



The Law Society

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Challenging assumptions and overcoming barriers

The journey to a legal career can be a daunting experience for aspiring solicitors, with relentless competition for outstanding academic results, training positions and placements. As a disabled student, this environment may feel even more overwhelming with the added stress and challenges of having to overcome barriers often based on assumptions and lack of knowledge. The good news is that employers, realising that they could be missing out on a massive talent pool, are increasingly committed to recruiting candidates that can help shape a dynamic and diverse workforce. The legal situation has also improved for disabled people since the introduction of the Equality Act 2010 which states that it is unlawful to discriminate against disabled people through recruitment and selection procedures.

Entry to the solicitors' profession is open to a wide range of candidates, having a disability does not exclude you. If you have decided to embark on a legal career, it is important that you are realistic and evaluate what the next few years ahead will require of you; strong commitment, time, hard work and perseverance. You should also ask yourself some questions like: what do I want to achieve, why do I want to achieve this, is it realistic and how am I going to achieve it? Consider whether you will be reasonably able to perform at a level that is expected in order to succeed. Be mindful that law is an extremely competitive environment, you will be up against many qualified applicants also pursuing a career as a solicitor.

Research, think and plan ahead

Knowledge is key and the more time you spend researching what lies ahead of you and understanding the legal environment, the better you can evaluate if this is really something for you.

Available support

Teaching institution

Education providers are required to provide reasonable adjustments where disabled people are placed at a substantial disadvantage. You will find that most teaching institutions today offer very good support for disabled students and will put in place the necessary support required for you to complete your studies. It is ultimately your responsibility to inform your teaching provider of your requirements.

Reasonable adjustments may include:

- provision of materials in a range of formats with a particular emphasis on the value of web-based provision
- timetabling and room provision to suit the needs of the student
- provision of study skills tuition
- special arrangements for exams and assignments including extra time, provision of an amanuensis or special equipment

It is important that you give advance notice of your needs to allow for the necessary assessments to be carried out. If you do not declare your disability and any special requirements during the application stage you must ensure you do so at least one month prior to starting the course. To find out more about the support and policies that individual education providers have in place, you should contact them directly or visit their website. Further guidance is provided in the 'Making the most of law school' article featured on the Lawyers with Disabilities Division website (*see useful contacts*).



Employer

It is an employer's responsibility to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that a disabled worker is not seriously disadvantaged when doing their job. The adjustments do not act as a substitute for skills needed to perform a job, adjustments may include:

- allowing flexibility and part-time working
- providing specialist equipment
- moving desks to ensure physical accessibility
- providing materials in alternative formats
- reallocating part of a job to another employee

If the adjustments required are not financially feasible for the firm/organisation or beyond reasonable there are external resources available that can help. 'Access to work' is a government scheme which can help cover up to 100% of the cost for the adjustments necessary to support you in your job.

Preparing yourself

Given the extremely competitive environment, forward planning and preparation is essential. It is highly recommended that very early on you start conducting your research on potential law firms that you might want to apply to. Early and thorough research will give you an understanding of the type of work a law firm undertakes and which clients they work with, this can help you establish the type of law firm that you can see yourself working in. Unless your desire for a career in law has been triggered by previous experience and events that created a special interest in a specific area of the law, it is advisable to spend some time getting a better understanding of the legal environment. A few ways of increasing your knowledge of the legal market might include:

- visiting libraries and websites for advice on relevant literature
- spending time in a court and sitting in on a trial
- reading the legal press
- visiting law fairs
- speaking to professionals
- attending open days and evenings hosted by law firms
- volunteering in legal environments

Find out what motivates you and where your interests are, as working as a solicitor will feel much more rewarding if you have an interest in the work you do.

Managing your time will be a challenge. You will need to think about how you will prioritise your time as the journey is extremely time consuming, with a lot of time needed for studying, researching, gaining legal work experience and writing applications. You will need to consider your financial situation. As tuition fees are high, make sure you have done any financial calculations beforehand. It is also worth bearing in mind that as of 1 August 2014, firms/organisations are no longer obliged to pay trainees a minimum salary above the national minimum wage. This may mean earning just above £12,500pa. The Law Society recommends that as a matter of good practice providers of training positions should pay their trainees a minimum salary of £20,913 in London and £18,547 outside of London, although you will find that the larger firms offer a starting salary higher than this. You must take this into account when considering your financial situation over the next few years.

Studying law is difficult, it requires time, dedication and a whole new way of thinking. Make sure you spend enough time evaluating what the next few years and your future life will look like, being a solicitor is rarely a 9-5 job. The more insight and knowledge that you have, the better equipped you will be to make an informed decision on whether it is the right thing for you.

Many people with disabilities have gone on to become successful solicitors with a rewarding career in law.

Routes to qualifying

If you do not hold a university degree, or the qualifications to apply for university, you can undertake a Quality Assurance Agency recognised Access to High Education Diploma. This qualification prepares you for studying at university. Most universities and colleges accept it as an equivalent to other level 3 qualifications. Most diplomas can be completed in a year but if you prefer to study over a longer period of time, some courses are offered in the evenings and by distance learning. To find out more, visit the Access to Higher Education website (*see useful contacts*).

Depending on your previous academic qualifications there are various routes to qualifying as a solicitor.

Equivalent means

Equivalent means allows the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) to recognise the knowledge, skills outcomes and standards which may have been achieved through other assessed and work-based learning. In these cases the SRA may grant exemption from all or part of the academic or vocational stages. To find out more visit the SRA website (*see useful contacts*).

Solicitors Qualifying Examination (SQE) – New route to qualification coming in 2020

In autumn 2020, the SRA will introduce a new examination that **all** prospective solicitors will need to pass in order to qualify. This examination will **replace** the current system. The new assessment aims to ensure everyone will meet the same high standard at the time of qualification. An outline of the new examination can be found on the SRA website (*see useful contacts*).

Apprenticeships

The legal apprenticeship is an alternative to the traditional graduate route to qualification. In most cases, an apprentice is an individual who will join a law firm straight from school, rather than going to university. Apprentices will be able to qualify as solicitors, legal executives or paralegals while working within a legal environment. Apprentices receive a salary and a blend of on and off the job learning. The standards expected of apprentice solicitors will be the same as those expected of all solicitors with the same rigorous assessments before they are admitted to the roll. It is not a requirement to study for a degree as part of an apprenticeship, although it is likely that a part-time degree will form part of many legal apprenticeships.

Legal apprenticeships are open to post A-level students and university graduates that have not completed the Legal Practice Course (LPC). The recommended minimum entry requirements are:

- 5 GCSEs including mathematics & english – grade C or above (or equivalent)
- 3 A Levels (or equivalent) – minimum grade C

Solicitor apprenticeships last five to six years. This may be reduced if exemptions from training are applicable. Further information can be found on the SRA website (*see useful contacts*).

The three main routes to becoming a solicitor in England and Wales are:

Qualifying law degree route

The stages include:

- Law degree
- Legal Practice Course
- Period of recognised training including Professional Skills Course
- Admission to the roll of solicitors



Non-qualifying law degree route

The stages include:

- Degree in any subject
- Common Professional Examination / Graduate Diploma in Law
- Legal Practice Course
- Period of recognised training including Professional Skills Course
- Admission to the roll of solicitors

Chartered Institute of Legal Executive (CILEx) route

This involves taking examinations set by CILEx.

Degree in law

If you decide to undertake an undergraduate law degree, with the intention of qualifying as a solicitor, it is important that you study a qualifying law degree as this covers the required foundation subjects (Contract, Tort, Criminal law, Equity and Trusts, Law of the European Union, Property law, Constitutional and Administrative law). Make sure that you research the universities you are applying to as this can have an impact on your future legal career; search their website, prospectus and make time to visit them. If you are applying for undergraduate law programmes at universities such as Oxford, King's College and UCL, then you must also take a National Admissions Test known as LNAT. The test does not test your knowledge of law or any other subject, instead it helps universities assess your aptitude for the skills required to study law. It is a two-part test, multiple choice questions based on passages of text and an essay. To find out more visit the LNAT website (*see useful contacts*).

Common Professional Examination / Graduate Diploma in Law

If you hold a non-law degree from a UK institution (or a foreign institution which the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) considers to be an equivalent) to qualify as a solicitor you will be required to undertake a conversion course known as the Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) or Common Professional Examination (CPE). The GDL/CPE is normally a one year course when undertaken full time. The cost of the course can be high with some institutions charging up to £11,000 depending on where you study. Further information on the conversion course can be found on the SRA website (*see useful contacts*).

This course is also suitable for those that have acquired career experience or an academic/vocational qualification that the SRA consider to be equivalent to an undergraduate degree. This is known as accreditation of prior learning. You should formally apply to your CPE/GDL provider if you think you may be eligible. Further information on eligibility can be found on the SRA website (*see useful contacts*).

Legal Practice Course

Once you are academically qualified you will need to undertake the Legal Practice Course (LPC) and secure a period of recognised training before you can refer to yourself as a trainee solicitor. The LPC ensures you have the necessary skills to work in a solicitors' office. It is advisable to secure a training position before enrolling on the LPC. Many larger firms provide sponsorship for the whole course fee or contribute towards it once you have secured training with them. The LPC is normally a one year course when undertaken full time. Some institutions charge over £15,000 for the course, it is therefore worth giving careful consideration if you are considering self-funding the LPC.

CILEx routes

Another option is to qualify as a solicitor through the Chartered Institute of Legal Executive (CILEx) routes. These routes involve undertaking examinations set by CILEx while working within a legal environment. There are various routes to qualifying via CILEx, depending on whether you have a qualifying law degree or not. The recommended minimum qualification requirement is 4 GCSEs or equivalent, including English Language or Literature. You would initially qualify as a chartered legal executive, you can then decide

to work as a chartered legal executive or go on to qualify as a solicitor. Whilst you would still be required to undertake the LPC you might, at the SRA's discretion, be exempt from the mandatory practice-based training if it is deemed that the work experience you have gained is relevant and sufficient. This is, however, not a guarantee and you would need to contact the SRA directly to obtain full details.

This route is attractive to some students as they feel better equipped to fund their studies as you 'earn as you learn', effectively studying part-time whilst working in a qualifying employment of a legal nature. To find out more about this route to qualification, visit the CILEx website (*see useful contacts*).

Funding opportunities

The government's student finance scheme is not available for post-graduate study. Postgraduate loans are not available for courses below Masters level, including shorter diplomas and certificates such as the LPC. However, many LLM (Master of Laws) programmes now include an LPC qualification and therefore may qualify. The government will provide up to £10,000 a year for taught and research Masters courses. There are other funding options available such as scholarships, grants, loans and trust funds. The Law Society operates a Diversity Access Scheme which offers help to exceptional individuals who face or have overcome exceptional obstacles to qualify as a solicitor. There are three elements to the scheme, full and partial funding of the LPC, work placements and mentoring support. To find out more about various funding opportunities, visit the Junior Lawyers Division website (*see useful contacts*).

In addition, if you have certain disabilities you may also qualify for a special support grant. To find out more about the loans and grants, visit the government's student loan page on their website. If you are in financial hardship, your university or college can offer financial support to disabled students who need help to stay in higher education, the amount and who receives it is decided by each university individually. You should apply to the student services department at your college or university. Disabled Students Allowances are based on your individual needs and paid in addition to your other student finances. They do not have to be paid back. The amount you receive will be decided once you have had a needs assessment.





Increase your chances of success

No one can market you better than yourself. As a disabled student it may be more challenging but it is not impossible. Much of it depends on how much time and effort you put in.

Academic achievements

To increase your chances and have more options of where you undertake your training, excellent academic qualifications are a must. Realistically, if you get anything below a 2.1 degree your chances of getting a training position with a larger firm are not impossible but they decrease significantly. However, if you can prove that there are mitigating circumstances for not achieving a 2.1, some firms will consider your application. Perhaps your disability affected your studies negatively or prolonged illness had an influence on your grades and maybe created gaps in your educational history. If this is the case, you should get in touch with the firms' HR department directly to explain your situation. It is important that you have evidence to back up your circumstances, such as a doctor's note or a letter from your university, and that you are able to demonstrate why you otherwise are a suitable candidate. Many online applications also include an area to explain mitigating circumstances.

Gain legal work experience

Legal work experience is key. With many candidates being academically excellent, gaining quality relevant work experience will enhance your application even further. Not having relevant work experience can therefore limit your chances of securing a training position.

It will be very challenging trying to explain why you want to work in law if you do not have any experience to relate to. Although some placements stand out more than others, any legal work experience is better than none. There are many options available and it is important that you treat your applications for work experience as seriously as you would job applications. The competition is strong with many trying to fill their CV with as much relevant content as possible to make them stand out when applying for a period of recognised training.



Undertaking a vacation scheme is one of the best experiences you can get. Once you manage to get your foot through the door, many firms will offer an interview for a training position if they are satisfied with your performance. Competition for vacation schemes is extremely high. Vacation placements are normally with larger law firms, sometimes paid and last between 1-4 weeks. This is a great opportunity to get a feel for a legal environment and start understanding your preferences.

Volunteering is another great way to gain valuable experience and make your CV stand out. Many free legal service providers, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and law centres accept volunteers and some even offer development and training opportunities. Another option is to get in touch with courts and see if they have any opportunities available. Getting a volunteer work placement at a law firm, although not very easy to achieve, is very beneficial. Send out letters expressing your desire to volunteer and ask if they need any help at all. Even if it is shadowing a solicitor, it shows future employers that you have a commitment to a career in law. You can search for local solicitors on the Law Society website in the 'Find a solicitor' section (see *useful contacts*).

Freelancing is another way of gaining valuable work experience, it can be everything from drafting contracts (which would then be approved by a qualified solicitor) to undertaking legal research. Often you can charge for the work you do.

If you do have the opportunity to choose, it would be preferable to gain legal work experience in areas relevant to the firms you will be applying to for training. However, any additional activities that you undertake during your studies, whether it be structured work placements, volunteering, shadowing a solicitor or active involvement in your university's student union, will help you convince an employer that you are committed and dedicated to law. Make it your goal to gain the maximum amount of legal work experience. Being able to demonstrate legal work experience on your CV and comfortably talk about it shows employers that you have had exposure to the legal environment and that you have made an informed decision about having a career in law.

Relevant experience

Although academic excellence and legal work experience are important factors, employers also look at what other attributes, valuable insight and experience you can bring to the firm/organisation. Before you can impress an employer in person you need to do so on paper. You need to be able to demonstrate the link between what you have to offer and the needs of the firm/organisation to which you are applying.

It may be that not all your previous experience will be relevant or of interest to an employer. Sit down and think about the knowledge, qualities, skills and insights that you have developed and more importantly, think about them laterally and how they are transferable.

Think about what general transferable skills you have acquired that are relevant to the solicitors' profession. Examples might include:

- team work
- commercial awareness
- negotiation
- meeting deadlines
- problem solving

Having this kind of experience can give you a clear advantage. It is important that you are able to demonstrate this in your applications.



Finding a period of recognised training

The final requirement to qualify as a solicitor is the mandatory two year practice-based training including the Professional Skills Course, which is spent undertaking supervised work in a law firm or organisation authorised to take on trainee solicitors. A good place to start researching those that offer training positions is TARGETJobs Law (*see useful contacts*).

Applying for training positions is often extremely daunting and time consuming, requiring patience and dedication. You may receive multiple rejections or no replies and you must be prepared not to get your first choices. The more informed you are, the more carefully you can target law firms/organisations to which you are suitable. Depending on your interests, it might be worth having a look at the Crown Prosecution Service and the Government Legal Service who both offer training and have a positive approach to equality and diversity. Your careers adviser might also be able to advise you on law firms/organisations that have a positive attitude towards equality and diversity.

Make sure you do extensive research; read the legal press to keep abreast of current affairs and think about being commercially aware. Firms want to feel that you can relate to the needs of their clients. Visit law fairs and other events attended by solicitors, speak to your student adviser, sign up to relevant online network groups, attend open days, speak to anyone who works in a legal environment. Make use of every single opportunity to network with the professionals. Learn the ethos of firms by reading their recruitment directories, what are their buzz words, do they put most value in ambitious, confident people, or do they prefer communicative team players. When you have narrowed it down to a selected few, find out all there is to know about the firms/organisations that interest you. This will give you an understanding of how you would fit in there. Research information such as:

- areas of practice
- information about them in the press
- their culture and ethos
- clients they work with
- the structure of their training
- retention rates after training

By knowing the firms/organisations you are applying to, you will better understand their needs and can therefore tailor your applications specifically to each, demonstrating how your skills, experience and personal attributes fit those needs. Before you can tell them what you can offer and how you are the right candidate, you need to know what they want. The importance of considering all your experience, skill sets, qualification and other achievements when targeting firms/organisations cannot be stressed enough. This is one thing that can make you stand out from your competitors. Academic excellence is important but almost taken for granted by employers. Employers look for many other attributes and skills that will be important and play a huge part as you progress through your legal career. You must be able to clearly demonstrate any transferable attributes and skills that you possess. It is therefore vital that you spend a good amount of time on each application. Ideally you should allocate at least a day for each to ensure you have perfected and tailored it specifically to each firm/organisation you are applying to. For more information on finding a training position and top tips for applications, visit the Junior Lawyers Division website (*see useful contacts*).

Finding a period of recognised training

The following free webinars that provide assistance with the application/selection process are available on the Law Society Professional Development Centre (see *useful contacts*):

- Things to consider before making an application
- Tips for getting ahead of the game
- CV and application tips
- How to survive interviews and assessment days

Admission to the roll

Once you have successfully completed your degree, Legal Practice Course, Professional Skills Course and period of recognised training, you can apply to the roll of solicitors in England and Wales, which entitles you to practise as a solicitor.

The SRA check the character and suitability of all applicants for admission and before the start of your period of recognised training.

If you know you have a character and suitability issue that may risk you not qualifying for admission, or you are unsure whether you may have an issue, it is very important that you disclose this as early as possible to the SRA and at least six months before you would anticipate starting a period of recognised training.

Disclosing your disability

When applying for positions it is your choice whether you decide to disclose your disability at the time of making your application. Deciding if and when to disclose a disability can be a difficult choice. Disclosure is an individual decision as there is no legal requirement for an employee to disclose their disability unless it is likely to affect their performance to meet the requirements of the job. If you require practical adjustments if called for an interview, it would be advisable that you arrange this beforehand to not only allow you to equally compete with other applicants but also to allow time for the employer to make any necessary arrangements. Requesting adjustments upon arrival can potentially limit your chances if such arrangements are not available.

There may be an advantage in disclosing your disability where firms are committed to equal opportunity policies that reflect non-discriminatory recruitment. Look out for the 'two ticks' disability symbol on job advertisements, this indicates that the employer has made a commitment to employing disabled people. This guarantees an interview to those that meet the minimum requirements of the job.

If you choose to disclose your disability at the time of your application, it is important that you do not under sell your abilities. Focus on the positive rather than the negative. You should only talk about your disability in terms of its relevance to your performance in the role. Emphasise how it has enabled you to further develop any skills that the firm/organisation might be looking for. Use terms that will demonstrate your suitability, such as, always achieving your goals despite any difficulties that you might face or your strong determination to always succeed thanks to your disability. With a positive attitude and by making positive statements about your disability, you can help remove any doubts that an employer might have. Many attitudes and assumptions made by employers are based on their lack of knowledge and experience, therefore, openly talk about any adjustments needed, this can help remove concern.



What does the law say?

The Equality Act 2010 provides a legal framework that protects disabled people from direct and indirect discrimination due to their disability. The Act defines a disabled person as someone who has a mental or physical impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

The law not only applies to all workers but also covers related areas such as further and higher education institutions, career guidance institutions, associations and vocational training providers.

At the time of recruiting, an employer is not allowed to ask questions about your health or disability prior to offering you a position unless their reasons for asking are to be able to make reasonable adjustments or to decide if you will be able to do something that is an essential part of the job. This means that there is no legal obligation to disclose your disability when applying for positions. You should, however, be aware that if you are in a position and choose not to disclose your disability, you will not be covered by the Equality Act 2010. If your disability affects your work performance in a negative way or places you at a health and safety risk, an employer cannot be accused of discrimination if unaware of your disability.

An employer is also obliged to make 'reasonable adjustments' to avoid you being put at a disadvantage compared to non-disabled people in the workplace.

Further information on disability discrimination and an overview of the Equality Act 2010 can be found at the Government Equalities Office website (see *useful contacts*).

Useful contacts

The Law Society

For information on becoming a solicitor and how the Law Society can provide support throughout your career.

www.lawsociety.org.uk

Solicitors Regulation Authority

For additional information on qualification requirements.

www.sra.org.uk

Law Society Communities

For information on all Law Society communities and the wide range of targeted support that is available to support you in your professional life:

www.lawsociety.org.uk/communities

Email: communities@lawsociety.org.uk

The Law Society communities include:

- Ethnic Minority Lawyers Division
- Junior Lawyers Division
- Lawyers with Disabilities Division
- Women Lawyers Division

Access to Higher Education

www.accesstohe.ac.uk

Chartered Institute of Legal Executives

www.cilex.org.uk

The National Admissions Test for Law

www.lnat.ac.uk

Government Equalities Office

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office

Law Society Gazette Jobs

The Gazette jobs provides access to the latest legal jobs:

www.gazettejobs.co.uk

TARGETjobs Law

For legal jobs and career guidance:

www.targetjobslaw.co.uk

Apprenticeships

For general information on apprenticeships:

www.apprenticeships.gov.uk

Case studies



Jane Silver-Frost

After entering the legal profession, Jane Silver Frost spent 14 years building a career as a respected criminal advocate before a road traffic accident left her disabled. The

resulting chronic medical condition that developed forced her to take medical retirement in 2001. After a 10 year absence from practice, due to her medical condition, Jane returned to work two years ago and now specialises in disability issues as a tribunal judge in the Social Entitlement Chamber.

Why did you decide to become a solicitor?

Initially I became a solicitor because I can't bear injustices and I have to get involved to resolve them. Having later learned about disability from the sharp end, I came back into law for the second time hoping to use my personal experiences to be of benefit to others.

What was your route to qualification?

I was already qualified and kept my name on the roll during my absence. To prepare myself for the return, I went on the Law Society's Returners Course and their Judicial Tips and Training Course.

How did you go about funding your studies?

When I became ill, I sold my house to pay for medical expenses and I used some of my remaining capital to pay for the costs associated with my return. I'm not in debt like most new lawyers, but I imagine there are few judges over 50 who are still renting.

At what stage of your route to qualification did you secure your training contract? How many applications did you submit?

I was appointed to the judiciary following my first application and I got the exact job that I wanted right away.

Did you disclose your disability at the time of applying for your current position and why did you make that decision?

Initially, I was embarrassed about my disability and sickness absence, I wanted to sweep it under the carpet and pretend to be 'normal'. However, after attending the Law Society's Returners Course, I decided to incorporate my 'specialist' experiences and turned my disability into my unique selling

point. I then applied for a job that involved assessment of sickness and disability and I was able to put myself forward as a person who would understand the issues much better because of my own experiences.

Has your employer had to make any reasonable adjustments to assist you in the firm/organisation?

I chose a part-time job deliberately so that I can decide how many days I work and I only travel to venues within a 30 minute drive. It does limit the work available for me but that way I don't cause inconvenience to anyone. I use special equipment that helps me to sit comfortably and I am given the only disabled parking space at certain venues. I am allowed to stay in hotels where the travel is excessive for me and I can claim first class rail to ensure a seat.

What is your current role?

Fee-paid Tribunal Judge of the First-tier Tribunal assigned to the Social Entitlement Chamber (Social Security and Child Support) jurisdiction. I sit with doctors and disability members to hear appeals from appellants who have been refused Employment Support Allowance and Disability Living Allowance.

Did you find any information sources particularly useful?

The Law Society's Returners Course told me everything about coming back to work after a long absence and their Judicial Tips and Training Course taught me a great deal about how to make a successful application to the judiciary. The Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC) website will tell you what you need to know about becoming a judge.

What advice would you give to anyone with a disability considering embarking on a career as a solicitor?

I would say apply to employers who are sympathetic and who welcome you and your disability. Life with a disability is hard enough without having to force yourself into a begrudging situation. The JAC has a transparent diversity policy and they do practise what they preach, I believe that most public sector bodies do. I feel very comfortable in the Social Entitlement Chamber: the staff deal with disability all day long, understand my condition and my difficulties and appreciate my contribution.



Warren Stapley

Warren Stapley was born with a severe hearing impairment and has worn hearing aids from the age of six, with varying degrees of success. In addition to his increasing reliance on hearing aids, Warren

has benefited from many years of tuition to assist with speech and lip-reading. A graduate of Oxford University, Warren trained with Slaughter and May and qualified as a financing associate before joining the London debt finance team of U.S. firm Kirkland & Ellis International LLP. Prior to qualification, Warren was elected to the Executive Committee of the Law Society's Lawyers with Disabilities Division (LDD) and maintains a keen interest in the way professionals manage disability in challenging work environments.

Why did you decide to become a solicitor?

I'd already concluded that being a 'lawyer' was a good thing before I really knew what lawyers actually did, having selectively absorbed enough information from a young age to make me believe (or at least, hope) that practising law was like Ally McBeal. Whilst I don't share Ally's tolerance for complete chaos, I did and do enjoy applying my mind to problems and working with the intricacies of language. This led to studying law, which led to my choosing to become a solicitor, having briefly considered a career at the Bar.

What was your route to qualification?

I completed a three-year law degree at Oxford University and attended several vacation schemes at UK City firms in my second year. On balance, I found my work experience with Slaughter and May to be the most 'authentic' and prioritised accordingly, targeting two or three (very similar) firms for my training contract applications. I secured my training contract with Slaughters at the end of my second year, and following graduation completed my LPC at BPP in London before commencing my training in September 2011.

How did you go about funding your studies?

Having completed my undergraduate degree before the outrageous rise in tuition fees, I haven't faced the same financial difficulty as many current students. Moreover, my postgraduate studies were funded as a condition of my training contract. However, I have mixed feelings on students self-funding a GDL/LPC in the hope of securing a training contract, particularly in these straitened times, as the demand for lawyers is no longer keeping pace with supply. For some it ends very well, whereas for others (and particularly when disability is added into the mix) my own view is that self-funding may be ill-advised.

Did you disclose your disability at the time of applying for your current position?

I did disclose my disability (a severe hearing impairment, for which I wear two hearing aids), although only once I'd secured an interview. I stop short of calling this approach a 'strategy', but I have sometimes refrained from declaring my disability on optional monitoring forms (sometimes found attached to applications) for fear that, notwithstanding my strong academics, premature disclosure might deny me the opportunity to prove myself at interview. My reasoning was that if I'm good enough on paper to be asked to meet a potential employer, I can, and indeed should, be open about an issue that potentially affects my ability to interact with people.

Has your employer had to make any reasonable adjustments to assist you in the firm/organisation?

Yes. After much trial and error, underpinned by good intentions and open dialogue, I now use a modified desk telephone for one-to-one calls and have been upgraded to a superior 'Polycom' unit for conference calls, an arrangement usually reserved for partners. I've also been given leave to attend my hearing aid appointments whenever necessary, the freedom to experiment with new technology and of course encouragement to fulfill my role as part of the Executive Committee of the Law Society's own Lawyers with Disabilities Division.

What is your current role?

I am a debt finance associate in the London office of Kirkland & Ellis International LLP, having moved shortly after qualifying into the banking and capital markets team at Slaughter and May. I'm pleased to report that both firms have been incredibly supportive.

Did you find any information sources particularly useful?

I'm especially grateful to my good friend Joanna Wootten, former Director of Information and Advice with the Business Disability Forum in London, an organisation which aims to help firms become more 'disability-smart'. A qualified lawyer despite being profoundly deaf, Joanna is a knowledgeable and inspirational figure within the disabled community and I feel privileged just to know her. I've also found my fellow LDD members to be a rich source of support, as well as those I meet through my work with the Law Society and its associated networks. As far as interview preparation was concerned, I made extensive use of the usual publications: Chambers, Target Law and even RollonFriday! I don't consider a firm's website a good way of assessing its culture, as most firms will present

themselves as leaders in their field, non-hierarchical and collegiate. Many firms actually are all of these things, but you usually have to canvass a wide range of sources to make an informed assessment.

What advice would you give to anyone with a disability embarking on a career as a solicitor?

First, reject quotas and positive discrimination. Given ever-increasing client expectations, a discernible rise in the quality of candidates and shrinking trainee intakes, the legal profession is no place for disabled applicants to feel entitled to that job, merely because they may have had to work harder than most to get the interview. Ask yourself whether you're at least as qualified as the upper percentile of candidates applying to that firm. Critically assess your position, revisit your CV and tailor your expectations and applications accordingly.

Second, be prepared to work very hard to reach the required standard. If you are determined to become a solicitor, be proud of your strengths, but know that you're definitely not: (a) the only person with a good degree from a well-established university; and (b) the only person who "really wants it". Leaving aside what you cannot change, become acutely aware of your most career-limiting weaknesses so that you can systematically address them. Whether it's obtaining more relevant work experience, ditching a victim complex or buying a suit that really does fit, it's all time well spent.

Finally, do not give up without a fight. Work hard, push yourself and exhaust your available options. If it doesn't work out for you, recognise when it's time to move on to something else. Having tried your best and risked failure along the way, you've shown what you're really made of – and have nothing to prove.





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