Advice on Trainee Solicitor & Paralegal Job Interviews
Advice on Interviews

Students often feel nervous about going for trainee solicitor & paralegal job interviews and are unsure how best to prepare for them. No two interviews will be the same and it is impossible to know exactly what you will face. Whilst you cannot “revise” for them in the same way as you would for an examination, some sensible preparation should help you to feel more confident and combat any concerns that you might have.

1) Job Interview Nerves - Feeling More Confident

Firstly, it is normal to feel a bit nervous about a job interview and sensible interviewers will understand this. Remember that by securing a job interview you have done well. Law firms & other organisations do not waste time interviewing people they are not interested in; they have received your CV and covering letter, or application form, and have decided that they are very interested in you. They will not be trying to “catch you out” but rather they like you, are intrigued by you as an applicant and want to find out more. So try to think the following things:

- Do not put too much pressure on yourself, avoid thinking ‘I must not mess up’ and focus on the skills that you would bring to the role.
- The law firm/organisation have shortlisted you for interview because they like you and want to find out more about you. From your CV and covering letter, or application form, they have decided that you are a good candidate and that you can do the job.
- This is an opportunity to answer the questions and tell them more about yourself, your achievements & experience, and your skills & qualities.

2) How To Prepare

Whilst you can prepare for question types, which we will look at below, there is little point in trying to “revise” for all the questions because until the interview starts you will not know which questions you are going to be asked. The PIP Exercise involves a form of preparation that involves trying to ensure that your achievements & experience and the skills, competences & qualities that they have developed & demonstrate, come out in answer to the interview questions.

Draw a line down the centre of a piece of paper to create two columns. Title the left-hand column as “My Experience & Achievements - What I Have Done.” Title the right-hand column as “My Skills & Qualities - What It Says About Me.”

Then start thinking about all the things that ideally you would want to come out during the interview. Of course, you cannot just talk about what you want in a job interview,
you need to answer the question, but this preparation exercise should help you. **The idea is to prepare items that can be used flexibly to answer interview questions.**

Start writing down brief points about your experience & achievements in the left-hand column. Then opposite in the right-hand column write down what that achievement or experience says about you in terms of your skills or qualities.

**Be sure to think about all your experience & achievements from across a range of areas, for example:**

- **Study Achievements**
- **Legal Work Experience**
- **Part-Time Jobs**
- **Work or Study Abroad**
- **Extra-Curricular Activities (E.G. Sport, Music, Drama, Art, Dance, Pro Bono Work, Volunteering, Community Work, Charitable Work/Fundraising)**
- **Travelling**

For example, you may have helped raise £500 for a children’s charity by doing a run or marathon. So write that down in brief note form. Then think about what to put in the right-hand column. This charitable achievement demonstrates that you possess commitment & energy (doing the training & running) and the ability to network successfully and market yourself (the fundraising.).

When it comes to the interview you might be asked a general question such as “What qualities can you bring to XYZ Solicitors?” for example. So you could then say:

“I possess commitment & energy, coupled with the ability to network & market myself successfully. This is demonstrated by the fact that in September 2013 I completed the Great North Run and successfully raised over £500 for Kidz, a children’s charity. These qualities would benefit XYZ Solicitors.”

Preparing in this way allows you to have a set of points that you can use flexibly to bring into the interview and to answer different questions.

**Remember:** the experience & achievements that you speak about in an interview do not have to be earth-shatteringly amazing! Students often underestimate their achievements, thinking that they are too basic. This is not the case. Law firms & other employers do want to hear about your experience & achievements, and they always emphasise this when they come and give careers presentations. However, if you do not tell them about it, then they cannot know about it!

**Examples of Achievements**

Do you have a part-time job, for example working in a bar or a shop, or volunteering in a charity shop? If so, are you expected to work in a team and meet sales targets? This can demonstrate that you possess strong team-working skills and commercial awareness/business nous.
Have you ever come up with a good idea in a meeting or by making a suggestion to your manager or supervisor that was adopted and was successful? For example, rearranging the display in a shop so that a product or item sold better. This can demonstrate that you can think creatively & innovatively and again, it can demonstrate commercial awareness.

Have you been achieving good grades on the LPC? This can help to demonstrate that you are likely to enjoy success in legal practice, as the LPC is a vocational course that teaches you key legal practice knowledge, aptitudes & skills.

Talk about what you learned & did when you undertook legal work experience or a work placement. Did you do well or receive praise? Was any of your work used? Again, this can demonstrate that you can succeed in a professional legal practice environment and perhaps might show that you can deal with clients & files effectively, depending on what you actually did or observed.

Have you done pro bono work? Here you can show the development of the legal skills that have been introduced to you and assessed on the LPC, such as interviewing & advising clients with legally related problems or issues, or drafting skills, the ability to undertake practical legal research or the ability to write accurately & summarise succinctly. All of these skills will translate to a professional legal practice environment and benefit the law firm that is interviewing you.

The key to this preparation is to find a way of answering the interview question directly by using your experience/achievements (left-hand column), and what they say about you in terms of your skills/qualities (right-hand column) successfully. I hope that this preparation will give you confidence. In addition, remember, if you have an interview coming up you can book a mock interview or interview preparation appointment with a member of the Careers team and go through the interview preparation together.

**Questions About Yourself (e.g. Interests, Achievements, Qualities)**

- What is your proudest achievement?
- What personal qualities do you possess which means we will be making a terrible mistake if we do not offer you a job?
- What makes you an outstanding candidate for this role? What can you bring to our law firm?
- Why did you choose your particular university? How did you choose your A levels?
- What is your greatest strength? What would your friends describe as your biggest weakness?

Students find the last question particularly difficult. There is good advice on how to answer this question on the web articles under ‘Further Reading’, located at the end of this guide. The best advice is to choose a weakness that you feel you have been able to work on and improve and demonstrate how you have improved or learned from the experience.
**Competency or Skills-Based Questions**

You could also be faced with a “competency question.” This is where the interviewer wants you to demonstrate that you have developed a particular skill. Sometimes you will have been given a job description and/or person specification when you applied for the job, or prior to interview. In other cases, the law firm or organisation will have mentioned the competences or skills that they are seeking in the job advert. There is a method to answer these questions known as the **STAR model**, which we look at in detail, below.

**Examples of competency based or skills based questions:**

- Give an example of your ability to work effectively in a team. (This question asks about team-working skills.)
- Have you ever used your negotiation skills to overcome a difficult situation?
- How did you go about this? (This question asks about a mix of negotiation skills & problem-solving capabilities.)
- Have you ever been able to solve a difficult or complex problem? (Problem-solving skills again.)
- Demonstrate that you can think commercially and possess business acumen. (This looks to probe your level of commercial awareness and business nous.)

You can use a whole range of examples to answer these questions. Things you did at university, achievements in part-time work, extra-curricular interests & activities, legal work experience or whilst travelling, for example.

**The STAR Model**

Use the **STAR technique** to help you develop a comprehensive but concise answer to competency questions.

- **Situation** – describe the situation.
- **Task** – describe the task undertaken.
- **Action** – explain the action you took.
- **Result** - explain the result you achieved.

**Example of the STAR Model**

**Question** - Give an example of your ability to work effectively in a team.

**Situation:** I currently work part-time in Kool Clothing, a busy city centre fashion store. Having done very well as a sales assistant, regularly exceeding sales targets, I was recently promoted to the post of team supervisor.

My role involves managing & motivating a team of five sales assistants who work on the women’s clothing floor. I make key decisions concerning product display and which items of clothing to package as part of deals and to place on special offers.
Task: The previous team supervisor had left and the team was in trouble as our store manager felt that it was behaving poorly and the team was not meeting store targets. He advised me that if things did not improve then he would need to break the team up. We had 2 months to make a drastic improvement. It was my job to turn things around.

Action: I decided to convene a team meeting so that we could discuss why motivation was low and the team was performing so poorly. I encouraged each team member to give their honest opinion and views and express what they enjoyed about the work and what they hated, what they felt they were good at and less good at. The feeling was that previously they had not been involved enough in decision-making and had had no input into suggestions regarding which products sold best, product display, special offer items and other matters. I put in place an “open idea” policy whereby team members could come to me with suggestions and made a change to team roles so that team members’ work more reflected their strengths.

Result: As a result, team members felt more motivated and included and some of the ideas that were contributed were really successful. Sales improved quickly and radically and we exceeded sales targets for the next 2 months. People enjoyed their work more and the team was saved.

Your Interest In Law/Becoming A Solicitor
You may be asked to justify your decision to become a solicitor (as opposed to a barrister, for example.)

You may be asked to describe a case or point of law which you have studied which you found particularly interesting (worryingly, law students seem to find this one particularly difficult!) The trick here is to ensure that you do not just give the name of the case and brief details, but actually state why the case is interesting from a legal point of view. What new law was created, for example, and how was the law in this area developed?

You need to be prepared to discuss anything that is on your CV, application form or covering letter. If you have done legal work experience, or spent time volunteering in a CAB or law centre, then you can bet you will be asked about this. You may be asked to describe the skills you developed (eg. interviewing, drafting, research or advocacy & negotiation), or the experience you gained of legal processes, proceedings or documentation. Try to reflect this back in terms of how it would help the firm you are hoping to join. For example, someone who volunteers in a CAB will be gaining practical experience of advising a wide & diverse range of clients - this experience will make you attractive to many law firms.

Your Match With This Firm
Why have you applied to this firm of solicitors? This is a very typical interview question.

The firm interviewing you want to feel that you have applied to them for specific reasons, not simply that you are desperate for a job and have applied anywhere & everywhere! If the firm has a specific niche or specialities in certain areas, they may want you to demonstrate some knowledge. They do want you to show that some thought has gone into targeting your application to them. It goes without saying that you should research their website, look at the range of legal services that they offer, read partner & staff profiles and the “About Us” section.
However, do not just copy what the firm says on its website; put it into your own words. So do not say that you have “applied for a training contract with Grimble & Grimble Solicitors because it is a dynamic, modern law firm which puts its clients at the heart of everything it does”, if that is the firm’s statement on the website, please put it into your own words!

However, your research should go a bit further.

For example has the firm been listed on the Legal 500 legal500.com/ or Chambers & Partners Student Guide chambersstudent.com/? If applying to mid-sized & smaller law firms they may not have been but some will.

The Manchester Evening News has a regular legal section, so it is worth searching their website to see if the firm has been featured.

Google the firm’s name in the Law Society’s Gazette website lawgazette.co.uk/ or do a general search. (For example, when helping to prepare an LPC student for an interview with a Legal Aid firm that did criminal defence work. The student completed a general internet search and found that the firm’s senior partner had recently appeared at a meeting on the then Carter Review of Legal Aid and had spoken against cuts to Legal Aid and competitive tendering for criminal Legal Aid work. She was thus able to go into the interview with this knowledge and was able to say that she was impressed that the partner had represented the firm’s views nationally in this way and agreed with his views, which matched her own.)

Have a think about the following ideas for answering the “why this firm” question:

What is particularly attractive about the firm’s trainee solicitor or paralegal positions? (You could mention the wide range of seats that they offer, the fact that a large no. of trainees stay with the firm after qualifying or the fact that responsibility and client contact is given at an early stage. You could also discuss the range & quality of work or clients that the firm attracts.)

The firm has a reputation for excellence in a certain area of law, for example Family Law. They key here is not just to say that but say why they have such an excellent reputation. Can you give examples of the cases or types of work that they have been involved in, for example, or the growth of work or the department. Which important cases has the firm been involved in recently? (These will often be mentioned in the press section of a firm’s website, or the legal press.)

Does the firm run seminars or training sessions for legal or other professionals, or have an impressive section of the firm’s website that keeps prospective and current clients up to date with legal developments? Say that this impresses you and why.

Can you say that you expect to receive excellent training and support within your role and why exactly? (There is no rule against mentioning certain solicitors or partners by name if they have an excellent reputation for practice in a certain area.)

Are you impressed with the firm’s commitment to charity and pro bono work? Does it allow employees time within their work to undertake pro bono work and what type of projects is it involved in? Does it have a chosen charity that it supports every year? (If you have undertaken charitable or pro bono work yourself then you can make a “match” between yourself and this firm.)
Example answer- “As you will note from my CV I have undertaken regular volunteering with Victim Support, helping the victims of crime with the court process and procedures, and I also completed a charity trek walking the Three Peaks, thus raising over £1000 for the NSPCC. I have been very impressed with XYZ Solicitors charitable fundraising and sponsorship work, as well as the fact that you allow your employees to do regular pro bono work on a monthly basis. I feel that the firm’s commitment to the community matches my own and I feel that we are well-matched and it is a law firm to which I would feel very committed.”

Specific Areas of Law/Current Legal Issues

Firms tend not to ask technical legal questions at interview, but you may be asked to discuss “topical legal issues”. For example, the implications of the Legal Services Act and alternative business structures for the legal profession or the controversy over the Legal Aid cuts. It is a good idea to try to keep an eye on what is happening, by reading the Law Society’s Gazette or The Lawyer on a regular basis. The Gazette is also accessible on-line at lawgazette.co.uk and you can search for archived articles. The website Lawcareers.Net also includes articles that give a neat summary of current legal issues

Other Current Affairs

You may be asked to give your opinion on a topical issue or current affairs. Lawyers need to be able to deal with argument & debate and put together convincing, persuasive verbal answers.

This is particularly important in negotiation situations with the opposite side or when trying to convince your client that you are taking the right course of action. You should also try to be aware of the counter-argument and deal with that. Keep an eye on what is happening by reading a quality newspaper on a regular basis and by watching news bulletins, or current affairs shows such as Newsnight.

Many current affairs issues have a legal angle:

- Should defendants accused of sexual offences possess the right to anonymity until conviction? Should there be a time limit within which such complaints can be made and defendants charged?
- Do the recommendations of the Leveson report into the culture, practices & ethics of the press represent a threat to press freedom?
- Should there be a “People’s Vote” on the deal with the EU to implement Brexit?
- If you could change any law, what would it be?
- Should there be a referendum on the reintroduction of the death penalty?
- Should cameras be allowed in court?

You may also be asked to make a case for a certain position. So, for example, you might be asked to make the case for the introduction of a privacy law.

The trick here is to not only state your reasons- but also show that you can anticipate the opposite view. A large part of what a lawyer does involves anticipating the opposite argument, particularly in contentious work.

Scenario/Hypothetical Questions

You may well be given hypothetical scenarios. It is virtually impossible to prepare for these. The idea is for the interviewer to test your ability to think on your feet and to see if you can think laterally. Here are some examples:
• It is 5.30 pm and you are about to go home. An irate client rings up; he feels that a partner has messed up an aspect of his case. How would you deal with this situation?
• You and another paralegal do not get along but are expected to work closely together. How would you overcome potential problems?
• Some firms ask more bizarre or outlandish hypothetical questions!
• Describe Manchester to a Martian.
• Which three people (living or dead) would you invite to a dinner party & why?
• Who would play you in the film of your life?

These are “curve ball” questions, designed to show that you can think on your feet and react to the unexpected. There is no right or wrong answer.

The trick with these questions is to “show your working.” In other words, do not just state which 3 people you want to invite to the dinner party, but give actual reasons & the thinking behind them.

**Strength-Based Questions**

These questions have come into fashion in recent years and are intended to see how an interview candidate thinks, reasons and communicates. Again, the trick when answering this type of question is to demonstrate your reasoning.

• Tell us about a film that you watched recently and really enjoyed. Why did you enjoy it?
• What’s the best book that you have ever read and why is it your favourite book?
• What’s your favourite musical?
• Which person from history do you most admire?

**Tips**

We have discussed the type of preparation that you can do before a training contract interview. Here is another idea ...

“An interview is a conversation with a purpose.”

Too many students find it hard to develop their answers to interview questions. Try to avoid brief or monosyllabic answers. You do not want to talk so much that the interviewer cannot get a word in edgeways! You want to speak concisely & specifically yet still develop your answers and try to turn it into a genuine two-way discussion. This sounds easier in theory than it is in practice, particularly when nerves come into play. Very few people are so confident about their interview technique that they would claim to be experts. It is a skill that develops with time.
If you are asked a question that you find difficult to answer, you can ask for a moment to think about it. Do not feel you have to start talking the very second the interviewer finishes the question!

Generally, firms seem to use a panel of two or three interviewers. They will share out the questions between them. Concentrate on giving eye contact to the person asking the questions, but do not ignore the others, glance at them as well whilst answering.

Larger firms often use a 2-step interview process, perhaps the first interview with just a HR manager, then a panel of partners for the second interview. Smaller firms may not use a panel; there may just be a single interview with a partner. Alternatively, sometimes they may use a first round telephone interview.

We all tend to have different mannerisms & posture. Get a friend to observe you. Do you tend to slouch, or wave your arms about when answering questions? If so, try to correct this at interview, although do not become too paranoid about it. You want to feel able to be yourself, albeit your “professional” self.

Many law firms now combine the interview with other exercises at an “assessment centre.” You may be asked to give a short presentation on an unseen topic. You may be given a choice of topics or the chance to talk about anything you like. You will normally be given time to prepare, and the presentation will generally be expected to last from 5-10 minutes. If you have a free choice, then consider giving the presentation on a topic that you know a lot about and you feel you could make interesting. For example, an LPC student who had played hockey to international level talked about hockey. The presentation may well be in front of partners and other applicants. It is highly unlikely other people would know as much about hockey, so it would be hard for the student to be challenged or asked difficult questions!

Some firms set written exercises. Recent examples have included examining an imaginary contract and correcting it or adding clauses to it, or a hypothetical client-based scenario. There could be a psychometric test (e.g. verbal reasoning.) Read our Psychometric Tests guide to learn how you can access free tests online; mmu.ac.uk/careers/guides

You can book an appointment with Faculty Careers & Employability Manager Nick Touati for a law mock interview, or for a general interview preparation appointment. You will be given feedback on your performance immediately afterwards and work on the paper exercise and advice on interview technique.

Similarly, if you are not successful at an interview, be prepared to ask for feedback.

As a final point, remember that the vast majority of people feel nervous about job interviews. Try to enjoy the experience - a job interview is a rare chance to talk about yourself!
Careers & Employability Support and Further Reading

The Careers & Employability Service offers range of support to Manchester Met students and graduates:

- **Detailed careers guides:**
  Our full range of careers guides, including information on finding and applying for opportunities are available on our website: mmu.ac.uk/careers/guides

- **Ask a Careers Question Online:**
  Get online advice through My Career Hub, ask your question at any time and receive support via email.
  mmu.ac.uk/careersquestion

- **Careers Consultant Appointments:**
  Book a 30 minute appointment with one of our Careers Consultants by calling 0161 247 3483.

- **Careers Events:**
  Meet employers and enhance your employability by attending our workshops, employer events and careers fairs.
  mmu.ac.uk/careers/events

- **MMyou**
  The online careers centre you can access 24/7 to view lots of career resources, advice and tips, career quizzes and helpful articles wherever you are! Including articles and information tailored to your sector! Login to MMyou Careers Centre to find out more!

* Lawcareers.net Article on Training Contract Interviews: [lawcareers.net/Information/Features/31072012-No-sweat-interviews-made-easy](http://lawcareers.net/Information/Features/31072012-No-sweat-interviews-made-easy)