

# Fact or Fiction? The truth behind life in a City law firm

By *Unnamed Lawyer* Apr 19 2017 *Legalcheek.com*

A recent research suggested that more than 90% of young lawyers have felt under too much emotional pressure at work in the last month, with punishing workloads and crippling stress.

Some firms are known to be greater slave-drivers than others (think US firms or magic circle) while in certain departments (like corporate or asset finance) insanely busy periods of all-nighters spent getting big deals “over the line” at any cost are often followed by boring lulls. In my department, commercial property, you’re constantly busy juggling a large number of matters. But there will always be jobs which can wait until tomorrow. If you get it right you can leave at a sensible hour and keep all your commitments outside of work. And keep most of your weekends too.

In the days before the start of my training contract, I remember frantically revising my Legal Practice Course (LPC) notes. I thought I’d be expected to know everything. What actually gets you through the day as a trainee is knowing how to use your firm’s document management and IT systems. Then there’s appreciating the importance of your secretary as a life-changing source of firm knowledge and temporary bullshit-spouter if you’re not quite ready to speak to that client who’s called for an update. Being composed enough to give advice down the phone to a client while your supervisor is in the room is also important. My bulging file of LPC property law notes gathers dust above my desk to this day. I’ve had to remind myself of the difference between a lease and a licence a few times but getting the deal done ranks far above the fineries of black-letter law. Law school was useful in getting me through the door. But once you’re in you have nothing but your wits and soft skills to save you.

Almost from day one of my training contract, the prospect of “qualification” (when the firm decides who it will keep and who it will not) loomed large. Final seaters going through the process uttered bitter war stories about the horrors that lay ahead. The uncertainty of whether you might find yourself without a job is unpleasant. Be prepared also for a bit of tension with others in your intake who might stop talking to you as they keep their cards close to their chest. But it soon passes and you’re back to normal. Even if you are not kept on, you are likely to find a job elsewhere.

I made loads of mistakes as a trainee and I continue to make them. The prospect of that heart-stopping moment when you break out in a cold sweat as you realise what you’ve done never ends. The further I got through my training contract, the more I learned which mistakes mattered and which didn’t. Misspelling a client’s name in an email to them is, while embarrassing, far removed from failing to submit a Stamp Duty Land Tax Return within the statutory deadline on the spectrum of cock-ups. All errors can be rectified. When you make them, all you can do is try to learn from it and prevent the same thing from happening again.

At my firm, there are about five or six complete bastards. That’s not bad for a workforce of 700. In my experience, even the most senior head of department will converse with the lowliest trainee if it helps them do their job. Most partners remember what it was like to be junior and have fairly realistic expectations of trainees. So don’t worry. Unless you’re working for a complete bastard.

I’m not going to lie. As a trainee and as a junior associate, you will often be given work which is mind-numbingly boring. It breaks my heart every time I get a hapless trainee to check an entire commercial lease which has been copy-typed into a Word document against the original PDF version for typos. Honest. But not all work is tedious. As a first-seat trainee I found myself addressing a High Court judge. While you sit at your desk slogging away through soul-destroying tasks, there will be people around you working on some potentially interesting things. Listen in and take an interest. As you climb the ranks, you will be given more responsibility and juicier tasks. Most departments are likely to give you as much work as you demonstrate you are capable of handling.

Whether it be the sadistic bastard partners trying to terrify you right from the start, scarred final-seaters at the end of their training contract, or anonymous posters on online forums warning you ominously “Do not do it”, there will always be people trying to scare you about what a future in law might hold. For every scary partner, there’s a nice one, for every hideous team whose work and culture you despise, there may be one you enjoy and fit right in with. Try to keep an open mind and take the advice for others with a pinch of salt. You only really know what something is like when you experience it for yourself.