



Introduction

A Modern Book for a Modern Solicitor?

This book is not like the other books — the books that repeat what marketing departments in law firms say, that churn out page after page of predictable theory or that give you 'practical' advice that is simply not relevant for you at your stage in your career. Those books are of little practical use to anyone. This book explores what it *actually* takes to be a successful 'starting out' lawyer in a corporate or commercial law firm.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

The focus is on the career of a solicitor, near the start of his or her career. The focus is on commercial or corporate law firms, since it was in these firms that I spent so much of my time as a professional, both as a lawyer and as a skills trainer and performance coach. This book is, in fact, the result of several thousands of hours of on-the-job research.

A little disclaimer ...

Please note that this book was not written with any specific law firm, lawyer, event or incident in mind. Nothing you read can be attributed to any lawyer, non-lawyer or firm unless expressed to be so. Rather, what follows is an examination of the **kinds of people** (lawyers and non-lawyers)

and **situations** you might come across in a commercial or corporate law firm, and how you might maximise your impact when you want to impress those in control (and even not) of your career. This book will not help you choose a specific firm to apply to, but it will help prepare you for your first day.

Who are you?

If you are a trainee, you will need to know this stuff to qualify for the job you want. If you have recently qualified, you will need to know this stuff to maximise your chances of stepping up to the next level. If you have just picked this book up, if you are embarking on a career as a solicitor in a high-street firm and if you are now thinking '*I won't need this, it's not relevant for me*', it is. Yes, there is a general commercial/corporate focus, but many of the themes covered in this book will help you succeed, regardless of which law firm you are in or are going to join.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

It used to be the case that, not so very long ago, to succeed as a lawyer you simply needed to excel technically and the rest would take care of itself. Draft a memo on a brain-achingly complicated point of law, get your secretary to type it up, send it to the client and then hope for the best. Pray that the client will not call to talk it through with you. If he does, hope for the best and tell him about the law. Blind him with science.

How times have changed! The downturn in the economy has meant that people now expect more for less. Technology, which has revolutionised the way we do things, has also highlighted the failings of the two-fingered typing technique. But most importantly, **people** have changed. Now, doing 'the law' is the bare minimum. It is a minimum simply **expected** by those you need to impress, those being fellow lawyers, non-lawyers and clients.

When you go to a restaurant, do you notice when the waiter writes down your order and brings you the right food? Hardly, since this is a bare

minimum expected of a good waiter. You do notice, however, if the waiter fails to write down your order at all. You assumed he would. This is a basic expectation of a waiter. And you certainly don't want to have to tell him to write down your order. This is not your role and it is awkward. Already, your confidence has gone. So much so that no matter what food arrives 20 minutes later, you will be convinced something is wrong with it — and there usually will be. The waiter will not remember that glass of tap water; or he will forget to tell the chef not to put anchovies on your Four Seasons pizza.

Being bad at 'the law' as a lawyer is like a plumber coming round to your house to fix a leak only to tell you he '*doesn't do pipes*'. Ridiculous! And in many ways it is exactly the same with those you need to impress in a law firm: They won't notice if you get the law right, only when you get it wrong. They won't care if 99 things you do are perfect; they will only care about the one that is poor. So, it's fair to say that if you cannot get the law right (honest mistakes or lack of experience aside), you might as well give up, go home and watch *Trisha* on daytime TV. Law may not be the career for you.

If being a good technical lawyer is simply what is expected, how do you stand out and make a lasting impact? When you are starting out, on top of the traditional legal-technical skills, you are now expected to display competence in a whole range of what used to be called (erroneously) 'soft-skills'. These are things you probably think you are good at already — after all, surely, '*it's all just common sense*'? But whilst it might be 'common sense', that does not mean it will be 'common practice'.

The reason for this behavioural shift? Times are changing. Where people once named fish and chips as their favourite take-away, nowadays it is much more likely to be sushi. Where families once holidayed in a campervan in Bognor Regis, they are now more likely to jump on the Eurostar after work and head off to Paris for a quick city-break. And where having a lunch break at work used to mean a trip to the local wine bar, it is now more likely to involve a spinning class at the local health and fitness centre.

Similarly, partners of law firms no longer enjoy plush offices with lavish, mahogany drinks cabinets, neither do they conclude deals over a round of golf after lunch. These days, in fact, they will readily use phrases such as *'let's sit down and discuss this in the coffee area; 'I want to make sure we give the client exactly what they want!' and 'is everyone happy with what they are doing?'* in team meetings whilst drinking an organic smoothie. Most importantly, things have become a whole lot more **people-** and **team-oriented**.

Coupled with this, business is more sophisticated. Clients demand more from their legal advisers. New commercial and legal risks have emerged, requiring lawyers to adapt accordingly to get the best clients and the best work. Most importantly for you, lawyers are no longer chosen as a sole result of the documents they produce or the technical advice they give. Clients decide between law firms on the basis of the people they provide, and because of the personalities they have. Law firms even have snazzy, 'post-modern' logos and electric-coloured, leather-clad receptions that resemble boutique hotels, which they call 'client suites' or 'welcome lounges' to set themselves apart. And similarly, your success as a junior lawyer depends on whether or not you 'fit in', 'stand out' and get on with others who might shape your progress.

Don't forget that law firms are a uniquely bizarre and eclectic mixture of old-fashioned values and practices coupled with twenty-first-century business and skills trends. They are an awkward, evolving melting-pot of belief systems, egos, habits and intellectual pursuits. As a 'bright young thing' coming into the profession, you are perfectly positioned to make an impact that will maximise your opportunity for long-term success. To do so, you have to follow certain rules and accepted models, pushing behavioural boundaries to reflect the changing nature of the expectations placed on you by those who are in control of your career.

Within law firms, partners and senior lawyers now expect more in terms of the people and 'business' skills displayed by their juniors (despite the fact that they might lack the skills themselves). They want junior lawyers they

would be happy to put in front of an important client without worrying about them saying or doing the wrong thing.

The profession is increasingly heavily regulated, more competitive, more globalised in its reach, more complex in terms of the work undertaken and, perhaps most importantly for you, increasingly reliant on the ability of its lawyers to 'sell' their service.

At your level, selling your service is simply about impressing your peers and your colleagues. Once you have done that, you will be given your chance to sell yourself to clients externally. The second won't happen until you have proved you can do the first. It is about doing the law well and doing the other skills even better — skills that are far from soft, skills that are as hard as it gets.

With all this in mind, this book will focus only on the things you might need to do to **stand out, make an impact** and **sell yourself** as a junior commercial lawyer. It will not tell you how to do the law, to record time effectively, to draft documents, to undertake research or conduct a due diligence project. **This is not a technical legal handbook.** Rather, this book will examine what impactful junior lawyers do. Eighty per cent of it is about communication skills in some form, and the remaining 20 per cent is about cultivating and displaying an active and visible interest in the things you do (ie business!). You will learn a lot from those around you as you progress through your early career, but this book will give you the tools to hit the ground running¹ — or at least walking briskly — when you start out and until you get to grips with things.

In food terms, this book aims to take you from baked potato with cheese and beans (solid, comforting and enjoyable, but predictable, unexciting, unremarkable and easily outdone) to baked fillet of Black Cod with a herb crust, a sweet potato and parmesan mash, and a medley of honey-glazed seasonal vegetables with a pea and mint purée (multi-faceted, exciting, fresh, delicious, innovative, exclusive and highly sought-after).

¹ Apologies for the use of this terrible phrase. Sadly, you might hear a lot of it over the next few years ...

As such, please note that in contrast with much of the literature on this subject, the writer of this book solemnly **promises** and **undertakes** to:

- make this book interesting (as possible ...)
- be honest
- make things as useful and practical as possible, but without stating the obvious
- make this book an appropriate length — not too long and not too short.

A warning ...

This is a manual — not an encyclopaedia, or a bible or a roadmap for guaranteed success as a professional. This book is not intended as a blueprint for the rest of your career; it just explains how to make an impact at the start when you don't really know how to do that. After all, you can't become a partner in one year, but you can destroy any chances of becoming a partner in a firm in a matter of six months (or less!).

This book is a good starting point for you, but is not intended to be any more than that. You will find your own style and a way to act around others that works for you in time. Then you can kick on in a way that suits you when it feels right.

YES, BUT WILL IT BE PRACTICAL?

This book should be of tangible, practical use to you — the reader and junior legal practitioner. Many books you might read in the areas we intend to cover will tell you, for example, to '*be confident*' or '*act assertively*', without telling you how this might practically be achieved and in what situations this might be appropriate. For you, this approach is frustrating, irritating and mildly patronising — like paying a fitness instructor who tells you at the start of each session to '*get fitter*', then proceeds to run aimlessly

around a park for an hour asking you to follow him before demanding payment. You'd feel cheated, frustrated and probably a little bit angry.

Here, where relevant and appropriate, you will be provided with strategies, formulae and particularised action plans, structuring theory and advice — where relevant and appropriate — around practical methodology.

Obviously, this will not work for every section of this book, and there will be some chapters where the focus is on behavioural issues that are intrinsically 'softer' in their scope. However, if you do need to do something or act in a specific way in any given situation, suggestions will be made as to how you might approach it.

With all this in mind, please read this book if:

- You are curious about what exactly it is that successful lawyers are like and do.
- You are thinking about becoming a lawyer, in a very speculative, *'I've got a good degree from a good university'* kind of way, but have no real understanding of the job spec.
- You are a trainee solicitor.
- You are intending to qualify as a solicitor quite soon.
- You are practising as a junior lawyer.
- You are supervising or mentoring a junior lawyer in a commercial law firm.
- You can laugh at yourself.
- You have just been made redundant and need something to do.