

## Law Society of Scotland Careers Podcast Transcript



### Podcast Transcript

**Topic:** Careers – Summer Placements and Traineeships:

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### [Collette]

Thanks for downloading the law Society of Scotland's second podcast on careers. The second podcast follows on from last year's podcast for people considering embarking on the LLB, particularly school pupils. Now, we assume you are an LLB student and in this podcast were hoping to answer some questions for those of you enjoying your course and thinking about careers in the Scottish legal profession. As a law student you'll know that when you start the course, chatter quickly turns to summer placements and traineeships. However, it's difficult to know just how serious you need to be about that or how early you need to start!

As an LLB student you should always remember that securing a traineeship is a separate process for securing a place on the Diploma in legal practice. You currently need to study the Diploma before you commence a traineeship, and places on the course are awarded on the basis of performance in the professional subjects. Were not talking about the Diploma today, so for further information, don't hesitate to call the Society, and I'll be giving out our contact details at the end of this podcast. Make sure you have a pen and paper handy.

Back to summer placements and traineeships and I've invited some members of the profession to the offices of the Society to share their thoughts and experiences with us. They have done what your doing, but have followed slightly different paths into the Scottish legal profession, and now work in quite different corners of the profession, from a privately managed investment management business in Edinburgh to commercial private practice to a local authority. Carolina Viola is head of legal and compliance at SVM asset management limited. Claire Gilmore is a litigation solicitor in the court department of Glasgow City Council and finally Cash Siersma is a trainee Solicitor with Burness.

Firstly Carolina, Claire and Cash are going to reflect on their own path to qualification and then I'll be asking them some specific questions about placements and traineeships. We hope you find this podcast very useful as you continue with your quest to enter the Scottish Solicitors profession.

**[Collette]**

Carolina, how did you end up where you are today?

**[Carolina]**

When I started doing my law degree, I didn't have a clear idea of which subjects I wanted to study long term or where I wanted my career to go, I just knew I wanted to study law and I was very keen to go to University. By the end of my first year, you get a taster of quite a number of courses in that time. It became quite obvious to me at the end of first year that I really enjoyed the contract and commercial side of things, and that was the area that I wanted to concentrate on. After second year and choosing honours degree subjects it was at that stage I decided to try and find a trainee-ship. Once I had decided that commercial and contract law was for me, I was able to target more effectively the types of firms that I wanted to work for and for a trainee-ship with. I wouldn't say that applies to everyone however, so I would suggest waiting until your second or third year before applying for summer placements, so you have a better idea of what you want to do. In the meantime, in the summers in between I would either continue with on with your summer job that you may have already had just to get some life experience before you go to a law firm. Too many students I think go into private practice without having much experience of the outside world, and it is very useful to do that before you go into private practice or do your traineeship.

**[Collette]**

What about you Cash?

**[Cash]**

I myself moved across three different continents. I had quite a unique upbringing, and after attending 11 schools I ended up at the University of Edinburgh to study English literature and Business, but I really felt that Law was definitely the subject that I wanted to go back to and continue. The University was very flexible and even though I had to make some sacrifices I went back, did the accelerated LLB at Edinburgh and after that the Diploma, but I definitely would say that any life experience you can get is key, whether that is undertaking several placements at different firm and in different cities, and even in other countries. I was able to a placement at Burness, which is a large commercial practice firm in Edinburgh, but I also undertook a 3 month placement in Brussels working in-house in an industry type practice so I think the more variety you can get and the more serious you are about it, really cast your net wide, do your research well in advance and that will just ensure that you get the most out a demanding and competitive career.

**[Collette]**

And Claire, how did you end up where you are today?

**[Claire]**

Well unlike Carolina and Cash, I entered the profession as a mature student, undertaking my LLB at Strathclyde in 2000. I really enjoyed all of the subjects on the degree course and wasn't really clear about where I wanted to go with my career until possibly about third year. I decided at that point to undertake a series of summer placements, two within local authorities and one within a large commercial firm, which saw me working in Glasgow and Edinburgh at that time. I really kind of decided

at that point that local authority was where I was going to pursue the rest of my career in the public sector. I finished my Diploma and took a year out to work in a local authority doing a different job, and then got my traineeship from there on. I completed my traineeship and have been working as a full time qualified Solicitor ever since.

**[Collette]**

Carolina, it has been said that because of competition the summer placement is the new traineeship. At what stage does someone need to start thinking about summer placements? How early is too early?

**[Carolina]**

I think were operating in a much more competitive environment than when I did my traineeship, so I would recommend certainly looking from second year onwards for a placement if possible. If you don't manage to get A summer placement, it's not the end of the world. There are obviously summer jobs to be had elsewhere. I just think the important thing is to get as much experience as you can as we said earlier. The more that you can bring to a traineeship for a firm, the more attractive your CV is going to be to that firm. They don't want someone who is completely green, has no experience of dealing with members of the public or business people. They want someone who is confident and has something that they can bring to the firm.

**[Collette]**

Tell us about your summer placement Cash?

**[Cash]**

My summer placement, the one I did here in Edinburgh was at Burness, which is a commercial practice and of course different firms vary in how they structure theirs. Mine personally was over a 6-8 week period. The work that I did could be anything from researching, attending client meetings or drafting. Some organisations will seat you in different departments to ensure you get a real feel for it and to maximise your exposure really, to all sides of their business and the way they operate.

**[Collette]**

Claire, you've done three summer placements. As a student what should you be hoping to get out of a summer placement?

**[Claire]**

Well I think the Degree and the Diploma to an extent are practical courses and academic courses which act as a bridge between University and finding a job, but a summer placement gives you a real insight into what it's actually like to work in law firm or in house, wherever you actually go. If you enjoy your experience whilst your there its a good sign that your going to enjoy a traineeship with that company, so as Cash was saying earier, if you target companies that your really interested in, then the likelihood is that your going to find out whether you'll enjoy that or not. if you don't enjoy your experience, on the flipside then I suppose it gives you an insight that law maybe is not the career for you, and it's good to find out at that stage what other options are open to you during your degree course.

**[Collette]**

And when you embarked on the Diploma, you will have quickly realised that although you did a summer placement, others students had not. Do you think you performed better on the Diploma as a result?

**[Claire]**

I would probably say yes to that. I think going into the Diploma which is obviously practically based and is designed to help the students bridge the gap between University and practice, the small element of insight that you get from a summer placement that you get from a summer placement does help you to perform more effectively and get more out of the diploma given that it is a practically based course.

**[Collette]**

Carolina, you eluded earlier to the fact that if you don't secure a summer placement that's it's not the end of the world, and there are lots of other things that you can do to make yourself attractive to an employer. What should a student do if they can't fit in a summer placement or have been unsuccessful in trying to secure one?

**[Carolina]**

I think the important thing is, is to do something productive with your time out during the summer. Some law firms are more interested in looking at candidates who have been a bit more creative with their time in between Degree courses, and if you can bring something to them that's different from everyone else's CV, then that will make yours stand out that little bit more. I'm not talking about going on operation rally or something like that, but something along that line does help. I think just being practical. Take for example if you were working in a Fringe festival venue then you would be dealing with members the public and you would have to learn to communicate well and work effectively as a team member. Those kind of skills are equally important as some of the academic skills you will pick up on the degree course, so I think the important thing is not to become disheartened if you get turned down by law firms if you get turned down by law firms for summer placements, but try and use the time effectively in some other work.

**[Collette]**

Cash, your placement was with Burness solicitors and you subsequently embarked on a traineeship with Burness, so these two things were linked. Is the summer placement always linked to the traineeship?

**[Cash]**

No, it's not but I would say more and more now it's becoming an important initial step to take before going onto a traineeship. Commonly you will have done a summer placement and a lot of law firms whether they are medium or large will recruit multiple summer students, as their ultimate aim is to attract the best quality candidates for the traineeships, so in that sense bar none it's definitely a great head start. If you do secure a traineeship once you've completed a summer placement as I did, it does allow you to really focus on the task at hand which can be quite a stressful time in your fourth year before starting work.

Some people I know have spent summers doing back to back summer placements, and the advice I got was to really be upfront about doing this, because with the demand out there and competition, there aren't really enough traineeships out there for all those seeking them, so its important to really make sure you are focused, and if you are casting your net wide, to make sure you are aware of what you want to get out of it I think.

**[Collette]**

Moving on from the summer placement. We have already heard that the summer placement is sometimes linked to the traineeship, but some times its not. How would a student go about securing a traineeship not having secured a summer placement?

**[Claire]**

Well as with summer placements, law firms will use a variety of methods to attract prospective trainee solicitors, whether that be ones that have done summer placements or not. It's a difficult time for the law profession at the moment with the credit crunch and obviously firms are being more selective than usual in the people that they choose. There are more students seeking traineeships than traineeships available, and that applies to places on the Diploma as I understand it as well at the moment. However some sectors recruit at different times. Large commercial firms like the commercial firms that Cash has been discussing often recruit up to two years in advance. Smaller firms and perhaps more in-house organisations recruit closer to the start of the traineeships. This would include the crown office, procurator fiscal service and local authorities as well. I think basically firms are looking for people who have enthusiasm and commitment to practicing law and making it a good career. Students are required to balance securing a traineeship as well and choice in that regard, with securing a traineeship at all, and remembering that once they are qualified there is far more choice available. Although the choice of traineeship is important, it's perhaps therefore not as important as making sure you're fully qualified completely.

**[Collette]**

Claire, you did three summer placements. Would you say that different organisations have different atmospheres?

**[Claire]**

Very much so Collette. I think again it depends on the organisation. My three placements were within local authority and a large commercial firm. I have never worked in a small private law firm. I would imagine that would be a very different atmosphere to large organisations whether that be in the public or private sector.

**[Collette]**

Tell me about the assessment centre Cash. What is the assessment centre?

**[Cash]**

Well, there's no escaping it really. It is something you have to go through for a lot of the interview processes. It's really is just a set of exercises which are devised to test different skills. These could range from entry exercises, group negotiations, psychometric testing, as I have done and of course the traditional interview, just a Q and A session, and even sometimes presentations being asked of you as well. Some firms I know have only recently started using assessment centres. It's not always a prerequisite.

**[Collette]**

What's the worst thing a student could do in trying to secure a traineeship?

**[Cash]**

I know there is one bad thing, one really bad thing that you really shouldn't do, and that is to send the same application to a number of law firms. I myself am ashamedly admitting that I've forgotten to use the spell checker or found that the firm name appeared twice in an application. You just don't want to come across as unprofessional and uncaring. They take a lot of time these forms but you should really put the energy in, because firms put the time and energy into finding you as well, so I would definitely say take some time to make sure that each one is individual.

**[Claire]**

And definitely tailor it to the organisation that you are aiming for. The more you show at the interview that you have learned about the organisation as well, then it always goes in your favour.

**[Carolina]**

I think it is really useful to keep up to date with what's happening in the news as well, read the local papers, read the business pages, find out what the firms have been up to. If it is not a business organisation you want to go to find out what has been happening in courts, if it is litigation work you are interested in or family law, just try and find out what the firm has been up to recently, if they have been involved in any large deals, transactions, court cases, it is important that you are aware of these things and if you can bring something like that into the conversation I think it helps to show how enthusiastic you are about that particular firm.

**[Collette]**

And if you had one top tip for a student looking for a traineeship, what would that be, or does some of it hinge on the interview and the day itself?

**[Carolina]**

At think a lot of it does hinge on interview and how well you come across. I think a top tip I could give is try and be as confident as you can without being arrogant. You must always appreciate that you are at a very early stage of your career and you know very little compared to the person who is interviewing you about the particular area of law you want to study. So show some humility and listen to what they are saying, try and answer questions that they put to you and not answer the questions you would have liked them to put to you. I think that's probably one of the most important things to remember.

**[Collette]**

Are there any other top tips?

**[Claire]**

I think use your University career service. It is often a fountain of knowledge and they keep maintaining links with firms as well. They will also review your CV for you and give you invaluable interview experience and run mock interviews.

**[Collette]**

Does personality count?

**[Carolina]**

I think personality is hugely important, and how you interact with the person interviewing you, once you get passed psychometric testing and once you get a foot in the door, I think that is hugely important. The old phrase "you don't get a second chance to make a first impression" is hugely important in this business, more than any other. I think it is very important to take care to turn yourself out as well as you possibly can to give the best possible first impression. So turn up early, never ever turn up for an interview late, or make the interviewer wait for you to turn up, because you will just get off on a bad footing, you will be nervous and not have time to prepare, so always turn up a bit early, take a newspaper with you, so you can sit in reception and just have time to calm down and collect your thoughts, you don't necessarily have to read the paper, but think about what you are going to say in your interview.

**[Collette]**

The interviewer is interviewing the student for the summer placement and they are looking for something. Is the student looking for something?

**[Cash]**

I think so, coming back to the importance of interviews as well, what's so useful about summer placements is that it is in a sense a long term interview and a chance for you to really get a sense of the type of organisation that you are going into and I think it is quite reciprocal, and it is a chance for them to really see who you are, not just through a psychometric test but through an extended period of time, and it gives you a chance to walk the halls, interact with all the employees on a day to day level and make sure that you are the right fit for the organisational as well.

**[Collette]**

It was mentioned earlier that there is a balance between securing the traineeship of choice and securing a traineeship at all, because just now it is very competitive, so Carolina, what should someone do if they don't manage to secure a traineeship?

**[Carolina]**

As we all know, there is no easy answer to that, there is no secret to securing a traineeship and some people will be disappointed, but having been through a law degree you have a fantastic means of moving on into many spheres. There are lots of different jobs that would throw their arms open to having a legally qualified person come on board. You don't necessarily have to be a solicitor to be able to use the skills that you have learnt through your University years. It's not about just learning laws and regulations, it is about how to research, how to apply thoughts in different ways and how to interpret situations and look for different solutions. I think you must always remember that if you have managed to walk out with a Degree from a University, you have got a hugely attractive means of offering skills to any employer and you must keep your mind open to other opportunities that are out there.

**[Collette]**

Speaking to the three of you today, it has become very clear, that there are opportunities to work in so many different practice areas in Scotland and that there are opportunities to work in house as well as in private practice. If someone doesn't secure the traineeship of choice and they have to do a traineeship in private practice when they actually want to work in-house, how easy is it to make the shift from private practice to in-house or the other way round. Is that a difficult move to make?

**[Carolina]**

I moved from private practice to in-house after having spent five years working for a major law firm. I would say it is an easy transition to make because if you are staying with the same sphere that you have been working in the past, you are just further developing those skills and applying them to one particular client, and if anything it is easier, because you are only working for one client, as opposed to working for many, and have the distraction of lots of different transactions going on at the same time, so I think it is an easy transition to make.

It's not a step that be can taken lightly either because you don't want to be typecast, for example, if you started out in a very general traineeship and a very general law firm and you still weren't sure what to do, and then you chose to go in-house, it can sometimes be difficult to go back the way to private practice, if your experience is very limited to what that private company does, so you have to bear that in mind, but it can be a hugely rewarding career choice, having the one client to work for.

**[Claire]**

I think in my experience having done my traineeship in-house and continued to work as a qualified solicitor in-house, I think the range of skills that I have learned during that time would be quite easily transferable to private practice. I know certain areas of law, particularly planning, large commercial firms seek people who have been in-house because of the experience they have gained in particular legislative sectors.

**[Collette]**

Is someone who is seeking a traineeship in-house required to be more pro-active than someone looking for a commercial practice traineeship?

**[Claire]**

I think large firms seek pro-active trainees the way in-house organisations or smaller firms do as well. I don't think more pro-active, I think as pro-active, and certainly with regard to in-house, from my perspective, a keen eye for legislative and regulatory work as well.

**[Collette]**

Unfortunately, that is all we have got time for, so thank you to Carolina, Claire and Cash for sharing their views with us. We might have reached the end of this podcast but this is only the second in a planning suite of careers podcasts. These will tackle the critical stages of the route to qualification as a solicitor and the decisions that law students and trainee solicitors are required to make along the way.

To find out about other projects that might be useful during your years on the LLB, Diploma in Legal Practice and as a Trainee Solicitor, log onto

[www.lawscot.org.uk/training](http://www.lawscot.org.uk/training) and log on to [www.syla.co.uk](http://www.syla.co.uk) to find out more about what the Society and the Scottish Young Lawyers Association can do for you.

And remember if today's discussion hasn't answered a particular question you had about summer placements and traineeships, why not contact the Society's Education and Training Department on 0131 226 7411.

Lots of luck in making your choices!