Work experience can give you skills that are not attainable through mere study.

SHOULD I GET LEGAL WORK EXPERIENCE WHILE AT UNIVERSITY?

It is advisable to get some legal work experience whilst still at university.

Try obtaining a position as a paralegal, law clerk, legal secretary or any other paid position within the legal industry. Practical legal experience (whether short or long term) will provide a realistic insight into the profession. It will also provide you with legal contacts, skills and experience which may assist you to obtain your first position as a lawyer. Potentially, you will also be more employable for future legal positions and/or be able to distinguish yourself from the other applicants. Furthermore, provided you work hard and perform well in that role you may also have the benefit of obtaining a professional referee from where you worked.

As well as potentially increasing your future job prospects, work experience provides a real insight into the culture of a workplace which can vary markedly from job to job. Culture is made up of the people, the style of management and the psychology, attitudes, experiences, beliefs and values of the workplace. You will also become familiar with the type of work, their clients and the number of hours you will be expected to work.

If you are unable to obtain a paid legal position, another alternative is a voluntary position at a community legal centre or similar organisation.
LEGAL WORK EXPERIENCE

How can I find out about legal positions?

Positions are commonly advertised on internet sites (such as seek.com.au, mycareer.com.au and careerone.com.au), law society websites (see the NSW Young Lawyers Job Network www.lawsociety.com.au/about/YoungLawyers/JobsNetwork/index.htm), and on university and College of Law notice boards. Government legal positions are usually advertised in state newspapers (such as The Sydney Morning Herald) and relevant government websites (such as jobs.nsw.gov.au and apsjobs.gov.au). You can also register with online job websites so that jobs fitting your criteria are emailed directly to you.

Another option is to register as a temporary or casual paralegal or legal secretary, either directly with a firm or via a legal recruitment agency. Barristers’ chambers also often hire legal clerks, receptionists and legal researchers so chambers also often hire legal clerks, receptionists and legal researchers so if they are aware of any upcoming suitable positions.

There are a number of ways to gain work experience before embarking on a career in law. By far, one of the most common and talked about ways is to secure a clerkship with a law firm. Though this is a common route, it is not the only route. Students are able to gain experience through many different avenues including volunteering, working in an in-house legal team, doing a volunteer placement in a government organisation, working in social justice organisations and much more.

Seasonal Clerkships

Most seasonal clerkships are approximately 11 weeks full-time work in the summer break between the penultimate (second to last) and final year. Clerkships are usually (but not exclusively) offered by mid to top tier law firms and they are a valuable opportunity to obtain hands on experience.

Many firms provide a rotation program, and ideally a mentor each rotation, to enable you to gain exposure and work experience across a broad range of practice areas. Students who participate in clerkships develop a greater understanding of employment opportunities and legal experience, whilst adding to their resumes. A further benefit is that you may be offered a graduate or casual/part-time paralegal position upon completion of the clerkship.

As many firms recruit their graduates directly from their seasonal clerks, it is wise to apply for a seasonal clerkship, if you plan on going into private practice. To be eligible for a seasonal clerkship you must be in the penultimate year of your degree.

When should I apply for a clerkship?

In New South Wales some firms advertise seasonal clerkship positions on ‘cvMail’, an electronic application system used by law firms around the world to advertise and process applications for graduate and seasonal clerkship positions. The Law Society of NSW also administers Graduate Employment and Summer Clerkship Programs for the benefit of law firms in NSW and law schools (www.legalvitae.com.au).

It is important that you familiarise yourself with the relevant application dates for each firm. Whilst a strong academic transcript is undeniably appealing to a prospective employer, marks alone are not enough to secure a seasonal clerkship/graduate position. Participation in extracurricular activities or work experience can give you skills that are not attainable through mere study. It is these skills that the law firm will seek to utilise.

Internships

A corporate internship is similar to a clerkship in that it provides students with a taste of what it will be like working in a multi-disciplinary professional services organisation as a graduate lawyer. Law students can often find a broad range of work experience as an intern, especially as internships provide students with a different outlook to legal work when compared to a clerkship. Interns are focused on servicing one single client in-house.

Internship Structure and Aims

Internships will aim to develop a number of areas, including:

• Receipt of general and department-specific training through each stream (in this case, legal)
• Development of skills necessary for professional growth, networking and career advancement
• The opportunity to connect with and receive evaluation from colleagues and superiors
• The opportunity to gain a graduate position

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**LEGAL WORK EXPERIENCE**

**When should I apply for an Internship?**

Internships are similar to clerkships and often call for penultimate year students. Again, if you are unsure about when you should apply or whether you would be a viable applicant, it is always best to call the company and speak to a member of their HR team or recruitment specialist.

When applying for an internship, students need to monitor the companies that they are interested in working for to ensure they are aware of when opportunities open and close. Internships generally do not follow a structured set of dates so it is important that students are proactive when it comes to seeking out internship opportunities.

**How do I apply for placements?**

Timeframes apply for the opening and closing of applications for graduate employment, summer clerkship and some internship positions. The making and accepting of graduate employment, seasonal clerkship and internship offers are in accordance with each of their respective guidelines (available on LegalVitae). Read more about legal graduate positions on page 45.

**Are clerkships and internships compulsory?**

If you don’t think a formal clerkship or internship program is for you, there’s no obligation to apply. There are plenty of other legal work experience opportunities in other law firms, government organisations, in-house corporate teams and in the community legal sector. If you later change your mind, many organisations also have a graduate intake. You may feel that you are expected to apply for and receive a clerkship or internship offer (especially clerkships), as they are heavily promoted by law firms and a common topic of discussion between students around June to September. However, there are many different ways to enter the legal profession.

**What if I miss out on a clerkship or internship?**

Many law students are unsuccessful in obtaining clerkship or internship positions as there are simply not enough places available. If you are one of the unsuccessful candidates don’t become disheartened. Formal clerkship and internship programs are not the only way to obtain legal experience. "The game of life is a lot like football. You have to tackle your problems, block your fears, and score your points when you get the opportunity."26

If your clerkship or internship application is unsuccessful, it is a good idea to contact the Human Resources department to seek feedback. The feedback you receive may assist you in improving your resume and interview technique for future applications. Try to obtain some other form of legal work experience. Keep in mind that completing an internship or clerkship is not a pre-requisite for gaining graduate employment.

If you are initially unable to obtain a paid legal position, consider applying for voluntary positions within community legal centres or other non-profit legal organisations. These positions usually provide excellent legal opportunities and experience. Voluntary work is an excellent way of experiencing new challenges and providing a valuable service to the community. A variety of organisations rely on volunteers and it can be a great way to build new skills and add to work experience. For more information see www.volunteeringaustralia.org.

Remember to contact the Human Resources department to seek feedback, which may assist you in improving your resume and interview technique for the future.

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