Getting a law job: the views of 15 city employers

John Caldwell and Natalie Baird, University of Canterbury, discuss their preliminary findings on recruiting and interviewing law graduates

Priority One of the New Zealand Tertiary Education (TEC) Strategy 2014–2019 provides that a crucial goal for tertiary education providers is “to ensure that the skills people develop in tertiary education are well matched to labour market needs”. This priority of delivering skills for the workplace has particular relevance for the more vocationally oriented university disciplines such as law; and while law schools will inevitably espouse an academic purpose and direction, they have always been conscious of the practical context in which they operate. After all, both law students and their prospective employers are ultimately concerned with the work-readiness of those who graduate, and this reality is increasingly being recognised by the various law schools’ growing emphasis on internship programmes and clinical legal education.

In order for law schools to respond meaningfully to the TEC strategy, and to workplace needs, it is clearly important to ascertain the perspectives and experiences of those who have recently employed law graduates. To this end, the Canterbury Law School’s Socio-Legal Research Group (which is undertaking aligned longitudinal research into the experiences and skills of the 2014 first year cohort of law students at Auckland, Canterbury and Waikato law schools), decided to commence a comprehensive research project into the views and experiences of employers of law graduates. This project is taking place in two phases over two years; the first phase was completed in 2015, and involved a series of qualitative hour-long interviews with 15 city employers of law students and graduates; the second is due to be completed in 2016, and will involve a much larger quantitative survey of employers in both the cities and provincial towns of New Zealand.

The qualitative interviews in 2015 were conducted in the cities of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, and the representative employers selected for interview (and who generously agreed to provide their time to the project) were: Air New Zealand; the Canterbury Community Law Centre; Chapman Tripp; the Christchurch City Council; Deloitte; the Government Legal Network; Lane Neave; Minter Ellison Rudd Witors; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Russell McVeagh; Saunders, Robinson, Brown; Taylor Shaw; Wynn Williams; YouthLaw Aotearoa, and an appellate court judge. Consistent with the granting of ethics approval from the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, the employers were provided in advance with a list of prompt questions, and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

The employers’ specific observations on law graduate skills will be analysed in a later article, but it quickly emerged during the course of the 15 interviews that the recruiting process and interviewing of law students became a very important determinant of what were reported to be generally positive subsequent experiences with the graduates employed. The actual law recruiting process therefore became worthy of separate analysis, and the findings from this project may well be of interest to law students and employers alike.

THE NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS

Applying for the first job following university study is a crucial and stressful step in any law student’s life. As one employer noted, this is the first time a highly intelligent and motivated student can tangibly see that all his or her effort and work at university could actually turn into a paying job. However, from both the student and employer point of view, the numbers of students applying for any one advertised position could be regarded as daunting, if not overwhelming. One employer dryly described the recruiting process as “bigger than Ben Hur”.

To provide some insight into the magnitude of the task, the bigger commercial law firms in the cities reported receiving between 400-500 applications for the 30-40 vacancies that they might have available for summer clerkships (taken up in the penultimate year of the law degree, and generally leading on to the offer of a full clerkship position following graduation). Another law firm employer reported receiving 350 applications for three positions, and a non-law firm employer had 200 applications for four openings.

The comment was frequently made that there were a lot more talented people in the field who would make great employees than there were jobs available, and one employer observed it was “incredibly frustrating” whenever a good graduate could not find an opening for his or her skills and talent.

THE FIRST FILTER — ACADEMIC ATTAINMENTS

Grades

In order to reduce the possible hundreds of applications down to more manageable proportions, the great majority of interviewed employers did employ some kind of grades filter as a screening device. In general terms, virtually all employers were looking for a Grade Point Average (GPA) of a ‘B’ average or above, while quite a few were focussed on an average of ‘B+’. The appellate court judge indicated that ‘A’ grades were generally expected for judges’ clerks.

With these city employers, it was clear that the GPA was primarily used for the purpose of reducing the number of applications to be actively considered by them; and with the
definite exception of the appellate courts, and the possible exception of one or two other employers, grades would very rarely, if ever, play any part at all in their subsequent substantive decision to employ. As discussed below, a student’s personal attributes and skills would prove much more decisive, and the way in which the student presented during the recruiting and interview process, would be the key determinant. The general approach was summarised by one employer who said while she looked at grades, she was “very aware” that grades would not necessarily predict whether a person was going to perform well. And, in the words of one large firm employer, grades are treated as only “slightly more important than hair colour”.

Accordingly, there proved to be no particular preference for Honours students amongst the city employers, and while a number stated they looked quite favourably upon any students who had done Honours courses, it was quite clear Honours students enjoyed no particular advantage by virtue of their Honours degree alone. Indeed, an occasional employer expressed some wariness that a straight ‘A’ Honours student might prove too academic or unworldly for their needs. One put it this way:

...I tell you what, I’d rather have a non-Honours graduate who works to put themselves through law school than an Honours graduate who didn’t ... supergeeks wouldn’t fit into this firm, to be honest.

Apart from providing some objective yardstick, the GPA was considered by a number of employers to be a useful and relevant screening device for the law recruitment exercise, in that academic achievement at law school could well serve as a proxy for wider talent and commitment. As one said, “if someone is able to make that achievement, that suggests given a new environment they will achieve there too”. Another indicated that ‘A’ and ‘B’ grades convey valuable information about the person’s work ethic, and would “tick the box” for the needed IQ.

**Specific subject grades and choice**

While the student’s overall GPA needed to be high at the initial screening stage, a number of employers additionally singled out the importance of grades for particular subjects. Thus one firm indicated that even with a high overall ‘B+’ GPA, a hypothetical ‘C’ in contract would be a “knockout”, unless there had maybe been a subsequent ‘B’ or ‘A’ in advanced contract. Another said the firm would be seeking a ‘B+’ at least for contract, but would not be too concerned about a low mark in criminal law. Another observed that good marks in property law were sought.

As one employer said, they were interested in the cognitive abilities in the more structured and relevant areas of law; and another indicated that the subjects chosen by the student might be looked at quite closely, as “you might get someone who might be very good but everything they have done is what you might call soft law as opposed to hard”. In the words of one, “a GPA can be swayed by subjects like French abstract movies”.

Putting specific grades to one side, there was a division of opinion as to whether the student’s subject choice of the optional law papers was a relevant consideration in the employment decision. Certainly company law was frequently cited as a subject that law firm employers would normally expect students to have studied, and for many employers it was a subject of critical practical importance.

One law firm employer commented that the number of applicants who had not done company law “astonished” him. For the larger law firms, however, they accepted that some students applying for summer clerkships in their penultimate year of study may not yet have completed company law, but would be planning to do so in their final year.

One employer did suggest that most students forgot the knowledge content of their degree “very quickly”, and that even students who had studied company law would often retain only the “sketchiest understanding”. Moreover, this practitioner felt it was “rare indeed” that the knowledge acquired in the degree was directly applicable to the day-to-day problems of legal practice. On this basis, some employers felt the graduate could acquire the requisite knowledge base on the job, and one firm admitted that there were people working in the commercial team who had not studied company law at university. One said the firm expected the university to have trained students with a set of skills rather than subject matter, and so “we discount the content of what they have done almost entirely”.

On the other hand, the comment was made that “fundamentally if you are not savvy enough in selecting your courses then it really questions to me their wider suitability”. Some law firm employers did display an open bias towards students who had done commercial subjects, and one employer stated they would look for the “best law student who has a very strong commercial focus”. A non-commercially oriented employer, however, felt that students should not stress about choosing the wrong subjects. She considered it was more important for students to have engaged with a breadth of legal areas, and that they could “connect with the purpose of being a lawyer and recognise that it is a career of service and [they should be] eager to learn through their working life”.

Similarly, other commercially oriented employers acknowledged the importance of students taking optional subjects that they loved, and would have fun studying. One said, “I still absolutely see the value of the academic pursuit”, and merely felt students simply need to be alert to the realities of the workplace world. Thus, in this particular employer’s view, a subject such as international human rights could be seen as “incredibly applicable, there’s just no money in it ... study is study and work is work, and not everything is about getting yourself primed up to a full-blown ninja on day one in law firms”.

**Double degrees**

A reasonable number of city employers did place some value on students having undertaken a double degree, and a few indicated that the conjoint degree might be of interest because it showed intellectual breadth and flexibility. One went on to say that the double degree also showed an ability to manage time, given that the LLB was “demanding” of itself.

While some of those employers who felt a double degree could help leaned in favour of the BCom/LLB, others favoured a double degree in the Arts, Fine Arts, or Music on the basis it showed a “broader intelligence” (or, in the case of one employer, because she thought graduates would be more likely to “get on with me in the office”). One employer specifically favoured diversity of thinking in the office, saying, “I’m conscious of not getting too much of one thing; if everyone has a commerce degree they’ll be taught to think in a certain way”.

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The student with lower academic grades

It emerged that employers were always open to the possibility of employing a students who did not meet the normal academic threshold. As one said “many of us got distracted in different ways over the time of varsity”, and this employer screened to see if a student was now through “varsity shenanigans” and had the “intellectual horsepower” to perform the job. Another who usually sought graduates who were “blisteringly intelligent” and “differentially smart” examined the trend line of a student’s transcript to determine if there was a strong finish to the degree.

That same employer said he would also review a person who had ‘C’ grade averages if the other elements were so strong “that we are going to say, ‘Wow, look at this person’”. Another employer told of an employee with “terrible” university grades who, as a result of personal contacts, had initially been employed for a temporary summer position and who had proved to be “particularly good” and a “star” within the firm.

In short, personal attributes and personality, as discussed further below, are generally perceived to be far more important for good lawyering than academic prowess at university. Indeed, as one employer observed, “a lot” of employers might even have a preference for employing a “beervizzling larrikin”, even though that person may be less intellectually capable, because “they know that will work well with their clients”.

PERSONAL QUALITIES AND EXPERIENCE

A couple of the larger employers, however, indicated that they sought not only the social gregarious graduate, who could connect well with clients, but also the more overtly intellectual graduate. Noting that people have different strengths, and that there were “horses for courses”, one large firm employer expressed the view that “not everyone needs EQ if you are a brilliant technical lawyer”. This employer said his firm had become better at seeking out introverts. Another similarly felt the opinion that extraverts did not necessarily make the best lawyers. Yet another said his firm would seek all types of personality, including the “propeller head” or “extreme intellectual”, and that while he was looking for “the perfect personality, there are so many shades of what the perfect person looks like”.

Having said that, it was clear from all 15 employers that a graduate’s ‘people skills’ was the personal attribute that was generally most highly valued; and an ability to relate well to clients and lawyers, and to fit easily into a firm or organisation’s culture, was of the utmost importance. Accordingly, one employer said he would be asking himself during the interview, “how am I going to work with, engage, and relate with you?”, another said he would be seeking “somebody who speaks our language, we can relate to, have a laugh with, socialise with”.

In similar vein, one employer in a law firm indicated that a “painfully shy” person would generally not pass muster, and another likewise noted that the “standalone, in the corner person doesn’t do very well”. One employer, however, ventured that he might possibly make some gender differentiations on the question of shyness, saying he was “probably more forgiving of an awkwardly shy woman than I am of an awkwardly shy guy” on the basis that he might expect the male to have “... sorted his shit [sic] out in a male centric world”.

Extreme over-confidence was seen as even more problematic, and a number of employers identified arrogance as a disqualifying attribute. As seen, the need for a lawyer to fit into the office environment was frequently identified as being of crucial importance, and employers said they would accordingly be quick to reject any applicants they sensed wanted to achieve status through the law, and were of the “hey I am here, I am a lawyer” type. Equally, they would avoid the “prima donna”, self-serving “hard, ultra-competitive, kill my co-workers in order to get ahead” types.

On the other hand the qualities of “controlled ambition” and drive (characterised by a couple of commercial law employers as “hunger” or “thirst”) were viewed in a positive light by many. Other qualities that were regarded as highly desirable were a strong work ethic, resilience, problem-solving skills, positive energy, independence, and a desire to learn and embrace challenges. Reflecting the nature of their specific work, some employers listed other desirable traits that ranged in nature from “commercial edge” to “public service affinity” and “empathy”.

An applicant’s curriculum vitae of extra-curricular activities and work experience is obviously very important in helping the employer determine whether the applicant might have the skills, understanding and background needed for the job in question; and the “impressive” nature of many students’ curriculum vitae was quite often commented on. Involvement in sport was highlighted by a few employers as being relevant to law employment. As one of those interviewed put it, “it’s not that you like them because they play rugby but it shows they can achieve at multiple things at once”. Another employer observed, “people who have been very successful in sport have often been able to generate patterns of behaviour that are necessary” for the teamwork needed in the workplace. That same employer also looked to see whether a student had done a moot, because “that shows a bit of bravery ... often that is harder than doing an assignment”.

Many employers valued an applicant student’s part-time work experience, as the applicant would thereby be assumed to have acquired teamwork, time-management, and other needed transferable skills. As one said, “sometimes you get blown away by people that have worked in a coffee shop with their customer service”. Another employer said she looked for voluntary service of a demonstrably significant kind, which had necessitated a “degree of sacrifice”, because that revealed the person had genuine principles and values that would give a “sense of meaning and purpose” to his or her work, and would help sustain him or her through difficult times.

The interview at the culmination of the recruiting process, discussed below, is obviously vital in helping the employer finally determine whether a particular applicant possesses the qualities needed for the job, although one employer did say his firm’s experience was that “often the people who come across as the most fun at interviews will not necessarily be the most well-rounded and confident people”, and he felt that a vivacious nature and persona may be “hiding some other shortcoming”. Another said she was less interested in people who presented really well than in people who will “develop well”.

Finally, it emerged that a considerable number of employers would be looking for “gems that haven’t come out of [a] blueblood, fortunate environment”. Many employers expressed open admiration for applicants whose success had not “all
been handed to them on a plate”. As one said, “if you have not had a silver spoon and are doing well at University, we are going to say ‘wow’”. Speaking of an outstanding employee, one employer narrated:

... he was a son of a solo mother, grew up on the wrong side of town, rough as guts, and he'd started working at the local supermarket from the third form. And he was so proud of the fact that he had left university without debt because he paid for it all himself ... that's someone you just grab and you just watch them evolve.

Other employers valued skills learned in other environments. One employer highly valued the skills and solid work experience gained by many of their employees at McDonalds especially where they had “worked their tail off” through school and university. Another employer described the occasion when a young woman said she could back a trailer, and he responded “well you've got the job”.

THE RECRUITING PROCESS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Reflecting the supreme importance of employing the best possible applicant, the larger firms and organisations in the cities devoted a considerable amount of time and resources to the recruiting process. In the smaller law firms and organisations, without human resource specialists or teams, the employers might rely simply on an interview.

For one large employer, the recruiting process in fact extended over 8 weeks: a pre-screening questionnaire would be followed by an online interview, where around 30 of the applicants would be asked pre-established questions (which they had not seen, and which, testing an ability to perform under pressure, had to be answered within 3 minutes), and then for the final 15 candidates there was a ‘situational test’ where the candidates were given 24 hours in which to provide written answers for 3 hypothetical scenarios. Another employer similarly employed a video interview where applicants were asked 5 “unusual” questions that needed to be answered within a minute.

A number of the larger law firms and organisations used deliberate ‘touch points’ prior to the interview which included social functions and ‘informal’ coffee meetings. During these social occasions, student applicants were being lightly appraised for their personal qualities such as relationship building. One employer described it thus:

[we] have a function and it is important for us to see those candidates being able to come up and hold a conversation with us much in the same way that they would in time with clients at functions.

The employer would assess “are they going to be able to engage people and be someone that a client would think ‘yes, I really enjoy working with them’?”. Another employer included an activity whereby the applicant conversed with a simulated client over the phone.

Throughout the recruiting process, these larger employers were endeavouring to identify the applicants whom they consider would not have the right levels of skills, teamwork, passion, engagement, care, and work ethic needed for the job. Some students in fact eliminated themselves from consideration at the outset, either by displaying poor written expression in their CV or submitting a standard CV that had simply been tweaked in a minor way.

Interestingly, a couple of employers declared they now specifically eschewed any psychometric testing. One did so because he felt there was no real scientific validity behind the tests; the other had abandoned them because “the level of competition from graduates is so high we have seen it [psychometric testing] as having negative effects on getting people in the door”.

At the interview itself, however, a number of employers would frequently ask targeted and pre-planned questions. Aware that numerous websites (for example, the Auckland Law School and the New Zealand Law Society) set out a number of standard law job interview questions, one employer said he would specifically try to avoid the more common-place and predictable lines of questioning. Hence, in a preliminary online video interview, one of the questions asked of applicants might be: “What is the key political thing you are concerned about in New Zealand at the moment?”. At the final face-to-face interview, some of the questions asked by the 15 employers included: “Why Law?”, “What can we do for you?” “Can you tell us about an example where you went the extra mile?” “What do you think are the key ingredients of client service?”, “How do you keep up with the business world?” and “Can you tell me about the Lawyers and Conveyancers Client Conduct Rules?”.

CONCLUSION

A qualitative survey of 15 city employers can only produce preliminary findings, and our 2016 quantitative study of employers working in both the cities and provinces will serve to either confirm or disprove what emerged from these hour-long interviews. The 2016 findings will also help inform the longitudinal study currently being undertaken by the University of Canterbury's Socio-Legal Research Group into the experiences and expectations of New Zealand law students (as to which see <www.laws.canterbury.ac.nz>). With those qualifications, three observations can be made.

First, there is clearly an impressive amount of young law student talent on offer, and the city employers often expressed genuine admiration and respect for those applying for their vacancies. As one employer said, “the CVs are ten times better than ours at the same time”.

Secondly, and entirely in line with the findings of two employer surveys conducted in the 1990s by one of the authors (see [1990] NZLJ 428 and [1999] NZLJ 438), it remains true that “personal attributes will decisively trump grades in terms of the final selection decision”. Once a student has been chosen for the recruiting process and interview, the decision to employ will generally all come down to the student’s personal qualities.

Thirdly, and importantly, with the available jobs in law ranging widely in nature from working with vulnerable children to working with large multi-national corporates, the personal attributes being sought by a particular employer may well vary considerably. For this reason it is far from trite to suggest ‘there is a place in law for everyone’.

At the time of writing, the job market fortunately appears to be reasonably positive, with 41 per cent of law firms looking to increase staff numbers at the end of 2015 (as reported by Samantha Woodhill, NZ Lawyer, 4 December 2015). Law students should feel confident that a good blend of academic and personal skills will equip them well in their quest for their first professional job.