

DOUGLAS HOPE

Douglas Hope specialises in assisting
solicitors and partners
in **England and Wales**

**Newly
Qualifieds**

INTRODUCTION

As you approach the time in your career when you are no longer a “trainee”, qualifying as a solicitor brings with it some crucial decisions that will begin to shape your early career.

Your decision may be a simple one, if you have been offered a position with your present firm, in the department of your choice it could be an obvious option to stay put within the familiar surroundings of the firm you trained with. However, over recent years for a growing number of Newly Qualifieds (NQ's) this is a time to consider other options. On the other hand, there may not be a position in your preferred department as firms cannot always retain all their qualifying trainees.

You should consider your next steps carefully, whether you should stay at your own firm or make a move as well as which area to specialise in. Getting the right advice and guidance from specialists who know the market is important at this pivotal stage in your career.

Generally, if you are qualifying in March you should be seeking advice from your recruitment consultant in October ready to make applications in November. If you are qualifying in September you should aim to be seeking advice in March ready to start making applications in May. It is therefore important that you have made your decisions before these times, whether or not your own firm has announced its own plans. If you wait you may find that many of the better positions in your chosen area of specialisation have gone in the early rounds.

We understand how difficult this time can be and we recognise that it may well be the first search and interview process you have experienced for a number of years. We can provide you with crucial market information as well as the experience to assist you through your individual search guiding you each step of the way.

We offer a service that is tailored to your individual motivations and aspirations. We are able to give you impartial, expert advice that will assist you in making the right decisions. We will make informed and relevant applications and arrange interviews on your behalf. We can give practical

advice on CV preparation and interview techniques as well as constructive feedback on any meetings and interviews that you attend. As we can work with you at each stage of your search we are on hand to offer advice and assistance where required including timing issues, salary and package negotiations and resignation etiquette.

It is crucial when working with your consultant to be open and honest at each stage of your search, these qualities will make for a successful working relationship. Always keep your consultant fully informed of your aspirations as well as other areas of expertise or positions of interest you may have. By making your consultant aware of any applications you have made yourself or via another source you will avoid unnecessary duplication which is not only a wasteful use of time and resources but, more importantly could have a negative effect on your application.

After an interview with a client it is important to give feedback as soon as possible. It is just as important to provide feedback that is negative as well as positive as this ensures that your consultant can overcome any potential obstacles for you.

WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS?

More and more often solicitors are being asked to specialise upon qualification and it is therefore extremely important that the decision you make is the right one for you. For some who have known which area of the law they have wished to specialise for a number of years the decision is easy, however for others making a decision is not quite so straight forward. It is imperative to look at the potential medium to long term impact of your decision, some solicitors accept positions with departments just because they feel comfortable or familiar. However, they can feel 2-4 years down the line that their chosen field has been a mistake and, by this stage it is often too late to make the change. Depending on the state of the market, the “ideal” position may not become available straight away; therefore it is important to be fairly flexible in your search. By accepting a position that may not be the exact one you had targeted but is relatively closely related will mean that you may well be able to transfer down the line.

WHERE SHOULD I PRACTICE?

Once you have made the crucial decision as to which area of law you wish to specialise you will need to ascertain where you wish to practice this area of law. The decision will depend upon the market and your specific background but may include looking at small, medium or large UK firms, accountancy practices, regional firms and in-house.

If you are currently based in London considering options in the City or overseas there are further options you can consider which include US firms or banks. Although the majority of these opportunities are available solely in London, some can be found in the southern regions of England with a handful based in the north.

UK PRIVATE PRACTICE

This is often the most obvious choice for many NQ's, either by staying at the firm where they have trained or moving elsewhere. However, many NQ's are now choosing to move to a new firm upon qualification utilising the opportunity to gain more and broader experience in a new environment. There is a vast difference in potential opportunities between firms and these must be explored before decisions are made. In broad terms the larger the firm the larger the deals you will get the opportunity to work on. The levels of training and support on offer are usually excellent. The smaller the firm the more direct involvement you will generally have with the clients, marketing and business development work will be more widely available as will greater levels of responsibility at an earlier stage. The salaries are often higher in the larger firms but the working hours expected of you are also greater than in the smaller law firms.

REGIONAL LAW FIRMS

If it is an option that you would consider in the foreseeable future then a move to a regional firm at this stage in your career is a good idea. Often, by putting the decision off until later down the line you can price yourself out of the market. Regional firms offer high quality work and have enviable client bases. The quality of non-fee earning support in regional firms is just as good as that of any City firm. They have long been attracted to good quality NQ's and offer the guarantees of continual training and genuine career progression, often with a more attractive work / life

balance.

IN-HOUSE

There are very few positions for NQ's in this area. The majority of roles arise for solicitors with 1-5 years experience who require far less ongoing supervision or training. However, on limited occasions roles do arise for NQ's. For those who have gained a secondment during training or have previous legal experience, particularly within contracts work the chances of securing an in-house role are more realistic.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

At this exciting and pivotal stage in your career it is crucial to prepare ensuring that you have the right information and advice to hand in order to make the best decisions that will impact upon and shape your career in the medium and long term as much as the here and now.

The NQ market is increasingly competitive and complex and brings with it numerous potential options that need to be considered carefully and advisedly.

This guide should have provided you with an overview of the various options that you will need to consider before and during your search for the right position. However, we recognise that everyone's circumstances are different and it is possible that you may have some further questions or queries you wish to discuss. For more specific advice and guidance on any aspect of your search we recommend that you contact us for a more in depth and impartial discussion.

We understand that you often have busy schedules and that the work environment may not be the ideal place to discuss your career. This is why we make ourselves available at times and places that are most convenient for you.

Call us confidentially on 0161 233 7171, or during evenings and weekends on 0870 240 4623.

Our website contains further information on salaries, market trends and living and working in the

north of England, visit us at www.douglashope.co.uk

CV GUIDE

The CV is your first opportunity to sell yourself and is ultimately what decides whether you are successful in securing the second opportunity to sell yourself – at the interview. The importance of producing and presenting a quality CV is crucial as it is the first thing that you will be judged upon. It is your responsibility to ensure that your CV stands out amongst the rest and therefore the importance of clear presentation and relevant content cannot be underestimated. This is your prime opportunity to market yourself, do this accurately and positively, do not exaggerate your skills and experience, never be tempted to include any information that cannot be supported at interview.

Your CV should be set out clearly and concisely enabling the reader to identify with ease the relevant information they need. Do not aim to “knock out” a CV at the first attempt, producing a quality CV takes some time and effort on your part.

CONTENT

Your CV should include the following information:

- ⊙ Personal details – name, address, and telephone numbers including a mobile number and email address where possible, date of birth and nationality (where relevant for work permit purposes).
- ⊙ Education – degree, name and dates of university, course title and classification; name and dates of secondary school / college, A levels, subjects and grades, number of O levels / GCSE's and grades as well as any other further and higher education courses.
- ⊙ Professional qualifications – dates, any awards, current stage of qualification if still studying, intended date of next exams and previous exam record if applicable, expected date of admission.
- ⊙ Employment history – This section should be given the most time and effort and should form a large proportion of the document, it is here where you have the best opportunity to

make your CV stand out and boldly express your level of experience. Include your career to date with employment record in reverse chronological order, from most recent back. Include dates and places where trained and qualified / due to qualify, therefore listing your training contract first. Provide details of responsibilities undertaken in each seat giving particular attention to the area into which you wish to qualify including any special projects undertaken and wider contributions made to your employer. Provide specific cases / transactions together with details of your involvement in these matters to quantify what your capabilities are. If you have had an unusual level of responsibility, for example running a case on your own account then this should be highlighted. Give greatest attention to your most recent position.

- ⊙ Interests – these give an employer a picture of your life outside of work seeing you more as a person. Make the most of your achievements as employers prefer well-rounded individuals. Be concise, honest and current with the information you provide, do not be tempted to put something in for the sake of it or to exaggerate in this section, you must remember that you must be prepared to elaborate on any of your interests cited at the interview stage.

A NQ CV should ideally be no more than 2 pages long, however if you have specific additional information that is relevant then you could consider it being slightly longer but no more than 3 pages. It is crucial to ensure that the CV remains at all times concise, clear and interesting focusing on key achievements. Ensure that there are no gaps in your employment or educational history, include brief explanations accounting for your time.

Do not worry too much about format at this stage. As we understand that you have busy schedules and may not have had that much experience in writing CV's at this stage in your career we can help you with layout and overall style. So long as you can detail your professional work experience to date, your notable achievements and skills and provide us with details that highlight your area of chosen specialism then we can work with you to bring it all together on the page in the most appropriate and professional way.

DO

- Use clear headings and bullet points
- Check spelling and grammar, dates and order
- Explain any gaps in your CV
- Keep the CV to no more than 3 pages in length
- Get advice and assistance from your consultant
- Proof read, proof read and proof read again

DON'T

- Exaggerate, embellish or be economical with the truth
- Give reasons for leaving any of the jobs on your CV, it is best to explain in person at interview
- Use technical jargon
- Include salary details on your CV
- Include a photograph
- Make your CV double-sided
- Focus too much on interests and hobbies
- Include irrelevant information or references

Remember that at Douglas Hope we have many years experience in ensuring that CVs fulfil their purpose – marketing your skills and experience in a way most pertinent to employers and ultimately securing an interview. For further assistance or advice on producing an effective CV please do not hesitate to contact us.

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The interview is the most important part of your job application, in the majority of cases you will find it will be very different from your training contract interviews. The personal interview remains the most common method of assessing candidates and is usually the forum from which the decision will be made on who is the 'best' person for the position.

Most interviews last about one hour and more often than not this provides the one chance to get it right. Beforehand make sure you double check the venue of the interview as well as the date and time. Plan your journey in advance allowing extra time for unforeseen traffic or misdirection. Check the name of the person or people who will be interviewing you and their positions within the organisation. Remember to take the telephone number of the offices where you are being interviewed.

PREPARATION

Research and preparation are key elements to a successful interview. However, it is important to mention at this stage that you can also overdo it. Over preparation can be just as dangerous as doing very little research as it can lead to unnecessary anxiety and tension that will make you come across as 'wooden', 'over-formal' and lacking in personality. Be confident enough to accept that you cannot predict exactly how any interview will go, what questions are asked of you and how the client will react to you and the answers you provide. In having this confidence the interview should flow more naturally and will allow you to relate to the interviewer as the situation demands whilst allowing your personality to come through.

Putting the right level of time and effort into your preparation will give you confidence, enable you to relax and should allow you to have listed a useful amount of relevant questions. Questions to ask your consultant before the interview include how long the interview will last, will it be technical, will you be expected to make a presentation, is there a test and if so what format will it take.

Research the organisation thoroughly. Your contact at Douglas Hope will be able to help you with this but you should carry out your own research as well. Useful sources of information include:

- ⊙ The firm's website - this is often an excellent source of material and can provide up to date information on recent events, publications, press releases and details about the solicitors within the practice
- ⊙ Legal journals and publications
- ⊙ Legal directories

- ⊙ Any brochures, annual reports or other literature produced by the firm

Research the department to which you are applying, it is useful to find out how big it is, what kinds of personalities and backgrounds have the solicitors got within it and how the department is structured. Find out how many people will be interviewing you, who they are, their position in the firm, how long they have been there, what they are like and whether you may be reporting to them.

Prepare a list of relevant questions to ask during or at the end of the interview that are pertinent to the role, the department and the firm. This demonstrates enthusiasm whilst allowing you to get any extra information you require from the interviewers. If you have carried out your research well this should provide you with a decent amount of suitable questions.

Read through your CV until you are totally familiar with it. Your CV often forms the basis of discussion at the interview so it is imperative that you are fully aware and confident of its contents. Use the information contained in your CV to highlight your strengths and relevant skills and experience in the interview.

Think carefully about the questions that you are likely to be asked at interview, whilst it is important not to dwell on every possible scenario that may arise there are some common questions that are easy to prepare for that often do come up. These include:

- ⊙ Tell me about yourself?
- ⊙ Why did you choose this firm?
- ⊙ What do you know about the firm?
- ⊙ Why did you choose to pursue a career in law?
- ⊙ What interests you about the law / your particular specialism?
- ⊙ What are your strengths?
- ⊙ What are your weaknesses (never answer “none”) / what have you done to address your weaknesses?
- ⊙ Why are you leaving your current firm?

- ⊙ How do you cope under pressure?
- ⊙ How well do you work as part of a team?
- ⊙ How would your team describe you?
- ⊙ Give examples of your delegation skills?
- ⊙ What are the major achievements in your professional and / or non-professional life?
- ⊙ Where do you hope to be in a set period of time from now (1 year, 5 years etc.)?
- ⊙ How much drafting or negotiating have you done?
- ⊙ How do you prioritise your workload?
- ⊙ How do you spend your spare time?
- ⊙ Give an example of when you have shown initiative in your career?
- ⊙ What are your goals in life, how will this position help you to achieve them?
- ⊙ What has been the most challenging point in your career to date, how did you overcome it?

PRESENTATION

First impressions are vital. It is crucial that you dress professionally and on the conservative side. A number of firms now have casual dress codes, however it is important that you still wear a suit to your interview. Men should wear a smart dark suit, fresh crisp shirt, a business tie (nothing outrageous), polished shoes and dark socks. Women should wear a smart dark suit or trouser suit, skirts should be neither too long or too short, clean shoes (no high heels), try to limit makeup and always wear tights or stockings. Remember you are far less likely to offend by dressing too conservatively than by going the other way. Men and women should keep jewellery to a minimum and ensure that hair is well groomed.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

It is good practice to arrive in the reception of the firm approximately 10 minutes before the interview. This will give you a chance to relax, take a few breaths and allow you to make yourself more familiar with the surroundings. Do not become too pre-occupied with your surroundings as you must ensure that your attention remains firmly on the interview. Whilst it is highly undesirable for you to be late, if you are unavoidably delayed or detained call ahead as soon as possible to

explain your late arrival. When you inform the receptionist of your arrival remember that they are an employee of the firm so at this stage the interview process has already begun.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

It has consistently been shown through research that the majority of all interviews are decided in the first 5 minutes and they rarely change for the better or worse. It is therefore crucial that your entrance and introduction are right. First impressions really do count, this fact cannot be underestimated. Enter the room confidently and positively, a firm handshake and an engaging smile are vital at this stage. Only sit down once invited to do so. It is important to appear calm, whether you are or not, maintaining eye contact throughout your interview.

Try and remain natural during the interview, remember to be yourself. Be alert and aware at all times of your body language (sitting slightly forwards implies interest, do not cross your arms as this comes across as defensive), sit up straight and keep an upbeat and positive interest about the firm and the position (even if your level of interest has changed, keep your options open at this stage). Be aware of the interviewers body language as well, this may give you an idea as to how they are feeling the interview is going, for example if the interviewer is looking bored it may be that you are beginning to ramble.

Listen to each question and make sure you understand it before you start to answer. Your answers should be succinct, keeping to the point without being too brief, never reply to a question with monosyllabic “yes” or “no” answers. Speak clearly and deliberately. Be aware not to ramble in your answers and do not be afraid of not talking. Silence is a tool used by interviewers and one that often catches candidates out, when you have answered your question stop and do not be tempted to fill silent gaps with irrelevant chatter. If you do not fully understand a question ask for clarification.

At every possible opportunity you should be selling yourself, keeping your answers achievement-orientated and highlighting wherever possible your strengths and abilities. Use your knowledge and research wherever possible and when appropriate to highlight your interest and show that you are keen. Never lie in an interview as you may be asked to support everything you say with

specific and quantifiable examples. Do not be tempted to make jokes in the interview as this could well backfire. Instead try to build up a rapport with the interviewer/s, a positive, confident and enthusiastic approach will help.

Do not be negative about your current or previous employers, appearing bitter or resentful will not highlight you as a good perspective new recruit. Try to avoid putting yourself across in a negative way by discussing any weaknesses or problems in your career or life to date. If the interviewers do raise these points do not dwell on them but instead highlight how you have learned and improved enabling you to add value because of these experiences in the future.

Do not discuss remuneration at the first interview unless specifically asked. Financial negotiations and considerations are best left until after the interview once you have discussed the outcome and way forward with your consultant. Ask the questions you have prepared if they have not been covered in the interview. Try to ask at least two relevant and intelligent questions this will show enthusiasm as well as demonstrating your knowledge of the firm and the position. Use this opportunity to clear up any questions you may have but do not ask about the salary, benefits or holidays at this stage. Whilst you can never totally predict what topics may come up in the interview and whether or not your prepared questions will end up being covered or become irrelevant for some reason during the meeting there are a few ideas that are worth considering, these include:

- ⊙ What career prospects are available?
- ⊙ Why has the position become available?
- ⊙ What are the future plans for the department / firm?
- ⊙ How do you appraise the performance of your employees?
- ⊙ Who do you regard as your main competitors?
- ⊙ What are the firm's training and development procedures?
- ⊙ What are the long term prospects for the successful candidate?
- ⊙ What are the firm's main objectives?
- ⊙ Ask the interviewers about themselves, what are their backgrounds, why do they enjoy working for the firm?

AT THE END OF THE INTERVIEW

Do not forget to let the employer know that you are interested in the position, it is important to ensure that the interviewers know that you have enjoyed your meeting. Leave the interview in the same positive manner in which you arrived. Thank the interviewer for their time, shake their hand again and smile remembering to always retain eye contact. As much as possible try and enjoy the interview and see it as a valuable experience, with hard work and sound preparation success will follow – Good Luck!

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Soon after the interview make some notes about the meeting and any further questions or queries you may subsequently have. Make an honest assessment of your performance. Interviews are highly subjective and sometimes things ‘click’ and sometimes they don’t. Discuss the interview with your consultant and be prepared to listen to honest and constructive feedback, even if at times this may not always be positive ensure that you learn from the experience for future interviews.

It is important to make contact with your consultant soon after the meeting so that they can relay any feedback they may have and likewise ascertain what questions, queries or concerns you may have in order to gain answers from the client as soon as possible. If a second interview is required this can be arranged efficiently and any knowledge or feedback that the consultant has can be passed on to you in order to provide you with the best possible chance of success.

Try to plan for a second interview as you did for the first and spend time in preparing any more detailed questions you may have before you attend. Discuss any reservations, concerns or queries with your consultant beforehand, by utilising their substantial knowledge and expertise you can maximise your chances of a positive outcome. Remember that your consultant has many years experience in the entire recruitment process and will be able to advise you at each stage, assisting you in securing the best possible position.

SOCIAL INTERVIEWS

On occasions organisations chose to use a more social meeting as part of their interview and selection process. This can take the form of a lunch, drinks after work or an evening meal with one or more individuals from the firm. This style may also be used as an opportunity for you to meet other members of the team and for them to meet you. It is important to remember that this is still an interview and you are on show.

Be careful not to drink to much, only smoke if other team members do - don't over-smoke. You will undoubtedly be assessed on your ability to mix and get on with a variety of people, make your presence felt without being too overbearing, be confident but not arrogant. Ask questions about the individuals in the team, people always like to talk about themselves and it will take the heat off you.

As with the traditional interview situation always be yourself and avoid exaggerating, do not lie as this could well backfire. Try to enjoy the occasion and make the most of the opportunity to find out as much about the firm, the department and the people as possible in order to make an informed decision about the position you have applied for.