

A TRAINEE SOLICITOR SURGERY EBOOK

21
Secrets



To Successful Applications

Introduction

There is still surprisingly little information available about what actually goes on in the real world when it comes to the recruitment of trainee solicitors by law firms.

This ebook is a new and improved version of our 2010 ebook which was produced to try to fill in some of the blanks about trainee solicitor recruitment. Its now full of much more content which aims to give you an insight into some of the secrets to bear in mind when making applications for training contracts and vacation schemes.

It also aims to give you an idea about what is really going on within the recruitment processes of many law firms.

By reading this ebook and applying its contents you should be able to improve your chances of succeeding with your applications for training contracts and/or legal work experience.

Good luck!

The Trainee Solicitor Surgery Team



Don't be afraid to sell yourself

You may not know it but you are a sales person. When you are making applications for vacation schemes and training contracts you should treat it as a sales job.

One of the golden rules of sales is to sell the benefits not the features. Now it may be taking the analogy too far to say that trying to get a training contract is like trying to sell a Hoover but there are similarities.

To sell a Hoover you need to sell the benefits to the customer. And to sell the benefits you may first have to find out a bit about the customer to know which things about the Hoover will benefit them. You can then explain to them the benefits to them of certain features such as it being bag-less or easy to store.

When it comes to selling yourself to a law firm in your applications you need to do similar things. Firstly, you need to find out about the firm so you know what they are after and what will benefit them. Thankfully, most firms provide you with much of these details in their graduate recruitment materials or in their

job descriptions. They will say what they are looking for, what they see as important in their trainees, etc.

Far too many applicants miss these signposts and just plough on regardless with the sort of application they think the firm will want to receive. However, if you first find out all the things the firm has said about itself and what it is after this is a much more solid foundation for your application.

Once you have done this you then need to sell to them the fact that you, the 'product', can deliver these things for them. You sell to them the benefits of having you as an employee and how the main benefit is that you can fulfil the role they are seeking to fill.

With this knowledge you can then proceed with tailoring your application specifically to the firm in question. Think about the skills, attributes and competencies they are after and then work hard on drafting your applications to display them in yourself.

Do you have your sales pitch ready?

Now that you know you are a sales person, what is your sales pitch to be?

This is not the time to be shy or under confident. Whilst you want to steer clear of arrogance or self-serving statements about how great you are you can be assertive here.

Talk about the skills and attributes you have in very positive terms and back them up with evidence from your experience.

Don't make the mistake that a large number of applicants make and just list out all of your experience without referring to the skills you used and developed. Also mention what you learnt. All the time you should also be thinking "what is relevant to the role of a trainee solicitor or solicitor?".

The temptation for many applicants is to try to list every detail of the work they did in a 3 day legal work experience placement, for example. This can lead to the real benefit, eg the skills used, being buried in the list of details about what was done, on what case, about what issues, etc.

It can also lead to applicants trying to use the work they did on work experience as the reason why they should get the job. The actual work you did will not get you the job - its more the fact that

you undertook the work experience in the first place and that you had experience using some of the skills you would use as a solicitor. This then adds to the bigger picture of you seeking out some experience in order to help you make decisions about, firstly, wanting a career in law and, secondly, what sort of firm you might want to train in.

Your sales pitch, therefore, needs to be a considered balance of the skills and learnings from your various pieces of experience. This is not only from legal work experience but also from non-legal work experience, volunteering, positions of responsibility you have held and your interests and activities.

Sell yourself as a well-rounded individual who is more than just an academic, who has taken an active interest in the legal profession and finding out which route you want to take in your legal career. Also sell the fact that you have developed and displayed various skills from your experience and interests to date that are relevant to being a solicitor.

This way you are much more likely to 'close' the sale and have the firm buying your services pursuant to a training contract.

Checking your skills bank account

It is advisable that before you start writing even the first word of a CV or application form that you assess your 'skills bank account'.

Everybody has their own unique bank account of skills in which we are hopefully continually making deposits as we develop further skills.

The skills bank account can have various skills in there such as knowledge related skills, which are commonly learned during our education, technical skills learnt in our practical training, and work and personal skills which can be learnt in most areas of life.

Before making any applications it is important to sit down and list out all the skills you have. Once you have done this then you can divide them into skills that are relevant to the job of a solicitor and skills that aren't. If you have developed good analytical skills then they will go into the list relevant to solicitors and if you are a national pole dancing champion that can probably stay on the 'not relevant to solicitors' list.

Once you have completed the list that is relevant to the work of a solicitor then this is now your 'solicitor skills bank account'. It is important to think a bit laterally here to make sure you include all of those non-legal, non-technical skills that are still relevant to the job of a solicitor. For example, you may have worked as part of a

team in a sport or a volunteering project. Teamwork is an important skill of a solicitor so you need to include this.

Once you have your list you then need to put it into a simple table with two columns. The list of skills goes into the first column and in the second column you add the best examples of where you have used, developed and displayed that skill.

Now you will have an incredibly useful snapshot of your skills and experience which you can use to help you complete all future applications. All you need to do is take a look at the individual firm's graduate recruitment materials and job description to get a sense of what they are looking for and then draw from your skills bank the things that are most relevant and will display to the firm that you have what they are looking for.

Is your skills bank account in credit or overdrawn?

If you are serious about your applications for vacation schemes and training contracts then you must have gone through the skills bank account exercise or similar.

If you don't then it's often a sign that you don't want to see the results for some reason. Usually this is because you feel that you don't have enough skills or that you don't have the relevant skills.

Without doing the brainstorming exercise and committing these things to paper then you will never know. Often candidates will do this exercise thinking they don't have enough skills and experience and when they are finished they are pleasantly surprised and much more confident about their applications.

Once you have done the exercise you will get a good bird's eye view of yourself as a candidate and be able to see whether your skills bank account is in credit or overdrawn.

If you feel that you are light on skills and/or experience then the best time to do something about that is now. It is never too late. Do not become one of the applicants who knows there is a skills/experience shortage on their CV but buries their head in the sand and hopes they might get lucky with their applications.

You will hardly need telling that the job market is very competitive at the moment. Therefore you bury your head in the sand at your peril. The good news, however, is that there are a large number of applicants who will not even have this knowledge let alone be doing anything about it.

Therefore if you can take positive action now to top up your skills bank account through additional experience you will increase your chances of success significantly.

Even if your skills bank account is looking very healthy, until you secure a job it is advisable to continue to seek out experiences, activities and interests that will allow you to use and develop skills which are relevant to the job of a solicitor. This will not only give you a bigger pool of things to use on your applications but also more things to use in interviews as a way of backing up what you are saying about yourself. It also shows that you are a pro-active person who is keen to be taking on new challenges and learning new things which always goes down well with law firms.

Recruiters are busy people

The very people you want to impress with your training contract applications are likely to be busy people. In fact, if you assume that every person who considers your training contract applications is an extremely busy person this will stand you in good stead when you are preparing them. The ultimate decision makers will often be partners in law firms who, as well as being practising lawyers, will be managing staff and most likely playing some other part in the running of the law firm.

You must therefore help them and make it easy for them to say yes to you, or at least put you on the 'Maybe' pile. Put yourself in their shoes for a moment. If you were a busy law firm partner who had several hundred applications to go through, what would you prefer?

Would you prefer to be met with a covering letter with short paragraphs of text and plenty of white space or a covering letter with large blocks of text in small font which is set out in order to get as many words on the page as possible? Would you prefer to see a three page CV with lots of long paragraphs of text or a two page CV broken up into sections and with the information arranged with the use of bullet points and plenty of white space?

As a former 'busy recruiter' I know which one I preferred. This may seem obvious but there are still far too many people who forget this as soon as they face the challenge of getting all their relevant information into their applications.



Help recruiters see your best bits

If you are going to go to the trouble of helping the busy recruiter review your application, you should also make sure you help them see your best bits. Clearly, you have all got lots going for you but, at first, the recruiter will only want to know your best bits. They can then go on to consider the rest of you when they get into the details of your application or at interview.

Do you think that same busy recruiter would want to read a covering letter or application form that crams in point after point after point about what you have to offer? Or do you think they would prefer to be able to easily read through your covering letter or application form and hear about one or two of your best bits of experience and/or attributes, and your main reason for applying to that firm?

Again the answer may seem obvious but you would be surprised how many applicants try to convince the recruiter why they should choose them by packing in too many points. Some applicants seem to lack the confidence, or the knowledge, to put only their edited highlights in the covering letter or critical areas of the application form and leave the rest for the CV or other parts of the application forms.



Recruiters are used to good presentation

The majority of law firms pride themselves on the presentation of their letters and their documents. Many will use trained legal secretaries who are particularly good at using word processing software such as Microsoft Word to produce their documents for them.

The norm for anyone working for a law firm, therefore, is to see professionally drafted letters and well formatted and presented documents, eg litigation papers, commercial contracts, on a daily basis. Anyone involved in trainee solicitor recruitment will also have seen many CV's, covering letters and application forms and will therefore know how these should or should not be presented.

If you want to make a good first impression with your applications, therefore, do not disappoint recruiters with their presentation. The saying "first impressions count" is even particularly relevant to training contract applications as each law firm will receive a large number of applications and is therefore able to use first impressions as a reason to reject an applicant and still have plenty of other good applicants left to choose from.

Whilst you do not need to become as proficient at word processing as a legal secretary, you do need to know the basics in order to make your documents look clean, well presented and professional. These skills are not necessarily taught at school or university but there are plenty of other sources of information and training.

The internet has a great deal of free information and tutorials about word processing, document creation, etc. You might also be able to find free or cheap courses at your local night school or run through local libraries. There are also plenty of books which teach the necessary 'how to'.

Making this additional effort will set your applications apart from many of the others so it is well worthwhile.

Mistakes can be the death of your applications

As well as taking care over your presentation you must also take great care over the content of your applications, in particular the avoidance of mistakes.

This does not just mean that you should avoid obvious mistakes or too many mistakes. It means there should be no mistakes whatsoever, that's none, zip, zilch, nada - do you get the point?! Most lawyers are paid to have a very keen eye for detail - they are also paid to look for mistakes, holes in arguments, etc. If a mistake is going to jump out at anyone it will be a lawyer who is considering your application.

You must double and triple check every aspect of your applications - every paragraph, sentence, word, letter, piece of punctuation, grammar, etc. Even one misplaced or misused full stop can cause your application to hit the 'No' pile. Always get someone else to review your applications as well as you will often become blind to mistakes that others may pick up easily.

When you are checking your applications for mistakes beware the curse of spell-check. By all means use it in the first stage of your editing process but do not under any circumstances rely on a clean bill of health from a spellchecker as approval that your documents are spelling mistake free.

Spell check will not pick up a misspelt 'from' which is spelt 'form', for example, and many spellcheckers will check from the perspective of the American spelling of words. The presence of any spelling mistakes as a result says to a recruiter that you haven't checked your application thoroughly enough and have therefore either not taken enough time over it or do not have the requisite eye for detail which is needed by that firm. This in itself could move your application onto the 'No' pile.

Trying too hard and over complicating things

Many applicants feel like they have to impress a recruiter with the wording they use in their applications. This can often lead to over-complicated wording or use of unnecessary wording. Whilst a recruiter will want to read something that is well written they will not necessarily be impressed with long, fancy words which seem to be thrown in for effect.

They are more likely to be impressed by something that is written in plain English and is simple and easy to read. To communicate your message simply is actually more of a skill than to write long and convoluted paragraphs.

You should not therefore try too hard to impress with clever wording. Instead, read and re-read what you have written and take out all unnecessary words. Try to use the least amount of words possible to make the point you want to make.

For example, it is much better to give the recruiter a simple but heartfelt and well thought out reason for wanting to work at that firm than to give a long winded explanation of every reason you want to work there. They will thank you for having eliminated the waffle and given them the key points in a simple format.



Your target may be guarded by many lines of defence

Recruiters may well not be the first line of defence between you and that elusive training contract interview. Many firms will have more junior members of staff such as trainees or their secretarial staff who are responsible for the first review of training contract applications when they first come in. They will have been given some basic criteria by which they should conduct the first round of filtering of the applications. These are usually objective criteria such as academic grades as opposed to other more subjective criteria which allow for any discretion to be used.

Many of the bigger firms who accept applications via their standard on-line application forms will in fact have a piece of software that can perform an initial review against these objective criteria and automatically reject applicants who don't meet them.

Other law firms will have their support staff perform this task manually but the outcome will be the same. An example might be where the software, or the person reviewing an application, comes across a candidate who does not have a 2:1 then they will automatically put that person onto the 'No' pile to receive a rejection letter. The actual recruiter will therefore never get to see these applications and consider those applicants further.

This may seem harsh to some but, provided this information is known in advance, it can save a lot of time on wasted applications. It is obvious that you cannot change your grades in order to avoid this pre-selection. However, what you can do is ensure you are not applying to firms which have a clear policy to filter out candidates who do not meet certain requirements.

One of the most important things you can do when researching where to apply, therefore, is to ensure you check firms' minimum requirements carefully. Not only should you check the advertising for specific training contract vacancies very carefully but also every other piece of literature or other materials relating to the firm's graduate/trainee recruitment. If any of these mention minimum requirements in respect of your degree or the number of UCAS points, for example, do not waste your time applying to them unless you are able to find an alternative route to apply through, as set out in the following section.

More than one way to skin a cat

It may be possible to get your application considered by a firm despite you not meeting their published minimum requirements. However, this approach should be considered sparingly. If you feel there are either mitigating circumstances that compensate for the fact you fall below their requirements or you feel you have something else that will be of particular value to them, and which is probably quite unique, then you may still consider applying. However, you will need to find another way to submit your application.

What you will need to do is to find a different route by which to get access to the recruiter, whether directly or via someone else who could introduce you to them. Some of the ways to do this are:

- Law fairs
- Law firm open days
- Legal work experience (although the application process for this may have its own minimum requirements)
- Local business networking groups
- On-line networking such as LinkedIn
- Introduction from a family friend or other contact

- Write to them about something else or in a different manner so as to circumvent the application process
- Cold telephone call and see if you can get to speak to them to explain your situation and sell yourself
- Personally visit their offices and try to get 5 minutes with them

All of these have varying degrees of difficulty attached and you will have to balance them with how much you want to work for that firm and the time you have available to devote to your job hunting.



Are you genuine or a fake?

If you are going to go to all the time, effort and expense of studying and training to be a solicitor then its worth exploring where your interests lie. What sort of law would you like to work with and which sort of firms might you want to train at.

For many, however, making these sorts of decisions can prove difficult. This is usually because they have not gained enough experience or done enough research into the different areas of law and law firms out in the real world.

So when it comes to applying for jobs it can prove difficult to be able to express a genuine interest in the firm they are applying to and the areas of law they practice.

Given that the firm will be receiving applications from other candidates who do have a very genuine and well thought out desire to work at that firm the fakes will be at a disadvantage.

As a recruiter, it can be fairly obvious when someone is applying to the firm without any real reasons as to why. If you do not know much about the law that firm practices and how the firm and their legal sector operates then this will be apparent from your applications.

The solution therefore is to ensure that you are doing plenty of reading of the legal press as well as seeking out a wider variety of work experience.

This will then help you with your own decision making and developing your own interests which can dictate your career path. It will also mean that you will find your applications much easier to write and they will be more genuine and passionate as a result.

Finally, if and when you get to interview, you will have something to talk about and will be able to use your genuine interest as a way of selling yourself to the firm.



Recruiters recruit in their own, and their firm's, image

Every law firm has its own distinct culture and its own personality. This is created by the collection of the individuals who work there and their respective personalities, values and ambitions. When it comes to recruitment, firms will always look to recruit people who fit in with their culture as well as being up to the job.

It can therefore pay to spend some time trying to get a sense of firms' cultures when you are at the researching stage about which types of firms you are going to apply to. Some firms are very traditional and serious whereas others are more modern and laid back. By researching this aspect of a firm it can help you tailor your application accordingly so as to present yourself more in the firm's image than not.

If you can also find out some information about the person who is going to be reviewing your application and conducting interviews this is even better. Most firms have a website nowadays which gives details about the people who work there so this should always be reviewed. If the firm has a hard copy or on-line brochure this should also be requested and reviewed.

In addition to the firm's marketing materials there are many resources both on-line and off-line that have plentiful information about firms and their staff. These include the Legal 500 and Chambers and Partners publications and the LawCareers.Net and All About Law websites. It is also worth conducting a search of the recruiter and other partners at the law firm via the search engines to see what other information you can find about them.

Once you have reviewed the various pieces of information that are out there you will then be much better placed to align your applications with that firm's image.

Finally, don't forget to search for, and read, any profiles of the firm's current or former trainee solicitors to get an idea about the sort of people the firm typically recruits.

You need to show the recruiter you care

You need to show the recruiter that you care about their firm and you really want to work there. You want to make them feel like you want to work for them over and above every other firm, not that they are one of many firms you are applying to just to enable you to get a training contract.

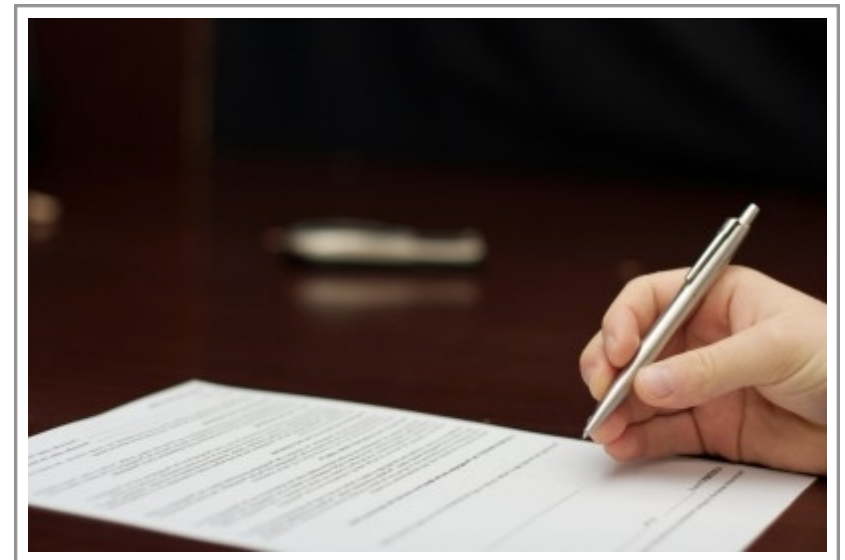
Think of it being a bit like dating. People do not want to be asked out on a date solely because they are single and available. Instead they want to be asked on a date because there is something about them that the other person likes. They need to know that the other person cares.

The same goes for law firms. They do not want you to apply to them just because they are one of the many firms out there that are available (ie offering training contracts). Instead they want you to convince them that there is something about them that you particularly like and that is why you are interested in them.

As well as showing that you are interested in them, you also need to show that you have made an effort to impress them. If you display to them a lack of care and effort by having mistakes in your applications then that may well be the end of a very short relationship.

Nothing screams you might not care enough than mistakes in your applications. Going back to the dating analogy, this can be seen as the equivalent of forgetting someone's name on a first date.

Therefore, ensure you display to the recruiter that you have made an effort, that you have a genuine interest in their firm and that you really care about them and the training contract they have on offer.



Beware interpersonal skills

When we say beware interpersonal skills we are not saying you should not work hard to practice and develop yours. What we mean is that you shouldn't just bandy around the term "interpersonal skills" all over your applications and interviews.

Many candidates fail because they make self-serving statements about the skills they have without necessarily backing them up with any evidence of where these were gained and used. "Interpersonal skills" is one of the classics and has been around ever since it became a buzz phrase in the 1990's.

Whilst they are clearly important, please do not talk about your interpersonal skills unless in the same breath you go on to identify which of these skills you are referring to. Also ensure that when you have referred to the skill in question that you put an example forward of where you have used or developed it.

Interpersonal skills can also mean different things to different people and the phrase is therefore a fairly broad church. Examples of interpersonal skills which are relevant to the job of a solicitor are teamwork (with people at all levels), relationship building, collaboration, leadership and even compassion.

These interpersonal skills can be displayed by many different pieces of experience and can range from legal work experience to other non-legal work experience and volunteering.

Many are also used and developed particularly well when participating in clubs, societies and sports teams and through other interests and activities.



Beating Procrastination

I'm sure many of you will have experienced procrastination in its many forms - its a fact of life for many of us. However there are things you can do you overcome it and to help you with your applications.

Procrastination is that feeling of being a bit stuck and unable to move forward with whatever you are doing. Procrastination can come about for a few reasons but the main one is because of fear.

You may fear failure or you may fear what people think. Much of this can be happening on a more subconscious level too so its not always easy to identify it obviously as fear.

Now without wanting to get too psychological and self-helpy on you, there are some ways to break through that fear and therefore the procrastination.

The first step is to sit for a moment and examine what you are thinking and analyse why you may think that you are fearful of failure or what others think. Weirdly you may even be afraid of success and this can lead to procrastination too.

Once you identify these thoughts then just decide to let them go - recognise that they are limiting thoughts and let go of them.

The next thing to do is to make sure you are not feeling sorry for yourself. This may sound a bit harsh but often we can stop ourselves moving forwards because we are feeling sorry for ourself. Just choose to stop this now and move on more positively.

Another major reason for procrastination is because we feel the task at hand is too big. Researching those firms, making all those applications and still trying to study and work at the same time all seems like too big a mountain to climb - but that's simply not true.

At the start of your degree if you looked at all the work that needed to be done over the 3 or 4 years then you would have felt overwhelmed for sure. But when your university breaks it down into smaller chunks spaced evenly across the weeks it suddenly becomes much more achievable.

A famous quote which is good to remember is “You can eat a whole elephant if you take it one bite at a time”. The same goes for your applications and dealing with your procrastination.

Focus on what's important and park what's not

It is easy to feel overwhelmed particularly when you are trying to juggle uni, applications and maybe even a job. This feeling may be accentuated by the fact that you may not be confident in how to make your applications and how to compete with the many other applicants for training contracts and vacation schemes.

Following on from the previous section, one good question to ask yourself in order to help you beat procrastination is "If not now, then when?"

A big factor in people not moving forward and getting their applications done is that they get stuck in procrastination. They focus on too many other things that aren't important in the big scheme of things - or at least when compared to making numerous quality job applications.

They don't feel they can move forward because it's a very big job and they are focussing on other details which may not be important.

If you are procrastinating therefore, an important step is to understand that you should only be doing what is important. Write a list of all the things you supposedly "need" to do. Whatever you put on that list that isn't that important cross it out - it doesn't even need to be on your "to be procrastinated" list. If

you want to put it on another list to be looked at in a few months time when your applications are done then fine but physically get it off your current list.

Now you need to schedule some time in to finalise a proper "to do" list, and prioritise it and then schedule some time in each week to work on your applications.

You do not need to do them all at once and you want to be fresh and motivated each time you work on them. This means having a set block of time where you work undistracted on your applications as if they were a bit of course work.

Also look at your other habits to see whether watching a couple of hours less TV a week or spending an hour or two less on social media sites is worth doing to ensure you have plenty of time to get over your procrastination and get your applications done.

Recruiters are looking for reasons to reject you!

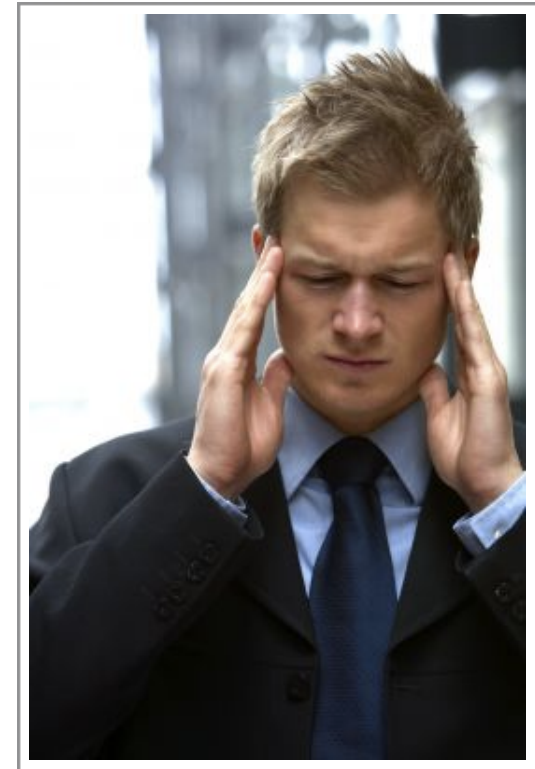
Recruiters are on the whole good-hearted people who want you to do well with your applications. However, they also have to consider many other people who they want to do well too and they do not want to be seen to make a mistake. Therefore, they look for reasons to reject candidates as a way to thin out the numbers before offering interviews.

This means that they will be reviewing your application with a critical eye and if they find a reason to reject you they will not give you a second chance or start hunting around in your application for mitigating or redeeming factors.

You must therefore eliminate all the reasons a firm might reject you that are within your control. Obviously, if you have already taken certain exams and the firm does not like your grades then there is nothing you can do about this. However, with the things you do have control over, as set out in this ebook, you must ensure that you have fully considered them and, where applicable, applied them to the best of your ability.

By doing this, you will have the best chance of your applications being successful and provided they are strong enough in substance then you will be invited in for interview.

The good news is that many applicants still do not know how to put together a successful application so by taking some time to improve yours you will be giving yourself a better chance than many others.



Motivating yourself to make numerous applications

Lets be honest, there are going to be many times when the prospect of having to do some work on your applications isn't going to be the most appealing thought.

Applications are hard work and they take a lot of time. You are also going to need to be making quite a few of them. Therefore you need to make sure you can motivate yourself to do them otherwise you risk missing the boat.

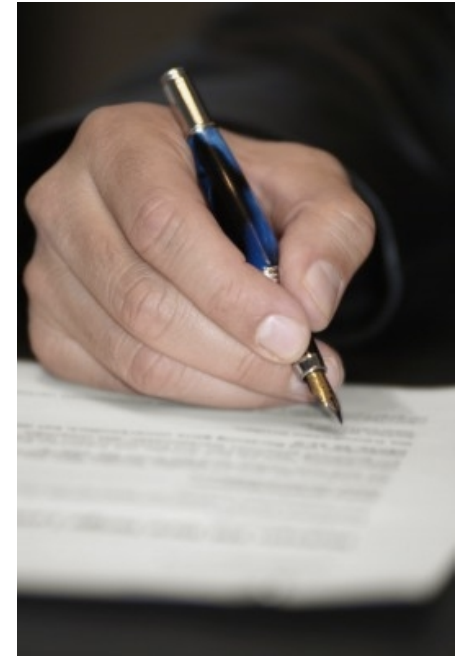
To motivate yourself remind yourself of what you want to achieve and where you want to go with your life. What is your purpose and what are your goals in life?

The time that you spend researching and completing your applications will build the bridge between where you are now and where you want to be in the future.

Dare to succeed. Personal achievement is incredibly fulfilling but it often requires hard work. If you recognise this and then plan to schedule the necessary work in then you can get a real sense of achievement and feeling of moving towards your goals every time you complete a session of work on your applications. Remember to think about eating the elephant one bite at a time.

The difference between an average outcome and a successful outcome from your applications is, more often than not, down to motivation and effort. This is both in terms of researching the firms and areas of law and in terms of putting the applications together.

Whilst this may be quite a sobering thought its actually very good news for you. Its good news because many people do not, and will not, consistently put in this effort. This in itself should motivate you to do so as it will set you apart from many of your peers and drastically increase your chances of success.



Don't fall at the last hurdle

Most candidates know that there is a lot of hard work needed to produce multiple applications to a high enough standard to have a chance of success.

However, even with this knowledge, some candidates make a mistake right at the end of the application process which can easily be avoided.

Having done all the hard work they forget to check some basic but important details. Firstly, before you even start the application you should be checking the deadline for applications.

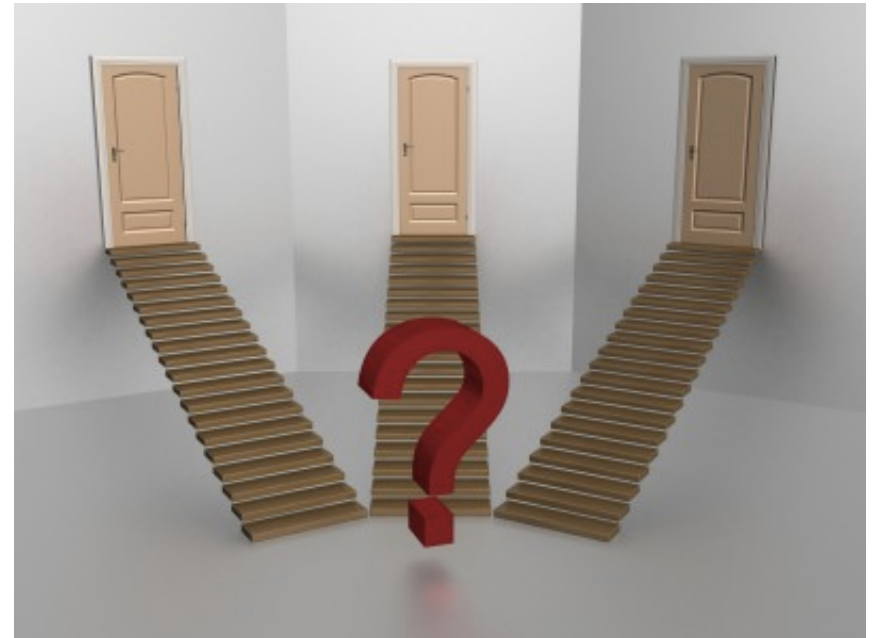
Deadlines do vary and can be subject to change so always ensure you check the deadlines on LawCareers.Net first and then phone each firm before you apply just to double check their deadline.

Whilst you're at it you can also check the name of the person to address your application to (if applicable) as the names published on the internet and in other publications are sometimes out of date. You do not want to give the firm an easy reason to reject you by writing to the wrong person!

Always make sure you double check these details just before you submit your application as you never know when they might

change and you would not want a change to affect your chances of success.

Finally, where you are making a written application that requires a covering letter please make sure you check you have signed the letter before you post or email it. You will be surprised how easy it can be to send an unsigned letter when you think you have finished all the hard work of the application and are rushing to get the application out.



And finally...10 common mistakes to avoid

As a summary and reminder here are 10 of the most common mistakes made by applicants which are sure to turn a prospective employer off:

1. **Lack of consideration** - some candidates do not spend enough time considering which area of law suits them best and into which type of law firm they will best fit. A lack of this sort of research and decision-making can often be very apparent to recruiters when reviewing applications.
2. **Not getting to know the firm** - when applicants find themselves making several applications it can be tempting to try to write a one-size-fits-all application to send to every firm. This means that the applicant does not fully research the firm they are applying to. This can stand out a mile amongst a batch of other applications from applicants who have done their research on the firm. At the very least, applicants should have a good read of the firm's website and the recent press relating to the firm and be sure to make the application show that this research has been done.
3. **Showing the love** - many applicants fail to convey why they feel the firm is the best firm for them. Again, this is about avoiding the scattergun, one-size-fits-all approach to applications. Firms like to read that applicants have carefully considered why they are applying to this firm and why they consider it to be the firm

for them. Firms (and their recruiters) have egos too but don't go overboard as they will probably pick up on you being false.

4. **Showing interest in the law** - firms like to see that this application isn't your first sign of having an interest in the law. Some form of law related work experience, vacation schemes, work shadowing, field trips, etc would usually be seen on successful applications.
5. **Dishonesty/truth bending** - being dishonest on an application is never advisable. Apart from being wrong, recruiters can often pick up on half truths and it becomes very easy to contradict yourself and forget which answers you have given.



10 common mistakes...continued

6. **Poor language and spelling** - given that applicants will be required to have an eye for detail in their work, it is inexcusable for an application to contain grammar and spelling mistakes. Not rushing applications, using spell and grammar check on word processors and proofreading several times over will help to avoid this. To recruiters, writing mistakes are, as Billy Connolly would say, about as welcome as a fart in a spacesuit!
7. **Using inappropriate language** - an applicant's language should be natural, clear and concise. Trying to be too clever with your language, or using slang or colloquialisms, will usually stand out like a sore 'primary digit on the hand'! You need to impress with the content a lot more than with the words used. Humour, whilst not a complete no-no, should be used with caution - this is something you can bring more into an interview situation than at the written application stage.
8. **Inappropriate stationery/layouts** - if the application is required to be submitted on paper rather than on-line it should be sent on a good quality, heavier weight, white or cream paper - no coloured paper to stand out unless you are a stand out candidate yourself (and even then its best avoided). Also, ensure the layouts of CV's and covering letters are professional and do not include any decoration, frills, different colours/fonts, etc.

9. **Cutting and pasting** - there are various examples of applications out there, some of which are useful to read at the research stage. However, it is never recommended that you cut and paste any part of an application from another source. Not only may you be infringing copyright but it may be picked up by recruiters and will never read as well as your own well thought out answers.

10. **Ducking the question** - if you find yourself faced with a question that you do not want to answer because it might reveal a weakness in you, or because you maybe don't have the experience, always be honest. Never try to fudge an answer so that it doesn't really answer the question or give the information requested. Bear in mind that all weaknesses can be turned into strengths if you put some thought into them.

An applicant who eliminates these mistakes will have a much better chance of landing a training contract than an applicant who doesn't.

Ignore at your peril and the best of luck with your applications!

Do you want to improve your applications?



This ebook was written by me, Matt Oliver - founder of the Trainee Solicitor Surgery website.

I am a former solicitor and recruiter of trainees and now, amongst other things, I coach lawyers on their careers. I can also help you ACHIEVE SUCCESS WITH YOUR APPLICATIONS.

Following demand from Trainee Solicitor Surgery readers a couple of years ago, I started to provide PERSONALISED CAREERS ADVICE to a limited number of applicants for training contracts and vacation schemes.

Despite the highly competitive job market I am proud to have helped many applicants secure interviews and training contracts with their chosen firms.

For many like John, their applications were transformed:

“The end result was a CV and covering letter unrecognisable from the ones I started with. The clarity of the layout and the concise nature of the content within had finally allowed me to present myself in a way that had so obviously been missing.”

To find out more about how I can HELP YOU IMPROVE YOUR APPLICATIONS

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