

# Student to lawyer: 20 tips

for a successful 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 Our 2021 New Lawyer Issue 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](http://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 our article on the continuing importance of telephone communication skills from the 2019 New Lawyer Edition of our Magazine.
- 15 Find a mentor who can help you improve your skills. Visit [practicepro.ca](http://practicepro.ca) for our article “It takes a village to build a lawyer”, and see our “Find a Mentor” resource on page 22 of this issue to find a mentor that works for you.
- 16 Make time for ongoing marketing and client development efforts. For marketing tips, see the full article online.
- 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](http://myassistplan.com) to access confidential member assistance services.
- 19 Take care of yourself physically and mentally to avoid burn-out. See the article about the Member Assistance Program on page 21 and visit [practicepro.ca](http://practicepro.ca) to download our recent issue on lawyer wellness: “Finding your way. Coping with health and wellness issues.”
- 20 Trust your instincts, think long-term and be prepared for unexpected turns in your career. ■

# Do you have what it takes to be a sole practitioner?

One-third of the more than 29,000 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 to answer that question.

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	Rating
<p><b>Getting clients</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>projecting confidence in your skills</li> <li>networking</li> <li>client service follow-up</li> <li>asking for referrals</li> <li>identifying client needs</li> <li>tracking competitors</li> </ul>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>LOW HIGH</p>
<p><b>Marketing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>advertising/promotion/public relations</li> <li>annual marketing plans</li> <li>marketing strategies</li> <li>pricing</li> </ul>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>LOW HIGH</p>
<p><b>Financial planning</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>cash flow planning</li> <li>bank relationships</li> <li>monthly financial statements</li> <li>management of credit lines</li> </ul>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>LOW HIGH</p>
<p><b>Accounting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>bookkeeping</li> <li>monthly profit and loss statements/balance sheets</li> <li>quarterly/annual tax preparation</li> <li>billing, payables, receivables</li> </ul>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>LOW HIGH</p>
<p><b>Administrative</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>scheduling</li> <li>payroll handling</li> <li>benefits administration</li> </ul>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>LOW HIGH</p>
<p><b>Personnel management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>hiring employees</li> <li>motivating employees</li> <li>general management skills</li> <li>firing employees</li> </ul>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>LOW HIGH</p>
<p><b>Personal business skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>oral presentation skills</li> <li>computer skills</li> <li>fax, email experience</li> <li>written communication skills</li> <li>word processing skills</li> <li>organizational skills</li> </ul>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>LOW HIGH</p>
<p><b>Intangibles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ability to work long and hard</li> <li>family support</li> <li>ability to work alone</li> <li>ability to manage risk and stress</li> <li>ability to deal with failure</li> <li>ability to work with and manage others</li> </ul>	<p>1 2 3 4 5</p> <p>LOW HIGH</p>

## How did you do?

## TOTAL

- 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're ready to start a sole practice now



# 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 had to describe yourself in only three words, what would those words be?
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## 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 them and don't understand the assignment. What do you do?
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## 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?
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## 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?
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## 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.
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## 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?
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## 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?