

Why being a barrister is the best job in the world

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WANTED Criminal barrister.

JOB DESCRIPTION Prosecuting and defending your fellow citizens in Magistrates' and Crown Courts across England and Wales.

HOURS 60 to 90 per week, mostly unpaid.

SALARY Variable, from sub-minimum wage at the beginning to a tenth of the pay of your commercial law peers if you reach the very top.

LINE MANAGEMENT Savour the freedom of self-employment – you are your own boss! (Subject to the requirement to obey the every command of your clerks, solicitors, the Crown Prosecution Service, leading counsel and judges).

BENEFITS Holiday pay, sick pay, maternity/paternity pay, pension contributions and fringe benefits are all explicitly excluded.

LOCATION Wherever necessary

DRESS CODE Absurd.

PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES The ideal candidate will possess outstanding legal and advocacy abilities, as well as the skills of a hostage negotiator, social worker, nightclub bouncer, juggler, parent, marriage counsellor, horse-whisperer, mental health diagnostician, can carrier and time-traveller. They will excel at carrying out the legal and administrative functions of others for free in order to plug the gaping holes in a chronically under-resourced and understaffed justice system.

They will particularly enjoy the thrill of mastering legally complex and emotionally traumatic situations on nil sleep and at a moment's notice, travelling long distances for court hearings that pay £4 after deductions, and being shouted at in public for the failings of others. Own transport a plus.

It's an advert with little to recommend it. It is also the sanitised, abridged version of the monologue awaiting anybody foolish enough to ask a practising criminal barrister: '*Should I go into criminal law?*'

Yet despite the warnings, thousands of applications for pupillage drop into the inboxes of criminal chambers each year, as newly minted Bar graduates compete at a ratio of 300:1 for a golden ticket to Wonka's Justice Factory. And, notwithstanding that some of us spend almost as much time railing against the inadequacies of our working conditions as we do actually practising law, we are, mostly, still here, keeping on keeping on.

And there's a reason for that. It is because, for all its hardships, it is, without question, the best job in the world.

There is simply nothing like it. No day is ever dull; no case is ever unimportant. What you do matters. In criminal justice, you are making a direct and quantifiable difference to people's lives and people's liberty, affording them a voice and ensuring they can access justice at what is, for almost everybody involved in a criminal case, their lowest ebb. Some days you will be defeated by the system, by the flaws that are all too common. An already difficult job is made unnecessarily harder by the constraints imposed by those in power who have run justice into the ground. But those frustrations are, on balance, just about outweighed by the satisfaction of knowing that, when the pieces click, you are ensuring that there is somebody to fight the corner of those who would otherwise be left unarmed.[...]

Every day you encounter a new problem, a novel challenge, and are tested in ways you could not have imagined when you rose at 6am to make your three-hour trek to court to cover that 'straightforward mention'. Terror, you learn, breeds resilience.

The people you will meet, the lives you will flit into and out of in the space of a day – some of their stories will remain with you forever. This job will change you; it will force you to reconsider so many certainties of how the world is, and how it ought to be.

And it's fun. That's not to belie the seriousness of what we do; we know all too well the stakes for those we represent. But the rampant, high-energy, seat-of-your-pants adrenaline cocktail of courtroom advocacy – especially a jury trial – grips and invigorates you like something that should be scheduled to the Misuse of Drugs Act. That, more than anything, I suspect, is why we keep doing it.

If you know all that going in – if you've listened to our cautions and read our blogs and stared into the criminal justice coalface in all its dysfunctional, chaotic glory – and you remain undeterred, I would still recommend this vocation to anyone, albeit with one final word of advice, born of realism even if it sounds like pessimism: the odds are not in anybody's favour. Make sure you have a Plan B.