

Working as a PSL

PSLs are increasingly becoming a vital resource within law firms as

Lynnsey McCall of Taylor Root explains....

Firms that employ PSLs

During the 1990s firms recognized that it was necessary to make a significant investment into the resources available to support their fee-earners. During the downturn in the market, this investment slowed down and many firms turned to fee-earners who were under utilised to assist with precedent creation, writing articles and marketing initiatives. With the change in the economy there has been a marked increase in the number of PSL roles, thus providing significant opportunities for talented fee-earners who are seeking to escape the grind of transactional work.

Until relatively recently, PSLs were only found within the major UK practices, but this is no longer the case as many of the medium-sized UK firms have recognized the value that can be added by having a lawyer, or team of lawyers dedicated to supporting the fee-earners. In addition, whereas PSLs were rarely found in US firms, many of the more established US firms have started to recruit PSLs for the core practice areas. The size of the PSL function varies from firm to firm, with some firms having over a dozen PSLs in disciplines such as Finance, Capital Markets and Corporate.

What do they do?

PSLs currently work across all disciplines. The larger teams of PSLs tend to be in the core areas of Corporate, Banking, Capital Markets and Litigation, although increasingly firms are appointing PSLs in the more niche areas including FSA, Pensions and Employee Benefits. The roles vary from firm to firm but will include some or all of: establishing and maintaining precedents, know how co-ordination, keeping fee earners up to date via newsletters and dealing with queries, organizing and providing training and helping

with internal/external marketing. There is plenty of interaction at partner level and roles do require support lawyers to be approachable, motivated, proactive and outgoing. There is also often the opportunity to become involved in maintaining the firm's web site and intranet. Increasingly, there is scope for senior PSLs to have input on strategic issues within the department which is typically in respect of client development and marketing initiatives.

Qualifications

Firms generally look for qualified lawyers with a minimum of two years experience. The work is often intellectually challenging so strong technical ability, good drafting skills and experience as a fee-earner are prerequisites. This ensures that they will be aware of the practicalities of being a fee earner and the pressures on and needs of a practising lawyer. It also means that they are more likely to have credibility within the department and that it will be easier for them

to command respect from the assistants/partners in the particular department. Previous experience as a support lawyer is not always necessary at the more junior level but is expected for roles heading up a team of PLSs or where a lawyer is developing a greenfield site. A number of firms have recruited Partners who are looking to move away from transactional work to head up the PSL function.

Hours

One of the main reasons for many lawyers moving to PSL roles and away from the distinct pressures of fee-earning are the hours. Although many PSLs work extremely hard, the hours tend to be much more predictable and you are much more able to control your working day. There is also the possibility of working on a part-time basis. With improvements in technology, an increasing number of firms are recognizing that a PSL's work can be undertaken on a flexible basis, away from the office.

Salaries

Salaries vary from firm to firm. Firms generally pay their PSLs as equivalent to fee-earners with a discount of around 10% to reflect the more regular hours and the move away from the pressures of fee earning. At many firms, PSLs are entitled to a bonus, albeit that it may not be at the same level as that awarded to fee-earners. Naturally, if working on a part-time basis, salaries and holidays will be pro-rated.

Career development

Progression for senior PSLs varies from firm to firm but there are an increasing number of top tier City that can offer partnership or directorship prospects.

If you would like to know more about these roles or would like a free copy of our guide, *Working as a PSL*, please contact Lynnsey McCall on 020 7415 2828 (lynnseymccall@taylorroot.com) or write to her at Taylor Root, Fleetway House, 25 Farringdon Street, London EC4A 4SR.