

Student to lawyer



CHOOSE YOUR ROLE

20 tips for a successful transition

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.



Sole Practitioner



Small Firm



Big Firm

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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.



A QUICK REVIEW OF THE OPTIONS

In Ontario there are nearly 29,000 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.

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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.

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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.

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

One-third of the nearly 29,000 lawyers in private practice in Ontario are sole practitioners. As a sole practitioner, it's great to have the freedom that comes with being your own boss, but you also have full responsibility for all the operation of your law practice. Do you have what it takes to be a sole practitioner? See the self-assessment (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



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

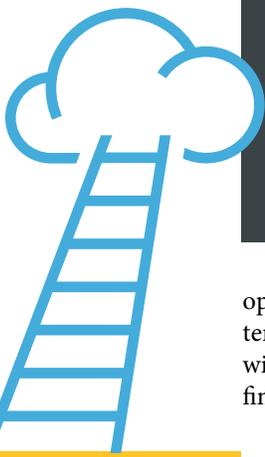
- ability to work long and hard
- family support
- ability to work alone
- ability to manage risk and stress
- ability to deal with failure
- ability to work with and manage others



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.



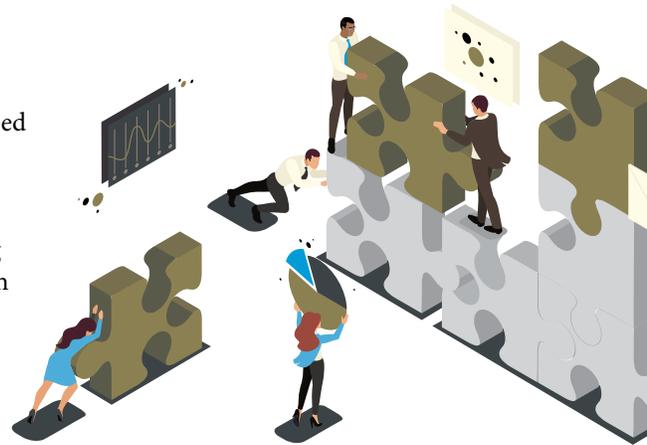
BE PREPARED TO DEAL WITH UNCERTAINTY

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.





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.

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.



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 19 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 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.



DELEGATED TASKS DONE RIGHT

Delegation involves getting the job done through others. As an articling, LPP student, and new lawyer you can count on having many tasks delegated to you. Here are some tips to help you maximize the learning opportunities that delegated tasks present and to make sure the tasks delegated to you are successfully completed:

- Get clear instructions and all required information: Make sure you understand the specific issues of concern, but also look to appreciate the bigger picture so that you understand the reasons behind the work that you are doing.
- Get direction on any special parameters: Ask the person giving you the task if there are any parameters that will limit or direct what you are to do to complete the task. Are there resources to use or to avoid? How much time is to be spent on the task? Are there any cost sensitivities on the part of the client with respect to the amount that will be billed for the work?
- Get a realistic deadline: Most tasks will come with a deadline attached to them. Make sure you are aware of the deadline and that you can realistically meet it given the other tasks for which you are responsible. Talk about alternatives if the deadline is unrealistic given other deadlines you are facing.
- Understand the reporting mechanism: Are you expected to simply return the completed work, or are you to check in with updates as the work progresses?
- Confirm the instructions given to you: At the end of your discussion, reiterate the instructions given to you to make sure you properly understood them. Ask about anything you don't understand or are confused about.
- Ask for feedback when the work is done: Getting feedback is key to learning, especially if there were mistakes or complaints about the work. Hopefully any criticism given to you will be constructive criticism.

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GOOD CLIENT COMMUNICATION IS ESSENTIAL

Start off on the right foot in your dealings with clients. LAWPRO statistics indicate that nearly half of all lawyers will have at least one malpractice claim during the course of their career. The most common malpractice claims don't involve a failure to know or apply the law – errors of law lead to only about 13 per cent of the claims LAWPRO sees. Lawyer/client communication issues are the most common cause of claims, accounting for more than one-third of the claims LAWPRO handles. These errors arise due to poor communication, miscommunication, or no communication whatsoever. Take the time to develop good interpersonal skills and to implement sound client communication practices. You can find more resources on client communication practices on practicepro.ca

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GET A MENTOR TO IMPROVE YOUR SKILLS

Mentoring is one of the most effective ways to gain skills, knowledge, and wisdom about many topics that are not taught in law school. See our article, *It takes a*

village to build a lawyer in the 2019 Student Issue, available at practicepro.ca, to learn more about using mentors in your career.



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MAKE TIME FOR MARKETING

Some lawyers find rainmaking natural and easy, others struggle with it, and some are oblivious to the need to market their services. In today's

competitive environment, marketing and client development are essential. Marketing legal services does not lead to instant results. Not everyone needs legal services at the moment. Good marketing does pay off, but generally only slowly and with a steady effort over the long haul. Therefore it is critical that you market yourself on an ongoing basis, even when business is good. Most law firms of any size will have some kind of formal marketing and business development plan. As an articling student there are some marketing-type activities that you can undertake to foster positive relationships with the clients you are dealing with. You will have to work within the parameters of any existing plan.

Marketing basics

It's never too early to begin marketing services to existing and potential clients. As you work on a basic marketing plan, consider including the following activities and implementation schedule:

Each week:

- Take at least one current client, potential client, or potential source of referrals out to lunch (or just for a coffee).
- Send a handwritten thank-you note any time you: close a client file; receive an introduction or a referral; or receive any kind of advice, assistance, or support that goes beyond the call of duty.
- Post articles on interesting legal topics to social media along with comments explaining their importance (see *Essential LinkedIn dos and don'ts for law student* on practicepro.ca).

Each month:

- Attend at least one civic, service, or community meeting.
- Try to add at least five new people to your professional contacts list.
- Make a telephone call to an old friend you haven't talked to in a while and just chat.
- Spend some time touring a client's place of business at no charge to the client.



- Send someone you know who received some good press a copy of the article and a congratulatory note.
- Attend an education program and sit with lawyers you don't already know.

During the next four months:

- Set up a public speaking engagement, or volunteer to help with one on behalf of your firm. Tell your clients about it.
- Read a book about marketing or law practice management.
- Host a social event or arrange a get-together.
- Do some volunteer work for the Law Society, the Canadian Bar Association, the Ontario Bar Association, or another law association.
- Schedule a time to review the last four months of your marketing efforts.
- Send cards to clients and other contacts on their birthdays and during the holiday season.

When choosing marketing activities, play to your strengths. If you're very social, find opportunities for face-to-face meetings. If you're a written communicator, keep those thank-you notes flowing. Remember that a diverse approach will often yield the best results. Make an effort to try some of those marketing activities that lie outside your comfort zone. With practice, you'll find that your efforts come more naturally. You'll also begin to see results.

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BE NICE!

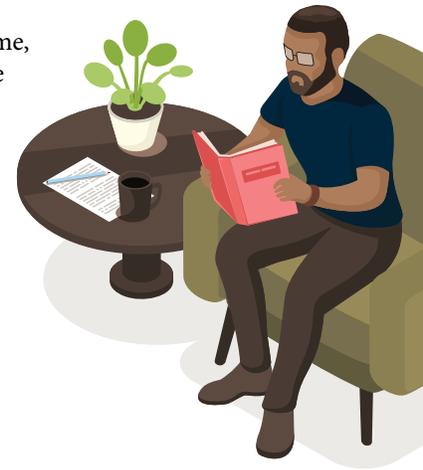
You will find that the legal world is a very small one. You will meet hundreds of people through the course of your articling year or LPP placement. This will include lawyers and staff at your firm and at other firms, clients, court office staff and others. You can count on meeting many of these people again through the course of your career, so be professional and courteous with everyone you deal with each and every day. Word gets around, and you never know how the people you interact with today will be in a position to help or harm you in the future. Always remember, what goes around, comes around. Be nice!

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HAVE A LIFE

Many legal positions will put great demands on your time, sometimes far beyond the regular 9 to 5 workday. There is nothing wrong with working hard and being proud of the work you do as a lawyer. But don't neglect the

people in your life, and make sure you spend time outside the law office setting! Your partner, kids, extended family, friends and community are important. Make time for them. A strong social network outside the office will make it easier to deal with the stress at the office and can help keep your job in perspective. Sports or other hobbies will let you blow off steam, keep in shape or be engaged with non-legal tasks and people.



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TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

At times you will find the demands of working stressful, as well as physically and emotionally exhausting. You can count on being exposed to high levels of stress on a daily basis. Unfortunately, lawyers exposed to high levels of stress over the long term may misuse or become addicted to drugs or alcohol, and can have challenges to physical or mental wellness. These problems can be contributing factors for LAWPRO claims and Law Society complaints. So try to eat right, and get exercise. And if you feel stressed and burnt out, remember there are resources to help you. See the self-assessment tools and resources on the practicePRO wellness page and page 23 for more information.



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TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

Throughout your career as a lawyer, there will be highs and lows, good times and bad. Follow your heart and your instincts. Be ready for the unexpected. Many of you will end up in a career that is very different from anything you are expecting or planning for today. It may even be outside the law. Good luck on your articling or LPP experience and with the other decisions you face over the coming months. ■