The student’s guide to the leading law firms and sets in the UK

e-Edition

chambers-student.com
make the difference
to your career, clients and community
START YOUR CAREER IN LAW
CAREER FOCUSED LAW COURSES

Our range of law courses focus on building practical legal skills so you have the best opportunity to achieve your career ambitions.

From the GDL, MA Law, LPC and BPTC for aspiring lawyers, to our specialist Master’s Programmes in Law, we offer courses whatever your aspirations.

Find out more law.ac.uk/postgraduate

*97% of our full-time 2016/17 and accelerated 2017/17 LPC students graduating in summer 2017 secured employment, a training contract, or further study within nine months of successfully completing their course.

**71% of our full-time UK/EEA BPTC students graduating in 2017 secured a pupillage within one year of successfully completing their course.
Travers Smith is everything you could want from a law firm.

First-rate training and market-leading work alongside some of the City’s finest lawyers. Prestigious clients. The opportunity to progress. And all in a supportive, non-hierarchical and inclusive environment.
Chambers Student Guide 2021
Editors’ foreword

The world has changed forever – we’re all a bit bored of hearing chilling truths like this. It may be factual, but after students have endured such a rough spell, we could do with something more comforting and familiar. Happily, we’ve seen the average NQ salary continue its steady increase in the face of 2020’s drama, and the indications are that trainee retention is not a disaster. Although it’s early days, the mood is of opportunity, not panic.

And, to be blunt, some shift in the dynamics in this profession was long overdue. The UK-US firm model of being office-bound at antisocial hours had become outdated, incompatible with modern family life and taking its toll on diversity and mental health. We learnt in our research this year that if firms fail to look after their trainees’ mental health, they will soon leave in high numbers. In every True Picture this year, we ask trainees to examine their firms’ handling of stress and wellbeing. For so many, this new remote-lawyer life is not unwelcome.

Just when students could do with a break, the new frenzy of online marketing from the profession will overwhelm many. Deciphering truth from spin and clarity from clamour is the challenge. Luckily, our research team devotes itself to that very task.

With covid-19, Brexit and tech all reshaping the legal landscape, it can be easy to forget that the route to qualifying as a solicitor is set to change completely in autumn 2021. With the introduction of the Solicitors Qualifying Exam (the SQE to its friends), entry into the legal profession may become more accessible than ever before, with the need to do a formal training contract swept away in favour of 24 months of legal work experience. Does this mean goodbye to the old model? Don’t bet on it – firms will largely continue to recruit trainees as they always have. With just 37.3% of our trainee survey respondents rating their law school as good value for money, potentially lower costs will also be very welcome...

Just as the entry points to the profession are changing, so too are the long-term aspirations of trainees. This year’s research showed only 18.8% of firms’ most recent recruits decisively plan to make partner at the firm they train at. Lateral moves between firms and to client companies are becoming more and more common. That doesn’t mean students reading this need a 30-year career plan; given how many new opportunities are being created in the legal world every year, flexibility will be a big strength for the solicitors of tomorrow.

When you pictured your future as a lawyer, video meetings and working from home in your slippers probably didn’t feature. But here we are. Amid news of cutbacks and belt-tightening, it’s easy to focus on negative headlines, but law students shouldn’t despair. As was the case after the 2008 financial crash, firms are adjusting to a changing landscape. Clients’ questions and concerns may change, but their need for legal advice will not. Lawyers today have a key role to play in supporting clients, whether it’s an insolvency, employment or insurance problem. One sure positive that’s come out of the chaos has been the huge shift in attitudes to remote working. Magic circle firm Linklaters has already committed to a 50/50 split between office and home post-pandemic. Invest in a quality pair of slippers, we say (just make sure your top half is always Zoom ready).

We recently learnt from the Bar Council that 46% of the most junior barristers (those with up to two years’ experience) had suffered a 70% reduction in fee income as a result of the pandemic. So much has been achieved in recent years to widen access at the junior end of the profession, but with the pandemic, there is the fear that these hard-won gains could be reduced or lost. The junior end of the profession is at once the most diverse yet the most vulnerable in a recession.

But there are some positives arising from this year. Law firms and sets of chambers alike are realising that virtual recruitment strategies are an essential tool for reaching a more diverse pool of candidates. With fewer barriers to attending interview and networking, we hope that this reliance on virtual processes will remain and increase social mobility in the law.

Our 2020 research highlighted some highs and lows in D&I. London firms were deemed to be performing better on D&I, and women were no less happy than men with their trainee experience. But we also found firms need to work harder to retain women and minority ethnic trainees longer than a couple of years. Keep in touch with our newsletter over the coming months as we build on our hub of frank and in-depth discussion on these important topics.

Antony Cooke, Editor
Michael Bird, Deputy Editor
Leah Henderson, Deputy Editor
Paul Rance, Deputy Editor
Our Editorial Team

Antony Cooke
Editor. Graduated from Durham University in Russian & French. Taught English at St. Petersburg State University. Previously worked at Michelin as a European project manager, and at PricewaterhouseCoopers as an audit associate in Investment Management. Fluent in Russian and French.

Sal Francis Morton
Graduated from Queen Mary, University of London with a BA in Drama, receiving the Sylvia Perry Prize for Outstanding Contribution. Has previously worked in education.

Paul Rance
Deputy Editor. Graduated from Exeter University with a First in English Literature, and also spent a year abroad at the University of Toronto to read Canadian literature. He completed his MA in English at UCL in 2010.

Ayesha Hayat
Analyst and Content Writer. Graduated with a BA in History and Hispanic Studies from the University of Birmingham. Previously worked as an English tutor during a year abroad in Seville and was a student ambassador for the University of Birmingham’s College of Arts and Law.

Leah Henderson
Deputy Editor. MA Journalism graduate. Previously worked as a business English teacher in Madrid. Graduated with an MA with Distinction in Journalism in 2015, and a BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Glasgow in 2014.

Joel Poultney
Research Analyst and Content Writer. Graduated from Exeter University in 2016 with a BA in History and Politics. Following this, received an MA in Creative Writing from the same institution.

Michael Bird
Deputy Editor. Graduated from Royal Holloway, University of London with a BA in History. Prior to Chambers, Michael worked for US-based entertainment websites, and continues to review music in his spare time.

Nikolai Viedge
Research Analyst and Content Writer. Former academic, Nikolai got his PhD from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2014 and worked as a post-doctoral fellow and lecturer in South Africa before relocating to the UK in 2019.

Natalie Bertram
Assistant Editor. Graduated in 2016 from the University of Exeter with a BA in English Literature. Freelances as a proofreader in her free time.

Olivia O’Driscoll
Research Analyst and Content Writer. Graduated in 2019 from Bournemouth University, with a BA in English. During her time at university, Olivia did a year in industry and interned at various companies, including a newspaper where she worked as a trainee journalist.

Harry Cerasale
Senior Researcher. Graduated in 2015 with a BA in History from the University of Nottingham. Has previously worked as an English teacher in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Rhia Lyon
Research Analyst and Content Writer. Graduated with a BA (Hons) degree in German from King’s College London in 2017, before completing a Postgraduate Diploma in Journalism from the London School of Journalism. She has spent time living in Vienna and studied Deutsche Philologie at Universität Wien. Rhia speaks advanced German.
## Contents

### 1: Becoming a Lawyer

- What kind of lawyer do you want to be? p.8
- Different types of law firm p.10
- What is a training contract? p.12

### 2: Preparation and Applications

- What are legal recruiters looking for? p.16
- Making successful applications p.19
- How to succeed at interviews and assessment days p.21
- Pro bono and volunteering p.24
- Vacation schemes p.26
- Vacation scheme deadlines p.29
- Training contract deadlines p.32

### 3: Law School

- The Solicitors Qualifying Exam (SQE) p.37
- An introduction to the SQE with ULaw p.41
- Solicitors’ timetable p.43
- Barristers’ timetable p.44
- The Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) p.45
- The Legal Practice Course (LPC) p.49
- The Bar Course p.52
- How to fund law school p.55
- Law school course providers p.57

### 4: Solicitors’ Practice Areas

- Arbitration: a beginner’s guide p.63
- Banking and finance p.66
- Capital markets p.68
- Competition/antitrust p.70
- Construction p.72
- Corporate/M&A p.74
- Crime p.76
- Employment p.78
- Environment p.80
- Family p.82
- Government and public policy p.84
- Human rights and immigration p.86
- Infrastructure and PPP p.88
- Insurance p.90
- Intellectual property p.93
- Litigation p.95
- Pensions p.98
- Personal injury p.100
- Private client and charities p.102
- Private equity and investment management p.104
- Projects and energy p.106
- Real estate p.108
- Restructuring and insolvency p.110
- Shipping p.112
- Sports, media and entertainment p.114
- Tax p.117
- Tech, telecoms and outsourcing p.119
Becoming a Lawyer

What kind of lawyer do you want to be?  p.8
Different types of law firm  p.10
What is a training contract?  p.12
Our ability to keep developing generations of first class lawyers is a reflection of our success in recruiting, retaining and promoting high-performing, talented individuals.

We believe in investing in people and recognise the need for life-long learning for all our lawyers – in both technical and soft skills.
What kind of lawyer do you want to be?

Let’s start with one of the most basic questions – do you want to be a barrister or a solicitor?

**Barrister**

At first glance the role of a barrister certainly looks a lot cooler than that of a solicitor. You know the deal – it’s all about striding into courtrooms, robes flowing, tense moments waiting for missing witnesses and razor-sharp cross-examinations. Glamorous? It’s downright sexy! The truth, of course, is that there’s a great deal more to it than looking fly in a wig...

Essentially barristers do three things:

- **Appear in court to represent others**
- **Give specialised legal advice in person or in writing**
- **Draft court documents**

The proportion of time spent on each depends on the type of law the barrister practises. There are various ‘Bars’ in England and Wales which each specialise in different areas of law. Criminal barristers are in court most of the time, often with only an hour or two's notice of the details of their cases. By contrast, commercial barristers spend most of their time in chambers, writing tricky opinions and advising in conference on complicated legal points.

Barristers must display the skill and clarity to make complex or arcane legal arguments accessible to lay clients, juries and the judiciary. Their style of argument must be clear and persuasive, both in court and on paper. It has been some time since barristers have had exclusive rights of audience in the courts though. Solicitors can train to become accredited advocates in even the higher courts.

This encroachment hasn’t been an utter disaster for the Bar, although solicitor advocates are handling more of the most straightforward cases. When it comes to more complicated and lengthy matters, barristers are usually still briefly to do the advocacy, not least because this is often the most cost-effective way of managing a case. As a point of interest, solicitor advocates do not wear the wig and gown and are referred to as ‘my friend’ rather than ‘my learned friend’. The Bar’s professional body is the Bar Council, and it is regulated by the Bar Standards Board (BSB).

Solicitors value barristers’ detailed knowledge of the litigation process and their ability to assess and advise on the merits and demerits of a case. A solicitor will pay good money for ‘counsel’s opinion’. Certainly, in the area of commercial law a barrister must understand the client’s perspective and use their legal knowledge to develop solutions that make business or common sense as well as legal sense. If you think a career as a barrister will allow you to rise above the rigours and scraping of modern-day capitalism, think again.

Of the UK’s 16,600 or so barristers, approximately 80% are self-employed. This is why you hear the expression ‘the independent Bar’. The remainder are employed by companies, public bodies or law firms, and they make up ‘the employed Bar’. To prevent independence from turning into isolation, barristers, like badgers, work in groups called ‘sets’, sharing premises and professional managers etc. Barristers do not work for their sets, just at their premises, and as ‘tenants’ they contribute to the upkeep of their chambers. A percentage of their earnings also goes to pay their clerks and administrators. Unlike employed barristers and solicitors, those at the independent Bar get no sickness pay, holiday pay, parental leave or monthly salary. What they do get is a good accountant.

To enter practice, law grads need to complete the Bar Course (formerly the BPTC, each course provider now gives it a different name) before starting a much sought-after year of pupillage at a barristers’ chambers or other employer. Non-law grads need to first complete the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) before taking the Bar Course. After pupillage, hopefully, the set you're with will take you on as a tenant, though if they don’t want you you may have to look elsewhere. Once tenancy is established, you’re home free (well, except for the gruelling schedule, high pressure, concerns over how much you’ll earn, dedicated wig maintenance...).

The competition to become a barrister is truly fierce. The main difficulty is that there are many more aspiring barristers than can possibly achieve a career at the Bar – for every three students enrolled on the BPTC there is only one pupillage available at the end.

If you want to know more, peruse the Bar section of this guide, where we provide details on the recruitment process, practice areas, terminology and the difficulties that aspiring barristers may encounter. The *Chambers Reports* give invaluable insight into the lives of pupils and junior barristers at some of the best sets.
Solicitor

Most lawyers qualify as solicitors: in fact, there are almost nine times as many solicitors as barristers in the UK. Their role is to provide legal services directly to lay clients, who could be individuals, companies (private or public) or other bodies. In short, clients come to solicitors for guidance on how to deal with their business or personal proposals and problems. These could be anything from drafting a will to defending a murder charge or buying a multibillion-pound business.

The solicitor advises on the steps needed to proceed and then manages the case or the deal for the client until its conclusion. They will bring in a barrister if and when a second opinion or specialist advocacy is needed. The solicitor’s role is much more like that of a project manager than the barrister’s.

According to the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA), there are just under 150,000 solicitors in England and Wales (as of July 2020), with practising certificates issued annually by the SRA. Roughly 66% are in ‘private practice’ in solicitors’ firms, and around 40% are employed in London. Many thousands work in-house for companies, charities or public authorities.

At present, those on the path into the solicitors’ profession attend law school after an undergraduate degree. Law grads need to take the Legal Practice Course (LPC). Non-law grads must first complete the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) before being eligible for the LPC.

‘The most common way of qualifying is by undertaking a two-year training contract with a firm of solicitors.’

Next comes the practical training. The most common way of qualifying is by undertaking a two-year training contract with a firm of solicitors, law centre, in-house legal team or public body. Much of the rest of this book deals with the nature of training contracts at different firms and how to procure one. The SRA’s website gives all the fine detail you could wish for as to the requirements for training.

Upon satisfactory completion of their training contract and the mandatory Professional Skills Course (PSC), a person can be admitted to the roll of those eligible to practise as a solicitor and apply for a practising certificate. They are then fully qualified.

Almost everything above is about to change, however. In 2021 the new Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) ‘superexam’ will be introduced. This ‘exam’ will actually consist of two sets of exams, one taken at the start of a two-year period of work experience and one at the end, which will replace the GDL and LPC. The requirement to do a formal training contract will disappear too. Such a traineeship will become just one way of completing the required two years of legal work experience, which can be gained at up to four different employers as a paralegal or working in a law clinic.

At the moment, where people often trip up is not being fully aware of when they should apply for a training contract. Most big employers recruit two years in advance. If you are studying law and you want to work in a commercial firm, the crucial time for research and applications is early on during your penultimate year at uni. If you are a non-law student intending to proceed straight to a GDL ‘conversion course’ before going to a commercial firm, you’ll have to juggle exams and career considerations in your final year. Smaller firms and high-street practices may recruit closer to the start date, and sometimes after a trial period of working as a paralegal.

Larger commercial firms more often than not cover the cost of their future trainees’ law school fees and other basic expenses. However, for students hoping to practise in smaller firms financial assistance is far from likely, and this can make law school a costly and uncertain endeavour.

Your choice of firm will shape the path of your career. A firm’s clients, its work and its reputation will determine not only the experience you gain but probably also your future marketability as a lawyer. At Chambers, we’ve made it our business to know who does what, how well they do it and what it might be like working at a particular firm.

The rankings of law firms and lawyers on chambers.com will also be an incredibly useful resource for you. These rankings show which firms command greatest respect from clients and other professionals in different areas of practice right across the world and in different UK regions. You can search the entire thing for free online and use it to help create a shortlist of firms which work in the areas you’re interested in.

In the True Picture section of this guide we’ve profiled 125 leading legal employers in England and Wales. Our goal is to help you understand what kind of firm might suit you and the kind of work you can expect to undertake when you get there. It is the product of many hundreds of interviews with trainees, and we think you’ll really benefit from making it your favourite bookmark on your smartphone or regular reading on the bus.

We’ve also interviewed recruiters, training partners and managing partners to give you the lowdown on firms’ business models, plans for the future and recruitment strategies. You should also read through the Solicitors’ practice areas section of this guide to gain an understanding of what’s involved in different fields of practice.
Different types of law firm

There are roughly 10,000 law firms in England and Wales. All offer a very different experience. The following will help you drill down.

**London: magic circle**
The membership of this club traditionally extends to Allen & Overy, Clifford Chance, Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, Linklaters, and Slaughter and May (though some exclude the latter, as it lacks a large network of overseas offices). To those for whom bigger deals, bigger money, bigger staff numbers... bigger *everything* is better, this is the place to be. Corporate and finance work dominates these firms, as do international big-bucks business clients. By organising their training on a massive scale, they can offer seemingly unlimited office facilities, great perks, overseas postings and excellent formal training sessions.

Although these five giants top many lists, not least for revenue and partner profits, consider carefully whether they’d top yours. Training in a magic circle firm is CV gold but not suited to everyone. One factor to consider is the requirement to work really long hours to keep profits fat and international clients happy. A great camaraderie develops among trainees, but be prepared to not see your other friends too often.

**London: large commercial**
The ten biggest law firm recruiters in the City of London firms (including the magic circle) offer roughly 700 traineeships between them each year, representing approximately 12.5% of all new training contracts registered with the SRA. In terms of day-to-day trainee experiences, there’s not such a huge difference between the magic circle and the so-called ‘silver circle’ firms such as Ashurst, Herbert Smith Freehills and a few others.

Training contracts at these chasing-pack firms are strongly flavoured with corporate and finance deals and, again, international work. The trainee salaries match those paid by the magic circle, which is only fair given that many of the lawyers work equally hard.

Many of these firms have recently enlarged further thanks to mergers with firms from abroad:

BLP became BCLP by merging with Bryan Cave, an American firm, in early 2018, while Eversheds Sutherland merged with Moscow-based Tilling Peters as well as Dvorak Hager & Partners of Prague and Bratislava. International giant Dentons continued its growth and combined with firms in Honduras, Zimbabwe, South Korea and Australia.

**London: American firms**
Since the 1970s, there has been a steady stream of US firms crossing the Atlantic to take their place in the UK market. Currently around 50 of them offer training contracts to would-be UK solicitors, with new schemes popping up all the time. We’d suggest staying eagle-eyed if you’ve got a thing for stars and stripes.

At the risk of over-generalising, these firms are characterised by international work (usually corporate or finance-led), small offices, more intimate training programmes and very long hours. On the other hand, they usually give trainees a good amount of responsibility (for those who prove themselves). Famously, many of them pay phenomenally high salaries. Lawyers at the hotshot US firms frequently work opposite magic circle lawyers on deals; indeed, many of them were previously magic circle and top-ten firm partners or associates.

Similarly to large commercial firms Macfarlanes and Travers Smith, UK and US firms are increasingly merging with each other, further blurring the definition of which are ‘American’ and which are not. Some firms are quite happy to be labelled as American; others prefer to be described as ‘international’. Look at their websites to get an idea of which term to use.

**London: mid-sized commercial**
Just like their bigger cousins, these firms are mostly dedicated to business law and business clients. Generally, they don’t require trainees to spend quite so many hours on the job; however, some of the most successful mid-sizers give the big boys a run for their money in terms of profitability.

Generally, the size of deals and cases in these firms means trainees can do much more than just administrative tasks. The atmosphere is a bit more intimate than at the giants of the City, with the greater likelihood of working for partners directly and, arguably, more scope to stand out within the trainee group. You shouldn’t expect such an international emphasis to all the work.
London: smaller commercial
For those who don’t mind taking home a slightly more modest pay cheque in exchange for better hours, these firms are a great choice. After all, money isn’t everything.

There are dozens of small commercial firms dotted around London: Wedlake Bell and Memery Crystal are just two examples. Usually these firms will be ‘full-service’, although some may have developed on the back of one or two particularly strong practice areas or via a reputation in certain industries. Real estate is often a big deal at these firms. Along with commercial work, a good number offer private client services to wealthier people. At firms like these you usually get great exposure to partners, and there’s less risk of losing contact with the outside world.

Regional firms
Many of you will agree that there is more to life than the Big Smoke. There are some very fine regional firms acting for top-notch clients on cases and deals the City firms would snap up in a heartbeat. There is also international work going on outside the capital.

The race for training contracts in the biggest of these firms is just as competitive as in the City. Some regional firms are even more discerning than their London counterparts in that applicants may have to demonstrate a long-term commitment to living in the area. Understandable, as they hardly want to shell out for training only to see their qualifiers flit off to the capital.

Smaller regional firms tend to focus on the needs of regional clients and would therefore suit anyone who wants to become an integral part of their local business community. Salaries are lower outside London, in some cases significantly so, but so is the cost of living. There’s a perception that working outside London means a chummier atmosphere and more time for the gym/pub/family, but do bear in mind that the biggest and most ambitious regional players will expect hours that aren’t so dissimilar to firms with an EC postcode.

National and multi-site firms
Multi-site firms are necessarily massive operations, some of them with office networks spanning the length and breadth of the country and overseas. To give you just two examples, Eversheds Sutherland has 11 branches in the UK plus many overseas; DLA Piper has six in England and many more overseas. These firms attract students who want to do bigger-ticket work outside London – a sometimes unwelcome consequence of which is doing London levels of work for a lower salary.

Some of the multi-site firms allow trainees to stay in one office, whereas others expect them to move around. Make sure you know the firm’s policy or you could end up having a long-distance relationship with friends, family and your significant other while you move to a new town for a few months or are saddled with a punishing commute. The work on offer is mostly commercial, although some private client experience may be available.

General practice/small firms
If you’re put off by the corporate jargon, City-slicking lifestyle and big-business attitude of some of the firms in this guide, then the small firm might be just what you’re after. If you want to grow up fast as a lawyer and see how the law actually affects individuals and the community in which you practise, then a high-street firm may be the best option for you. We go into much more detail on high-street firms online.

Larger firms may take up to half a dozen or so trainees a year; the smallest will recruit on an occasional basis. It is in this part of the profession where salaries are the lowest. While the Law Society recommends a minimum salary of £22,541 in London and £19,992 outside, we know of several small-town firms that pay lower than this.

Find out more by reading our feature about High-street firms and our article on Training on the high-street at three specific firms. We also recommend you read our feature on Legal aid cuts and reforms to find out how these are affecting the sector.
What is a training contract?

Put simply, a training contract is the step between your academic life and your life as a qualified solicitor.

The basics
Most training contracts are taken on a full-time basis and last two years. At present a training contract (or a period working as a paralegal which ticks the same boxes) is a requirement if you want to qualify as a solicitor. From autumn 2021, when the new Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) superexam is introduced, a formal traineeship will become just one of several ways of gaining the requisite two years of qualifying legal work experience, along with being a paralegal or working in a law clinic.

Until 1 July 2014 the term ‘training contract’ was used by the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) to designate legal traineeships. However, since 2014 it has begun using the term ‘period of recognised training’ and since its consultation on the SQE the SRA has started to use the term ‘qualifying work experience’. However, law firms and the SRA confirmed that even after the introduction of the SQE the term ‘training contract’ will remain in use for the contracts entered into between firms and trainees. In addition, the actual nature of the training firms offer through their training contracts is unlikely to change as a result of the SQE, although there will be some deregulation of the required elements of the training contract as outlined below.

Traineeships must comply with SRA guidelines, which can be found in the ‘trainee information pack’ on its website. The most important are:

- In the eyes of the law, a training contract is an apprenticeship. As such, you enjoy enhanced protections as a trainee and it’s nearly impossible for you to be sacked. A training contract can be terminated only because of serious misconduct, incapacity or the employer going bust. Training contracts often have a cancellation clause (like failing the GDL or LPC) as well. Instances of trainees being fired are rare.
- Trainees must gain practical experience in at least three distinct areas of English law (with a recommended minimum of three months in each). In practice transactional and contentious experience is required. Some firms, which may be unable to provide the necessary experience, send trainees on courses or secondments to fulfil the requirement.
- Trainees must complete the Professional Skills Course, which covers three areas: finance and business skills; advocacy and communication; and client care and professional standards. The firm has to pay the course fees for trainees’ first attempt at the course.

The norm is to spend time in four departments over two years (six months in each). Each stint is called a seat. At some firms you’ll do six four-month seats or some other more bespoke arrangement; at very small firms it’s likely that your training won’t be as structured. Trainees will sometimes repeat a seat in the firm’s largest department or the one they hope to qualify into, especially during six-seat schemes.

“Trainees should view the training contract as an opportunity to be a sponge and soak up all the right ways to be the lawyer they want to be. A degree of open-mindedness about your career is imperative.”

Some firms may require that you do a seat in one or more particular departments. For the other seats, firms usually ask you to identify your preferences and try to accommodate your wishes. However, seat allocation isn’t always a simple task, and you might not get what you want. It usually depends on the needs of departments and trainee seniority.

You will be allocated a supervisor in each seat who will be responsible for giving you assignments and (hopefully) helping out with any questions you have. Supervisors are typically mid-level to senior associates/assistants or partners, and usually you will share an office with your supervisor or sit near them in an open-plan setting. You may also have the opportunity to spend a seat seconded to one of your firm’s clients or one of its overseas offices. Appraisals are important, and most firms will arrange a formal meeting between trainee and supervisor/HR at the end of each seat and probably also midway through.

What the experience entails
Long hours are often a given; however, they are more likely when you work at a large, international or corporate/finance-focused firm, and vary depending on the area of law you’re working in. Super-punishing hours are less likely at smaller, domestic, advisory or boutique firms and firms outside the big cities.
There is a hierarchical structure to law firms, and while this is felt more strongly at some firms than others, trainees should be prepared to start at the bottom. Salaries follow the hierarchy too, rising with seniority rather than being based on performance. It’s worth noting that several City firms are increasing the salary for trainees and newly qualified lawyers. Trainee groups tend to be close-knit and most firms provide some sort of budget for trainee socialising, and larger firms with larger intakes of trainees tend to have more active social scenes.

You’re not guaranteed a job at the end of it all. If you’ve done well, the firm will retain you on qualification, finding you a job in a department that you’ve come to love... or one that needs new junior lawyers. The firm that trained you is not obligated to keep you: your contract with the firm is for the period of your training only. Our research into the firms featured in this guide shows that 80% of qualifying trainees stayed at their firms in 2019; the rest either elected to look elsewhere or were forced to. This has been roughly the average figure over the past two decades, though recessions tend to be immediately followed by (small) average retention dips.

The main thing to remember is that the purpose of training is to learn about several areas of practice and find your spot in the profession.
Here they are.

20 life-changing opportunities. 20 spaces for future partners. 20 chances to start your career with an ambitious, international firm.

At Stephenson Harwood, we’re looking for the most inquisitive, driven people to join us.

Have you got what it takes? To find out more, visit shlegal.com/futuretalent

Stephenson Harwood. We welcome the best.

Follow us @shfuturetalent
SEEKING EXCELLENCE

Vacation schemes
Apply by
8 January 2021

Training contracts
Apply by
9 July 2021 for 2023 start

See our website for open day details
uktrainee.wfw.com