

The skills lawyers of the 2020s need to succeed

By Aishah Hussain Oct 22 2019

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Tax is a red hot topic right now. The past few years have seen what may have previously been considered a bit of a 'nerdy' subject splashed across newspapers' front pages. The likes of Google, Amazon and Starbucks have come under fire for tax avoidance which has, in turn, sparked a culture of 'tax shaming' and boycotting of big-name brands.

This is just one of several reasons why Peter Morley, a tax partner at Pinsent Masons, enjoys working in tax law. It's a complex area of law that is constantly evolving, too, which means there's plenty of interesting work for tax lawyers like Morley to get stuck into. He was introduced to tax law during his training contract at Edge Ellison. He enjoyed his seat there and qualified into the firm's tax strategy and benefits department. After a 17-year spell the opportunity arose to head the growing tax team based in Pinsent Masons' Leeds office. Morley, who was by then a partner, took up the role just over a year ago.

One skill that is critical to a career in tax law is (surprisingly, not being a maths whizz) but the ability to solve commercial problems, says Morley, who advises on a variety of deals for clients ranging from start-ups to large national, and international, companies. It helps to be business savvy and frame advice to clients in the context of their business objectives — not just from a tax perspective — he says. That's because there is plenty of crossover with other practice areas, and Morley's work often spills into corporate law and real estate.

What's more, the ever-evolving nature of the work, which has become increasingly international in nature, means tax lawyers need to constantly keep on top of things. Morley is seeing UK-based clients expand their businesses overseas which means advising on how to make cross-jurisdictional tax systems work. It helps to be clued up on the global trends affecting a client's business and adapt accordingly, he says, and skills as such will only become more prevalent in the future. So there's no avoiding it, future lawyers, "commercial awareness is *never* going to come off the list", he stresses.

Morley, who grew up in Nottingham, studied law at Newcastle University. He found his law degree provided him with, as you might expect, the skills required for life as a lawyer: scrutinising statutes and applying case law to practical problems as a student proved useful when dealing with the technicalities of tax law in practice. Similarly, the Legal Practice Course (LPC) helped him brush up organisation and time-management skills as he worked through the various exercises

Lawyers of the 2020s will need to be tech savvy, says Morley. IT skills are a business essential lawyers are expected to have, in the same way they must be able to answer the phone or write an email, he says. It's also handy if you're joining a tech-forward firm like Pinsent Masons that has its very own document review platform. Of course you'll receive training on how to navigate the systems but a little understanding on how things work in practice goes a long way.

A prevailing question on students' minds is whether they should try their hand at coding. "It's a great skill to have if you are interested in and understand it," says Morley. It can be helpful (as with most things) if it's the focus area of your client but it's not essential ." The same can be said on whether budding solicitors should be able to speak another language — "useful, but not essential".

[...]

So how should students develop these skills? "Get involved in as much activity as you can during your time at university," he advises. Morley was Master of Moots for Newcastle Law Society in his final year and would compete in national tournaments. But don't disregard the importance of non-legal experience. Morley volunteered at his university's Raising and Giving (RAG) society and hosted regular charitable fundraisers. Other options include joining a sports club or leveraging the skills gained from a part-time job. "You'll pick up a range of skills and it's this combination that will make you an attractive prospect to future employers," he says.

And if you're faced with rejection — an important skill to build is resilience. "Make sure you ask for feedback and learn from it. Then persevere if it's a career you really want."