fairly standard. You greatly increase the chance you will give a good interview by preparing answers ahead of time. See the facing page for the questions you can expect in an interview for a position at a law firm.



Sample interview questions¹

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 an 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?

¹ Many of the questions in this article come from a *Sample List of Interview Questions* prepared by Karen MacKay of Phoenix Legal Inc.