

Apprentice Blog

Abigail Langstaff

Having never studied law and with just a couple of weeks of legal work experience before starting the apprenticeship in September 2021, I was nervous to step into the legal profession at 18 years old. At A-level, I studied French, Spanish and English Literature – three subjects with no connection to law. But from my first week working at Womble Bond Dickinson (WBD) I felt at home and, in a short time, I was able to learn a lot from both the team around me and university. I never felt at a disadvantage having not done an A-level in law prior to working at the firm.

During my time at sixth form, I researched various university options, weighing up the pros and cons, ultimately expecting to follow the ‘traditional’ route into law; study at university then join the thousands of law graduates in the search for a training contract. I then found the solicitor apprenticeship which ticked every box and seemed like the perfect opportunity for me. Looking back at my time so far, I couldn’t be happier with the decision to get a head start in my career.

Solicitor Apprentices are enrolled on a six-year programme whereby you are employed by a firm, work four days per week and study for the degree/ apprenticeship on the fifth. Apprentices can take advantage of everything the firm offers, including your salary and tuition fees being paid by the employer – no student loans, no debt. However, one of the biggest benefits is joining the seat rotation after your first four years. The apprenticeship route certainly is a big commitment but for me, the prospect of qualifying as a solicitor in 2027 is really motivating.

In September, I joined the Residential Development Team at the firm and I will stay here for the first four years of the apprenticeship. In the final two years of the apprenticeship, I will move on to the seat-rotation alongside the trainees where I will move to a different team every six months. My current team deals with site acquisitions and legal matters for residential developers. Some examples of the work I have done include drafting legal documents, processing sales and pre- and post-completion tasks. After only a couple of months in my team, I was also able to run my own file. It still amazes me how much responsibility you have as an apprentice and the range of work has been really beneficial to my development.

I have received so much help and guidance from my team as they take the time to check my work and feed back to me. I am also grateful to have started in the team at the same time as a first-seat trainee who will always give me a hand and answer any questions I have! It’s great to be part of such a big firm where there are so many junior lawyers; in the Newcastle office, there are currently nine Solicitor Apprentices (myself included), and dozens of Trainee Solicitors.

While I’d love to spend all my time working at the firm, getting involved with legal matters, university study is also important to understanding the law and progressing to qualification. Currently, I am required to attend university on a fortnightly basis, and I work remotely on alternate weeks. The day spent on campus is pretty intensive as we cover all our modules, answering questions and preparing for our exams/ coursework. Lectures are recorded and we are expected to watch these in our own time. Ultimately, the hard work and time spent studying is just a small sacrifice for a long-term gain and having good time management is absolutely key to the apprenticeship programme.

The application process for the Solicitor Apprenticeship varies from firm to firm; some smaller firms require a CV and covering letter, while others have a more extensive recruitment process. For WBD, applicants were first required to complete a written application form explaining why you’re interested in the apprenticeship route and the firm – researching the firm you are applying to is essential to see if you would fit into its culture. The next stage of the WBD selection process was a group assessment day – this was online for our cohort due to COVID but usually takes place in person. This assessment helped the firm see if candidates were good team workers, and it gave us the chance to see if the firm was the right fit for us. We were then given two short tasks to complete to show we were able to think critically.

The final stages of the recruitment process were a work placement and an interview. The work placement took place over one week and we were able to experience working in three different teams: Residential, Corporate Finance, and Planning – of course this varies year on year, firm to firm. Looking back, the interview certainly wasn’t anything to stress about. I remember being so nervous beforehand trying to guess the questions I’d be asked. While I was asked a few questions and asked to give examples to show my skills, the interview just felt like a conversation; there were no ‘trick questions’ and really, the employer is just looking to get to know you.

I have been so lucky to have been taken on at WBD and have made a great start to the apprenticeship. I’d highly recommend this route as an alternative to university for prospective, aspiring solicitors!

Written by Abigail Langstaff