

In Brief

Step 1 – Understanding the Legal Market

Introduction

You need to gain an understanding of the legal services market, in order to work out where you could see yourself fitting in. To help, there are some key decisions that you should start thinking about:

Key decisions

1. Do you want to be a solicitor or barrister?

- i) Solicitors form the largest part of the profession, with around 117,000 practitioners, and deal directly with clients who may be private individuals, companies or government departments. Most solicitors (around three quarters) work in law firms (also known as 'private practice'): others are employed by companies, charities, local and central government (known as working 'in-house'). The range of work is enormous, but falls roughly into two main areas: contentious (litigation) and non-contentious (transactional).
- ii) The Bar is a relatively small profession, with around 15,000 practitioners. The majority of barristers are self-employed, working at the self-employed Bar (sometimes called the 'Independent Bar') and operating from sets of chambers: but a small percentage work in-house. Barristers specialise in two key areas – advocacy and specialist opinion on specific areas of the law.

2. What type of legal employer do you want to work for?

i) Law firms:

Most people following the solicitor route start their career in private practice. Law firms can be categorised in many different ways, but may include:

- International and City firms
- Magic circle and silver circle firms
- US firms in London
- Other City firms
- National and regional firms
- General commercial firms
- Private client
- General practice/high street
- Legal aid firms
- Niche firms

ii) Barristers' chambers:

Most barristers train at the self-employed Bar. If this is the route you intend to pursue you will need to make choices between the various types of chambers, including:

- London sets
- Regional chambers

- Specialist chambers
- Generalist sets
- Supersets (very large sets, with as many as 200 members)

There may also be opportunities to train 'in-house' with organisations such as the Government Legal Service (GLS) or even within law firms.

iii) Alternatives to law firms and barristers' chambers

Not all lawyers work in law firms or chambers: there are many opportunities outside these types of employer, a few examples of which include:

- In-house in commerce and industry; the not-for-profit sector and charities
- The Government Legal Service (GLS)
- Local government
- Magistrates' Courts
- Law Centres and Citizens Advice Bureaux
- The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)

Further information on different employers is available in the Resource Book for Step 1.

You should also be aware that the Legal Services Act is likely to have a significant impact on the shape of the legal profession, and the types of organisation offering legal services, and you should keep up to date with the legal news.

3. What sort of law (practice areas) appeal to you?

The work of lawyers is often broken down into 'practice areas,' as you will usually specialise in one or more area of law as your career progresses. There is a world of difference between being a corporate lawyer and a criminal lawyer; and even significant differences within a practice area, depending on the type of organisation you choose.

For further information, see the Resource Book for Step 1, our Practice Areas, and Case Studies.

The training contract and pupillage market

In addition to knowing about the legal market and the type of lawyer you might like to be, you also need to research the number of opportunities available and the level of competition for training contracts and pupillage.

As with any rewarding career, competition to enter the profession is high, although levels of competition vary depending upon the recruiter, location, and popularity of the work they undertake.

You also need to be aware that the legal market is in a state of flux, with everything from the economy, technology and globalisation to changes in legislation, regulation and government policy affecting the provision of legal services. For those seeking to enter the legal profession, these changes bring opportunities as well as threats, so it is important to stay abreast of these issues.

Further Steps in this series will help you in this regard.