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Working remotely as a trainee solicitor

Transcript

00:00:02 Husnara Begum

Hello and welcome to this Law Society podcast, in which we'll be sharing top tips for starting a virtual training contract. My name's Husnara Begum and I'm a former city lawyer/ turned legal journalist/ turned careers consultant and soft skills trainer. Much of my work includes supporting aspiring lawyers to flourish at work. I'm really pleased to be joined for this recording by trainee solicitors Kyria and Sajeed, who will be sharing their firsthand experiences of training remotely.

Kyria is currently a third-seat trainee solicitor at RW Blears, a legal firm which provides corporate tax and regulatory advice to individual and institutional investors. She studied Law at the University of Surrey and, before joining Blears as a trainee, she worked as a paralegal at a top national law firm.

Sajeed, meanwhile, read Law at the University of Leicester and is now a second-seat trainee solicitor in the Real Estate disputes team at Trowers and Hamblins. Prior to starting his formal legal training, Sajeed worked in-house for a property/ construction company.

Hi to you both! How are you finding lockdown 3.0, Sajeed?

00:01:20 Sajeed Jamal

Yeah, hi Husnara, nice to speak to you. Yeah, it's been good. It's been very busy as well. I just tried to have a blinkered approach to the lockdown, if that makes sense.

00:01:35 Husnara

Okay, (...) I'll ask you to explain what "blinkered" means in a minute. Kyria, how about you? How are you coping with the third lockdown?

00:01:45 Kyria RW Blears

Yeah, I'm doing great. It feels like a year has gone by relatively quickly and work has been busy as well. So yeah, just carrying on and trying to stay positive as much as possible.

00:01:59 Husnara

Okay, so Sajeed, I wanted to start with you because you've only really had one proper day of trading in a physical building because, am I right in thinking that the country went into lockdown literally the day after you started at Trowers?

00:02:16 Sajeed

Yeah, that's correct. I had my induction and I think it was the 2nd day of the induction when London went into lockdown. So what we normally do at Trowers is we have a three-week induction process where we go to the London office, we meet all the trainees from all the other

offices, we have social events and network and just get to see the firm in action and learn all the processes. And yeah, the lockdown came on the second day, so I found myself working back at home and only having one day in the office.

00:02:52 Husnara

How did you find that? Presumably, the first stop was a trip to Argos.

00:02:58 Sajeed

Yeah, so basically... I don't have much apart from my laptop so Trowers kindly sent the phone and a few other equipment, and I went to Argos and bought myself a home workstation and that managed to come that day actually. and I set myself up ready to work from home, which was a bit of an unusual experience because I was expecting I'd be working in the office and speaking to different people, but I was at home.

00:03:30 Husnara

And what was your initial reaction? What did you think? Were you worried about the future or did you think this is going to be a short thing? What went through your mind at the minute the lockdown was announced at such a critical stage in your career?

00:03:44 Sajeed

The first thing that came to my mind was... because we were in London and every time I've been to London it's been very busy, but the streets were less crowded, so I realised it was something (...), it wasn't like a small thing that was going to happen. So, the main thing was just to get out of London and get home because I didn't want to be stranded in London in the hotel and then I wouldn't be able to leave. So that was the main thing. And then the second thing was what would happen to my training contract. But luckily Trowers emailed everyone to say "look, nothing is going to happen, we're working the same as before and we're carrying on working as normal" and they'll let us know if anything does happen or change. And it's just been that process. I was quite happy that we adapted quickly in that situation, but it's been difficult as well.

00:04:39 Husnara

Okay, and what about you, Kyria? Because you're in your third seat, as I said, so you presumably experienced your first few months of being a trainee in a building, so to speak.

00:04:53 Kyria

Yeah, that's right. So yeah, I started a year and a half ago now. That seems a long time, but I had the opportunity to work with my team on the ground and being able to have conversations in the kitchen, which is always good for trainees, and just getting to know your colleagues. So, for me the experience really was trying to recreate the office experience, but at home.

Now, unlike Sajeed, I didn't immediately set up a home office coz the initial feeling was that it would only last for about 3 months or so and then we'd be back; but it's not until things started to last a little longer that I thought about ways I could settle down well at home and still maintain communication with my team. So just in terms of the transition, so just thinking about... Okay, I had a laptop, which I was given well before the lockdown, so that was quite useful. I also went

out and bought equipment just to try, so printers and other office supplies that I didn't have right then and there and so that's been really what I tried to do the first time.

00:06:09 Husnara

What was the biggest change for you other than not being able to walk along the corridor and ask a colleague a question or for help or advice?

00:06:13 Kyria

I would say the learning experience. As a trainee, you often learn by overhearing conversations. You know, being able to tap someone on the shoulder and say "hey, I don't understand this document, could you walkthrough it with me?" and I think I really miss having immediate interaction with my colleagues. Now you have to think about it a bit more "Do I pick up the phone now or do I send an email?" and I think that's been part of the biggest transition for me, in terms of adapting being by myself at home and still trying to talk to my colleagues as much as possible so I can learn just as much as if I was in the office.

00:06:52 Husnara

Of course, and Sajeed, how about you? How have you found trying to cultivate relationships with colleagues who you are yet to meet in person?

00:07:03 Sajeed

Yeah, I think because I started with a cohort of trainees, we created a WhatsApp group straight away. So, we had trainees to speak to via WhatsApp. But then each Department that I've been in, they've had their own WhatsApp group. Before I started my seat, I was invited to join the WhatsApp group and I introduced myself, met everyone, I received loads of welcome emails before. So that's what made the transition quite easy and on the WhatsApp group, it is not just about work, it's things outside of work as well. So, you get to know people. So then, when I do have a problem, query or a question and I need to ask someone, I feel more comfortable going to that person because I have something outside of work with them.

There's other things like at our firm we have like a daily or weekly Zoom class. Sorry, yoga class. So, I went on the yoga class and managed to speak to different people and see different people. So yeah, I think it's just basically coming outside of your comfort zone because as a lawyer, you're having to network. I think starting the process a lot earlier will probably pay a bit more dividends in the future, and I think you've got to market yourself to different teams across the firm. Previously, if you were in the office, you wouldn't contact someone in London in the banking team just to say for example, but this way you probably would now. I think I find it a lot easier to do that yeah.

00:08:49 Husnara

Okay, and Kyria, what about you? What tips do you have on how to forge meaningful relationships with people you can't meet in person?

00:08:57 Kyria

My advice would be find at least two or three people to begin with at your firm that you are comfortable approaching, whether it's your graduate recruitment team or anyone you have

already had contact with as a first point and then from then they might be able to introduce you to more people. So, for example, being that I'm the only trainee, I don't necessarily have a huge network within my firm, but I have the Practice Manager who is always available and a bit more removed from the Law side so I can always, speak to her. And one thing that has been taught to me, just for my own personal development, is "don't be afraid to pick up the phone". It's so important to be able to do it because then one day you'll be speaking to clients that you haven't necessarily met face to face as well. So, it's an all-round good skill to develop as soon as possible.

00:10:17 Husnara

Yep. And I know, talking to trainees at other firms and to partners at other firms there are various firmwide initiatives taking place that are enabling this to happen. Whether that's through formal events like the yoga that Sajeed has just mentioned. I know other firms have done some similar activities. It's not just about getting to know people by doing the fee earning work, it's becoming a better assistant of the firm and I think whether you were doing your training contract on the ground or remotely getting involved in the non-fee earning activities is just as important from a development perspective as well as from the perspective of forming relationships with colleagues.

I don't know about the both of you, but one of my biggest struggles working remotely has been managing my time in an orderly manner, my routine is all over the place and in turn that means the boundaries. What boundaries, frankly.

How have you found working from home from that perspective, Kyria?

00:11:07 Kyria

Well, because I live with my siblings, it's been a case of dividing the house, so I essentially have taken over the living room, (which is) now my workspace. So, everyone knows that if I'm here I'm working, please do not knock at the door unless it's a very serious reason for doing so. And so yeah, I definitely agree it's important to separate the area where you spend most of your downtime with where you work, just mentally (so that) you have a mental boundary as well.

And just to add to what's been said as well, I think communication with colleagues. This is something that Sajeed alluded to earlier about looking at an email and working out, "do I really need to answer it right now or can I wait until tomorrow morning or whenever?". I think for those that are going to start and those that are already well into their training contract, one thing that I would say that I found really helpful is learning how to judge just how urgent a piece of work is. So, you don't find yourself going through, after 6:30pm you're still here, 8:30pm you are still working coz you feel like you have to get it done now. And that's the pressure we put on ourselves. I think as trainees trying to impress, of course. So, definitely let your colleagues know if you're with your family in the evening. Let them know I'm going to be away from my desk so I won't answer immediately, but I could catch up with you tomorrow morning for example. So just communicate as much as you can.

00:12:26 Husnara

How about you Sajeed? Have you managed to create some routine that works for you?

00:12:36 Sajeed

Yeah, well, I have the good days and bad days. (good days) when I'm really productive and some days where I'm not. And I think the days that I am very productive are those days where I wake up early and get into routine. What I found very successful in the last couple of months is having boundaries in my house, so I don't work in the living room and I don't work in the bedroom, I only work in the office. So, having a physical boundary that allows me to keep my mental side of things in check. And then, during the day I break my day up. So, for example, I take my one-hour lunch where possible and when necessary, but during that one-hour lunch I will cook something or do something away from the screen. So, I'm not just taking my one-hour lunch and being on my phone. So just those small things. I think they really, really help.

00:13:37 Husnara

Screen time for me has been the biggest challenge because I'm in front of a computer, either typing documents or doing video calls. Obviously in the normal world, those video calls would be in-person meetings, which is not counted as screen-time, and then in the evenings inevitably I resort to watching a box set either on my tablet because my husband is hogging the TV or my laptop. So, what I've had to do is try to come up with activities that just take me away from my computer screen or TV screen, but that requires planning and thinking. And I think that you don't always get it right, and it's important not to punish yourself. But give yourself permission to experiment because everyone has different priorities and different strengths, and it's important to come up with a structure that works for you.

Let's go back to relationship building and working remotely on a day to day basis. Two things jump out: work allocation and supervision, and by that, I mean being able to access help when you need it. Kyria, how have you found that... what's your firm doing by way of making sure that you're getting enough work so not too much, not too little, and that you're being supervised at an appropriate level?

00:15:04 Kyria

Yes, so the way that my firm is set up, we circulate a list of matters we're working on. So, I work directly with the Training Principal essentially. And just by that, I'm able to see what's going on with the firm, are there any matters that I might be interested in, and who I might want to work with over the next day or so. And so (...) what I do, I reach out either by email or by phone and just have a 5-minute conversation just to find out. Can I be involved in this matter or if you're too busy, can we maybe speak later in the week or what would work for you? So, I think (...), I guess it does depend on the firm, but we circulate coz my team is quite small. We circulate information, so everyone is aware of who's doing what and when and so that way it's for you to be proactive, go out there and ask and be involved.

00:16:06 Husnara

How about you Sajeed? How is work allocated at your firm for trainees? And how do you ensure that you're not given too much or too little?

00:16:17 Sajeed

Yeah, so in terms of work allocation, (...) each trainee has a supervisor (...) who supervises our work; but we are also encouraged to work with the rest of the team. So, I work with the rest of the team and (...). What we normally do is we have a Monday meeting right early in the morning. So, we have like an office meeting, my office is in Manchester. So, we'll have a

Manchester Office meeting but will also have a Litigation team meeting and, in both of those meetings, you can say if you're busy or not busy or talk about capacity. Yeah, and if someone is working on something very interesting, or they might be busy in a few days, you can offer to help.

What I tend to do as well is look on everyone's calendar. So, as a trainee in a law firm, you would have access to different calendars. So, you can go on a partner's calendar or fee-earner's calendar and see what they're doing or what meeting they might be involved in, or how busy they are, and that's really good for two reasons. One is, if you need to contact them, you'll know how busy or what they're doing on that day, and secondly, if you're interested in a piece of work or you want to get your hands on doing some sort of law or in a different area of law, then you can basically speak to that fee-earner and say "look, I'm really interested in this piece of work. Can I get involved?" and that's really good. And then I think the other thing as well is... the other side to the argument, is your supervisor or your fee-earner that you work for can shield you when you have a lot more work on. It might just be the situation where because... as a trainee, you're working remotely you're out of sight and out of mind sometimes. So, if you're in the office, the supervisor might be like "ohh yeah, there's a trainee there, he could do that work", but sometimes when you're not in the office, they won't think of you straight away. So, I think the emphasis has to be on you to show initiative, so if you do get a piece of work, don't just do the piece of work, then also think about what's going to happen in the future. So if you've got a piece of work, I think you should be "we might need to do this in the future, do you want me to do that?" and then that way... yeah, then they know what you're doing as well so it works both ways sometimes.

00:19:36 Husnara

That's a very good point about anticipating the future. I think that's something a lot of trainees don't perhaps think about doing early on in their traineeships. Other areas where I think trainees could put a bit more effort, I think, is firstly making sure that when you're receiving a piece of work that's being delegated down to you, that you have absolute clarity on what's expected of you, including deadlines or a mini deadline, level of detail you need to go into, etc. Secondly, managing expectations, I think that requires, from my perspective, especially in this remote working environment, just to almost agree a point to check in to update someone on how you're getting on and not leaving anything to chance because... I know from my own personal experiences of delegating work to former colleagues, the worst thing someone can do for me is say they're about to miss a deadline 5 minutes before the deadline. So, if something is taking you longer to do, just flag it and that applies whether you're working remotely or in person.

Kyria, you've obviously had that exposure to both. What are you missing about being in a physical building and what have you learnt about yourself in terms of personal management at work?

00:20:12 Kyria

Yeah, it's a really really good question. initially I did struggle trying to find a balance between do I stick to what would be a normal work at the office, a day at the office as far as waking up at the same time, trying to recreate the office experience during the day and switching off in the evening. But what I have done, after a lot of trial and error, is make use of technology. So for example, there's an app which tracks how long I spent on a task and if I spent two or three hours, then it tells me how long my break should be, and so I use that to manage my time

throughout the day so that... now that I'm no longer commuting, I'm getting up early still and I feel I'm also working longer hours just because there's no phase where, "I'm leaving the office now, I'm going home", where I'm not expected to work during that commuting - what would have been my commuting period. And so try and think about... if you haven't started your training contract yet, try and think about what your work hours would normally be, whether you should continue to wake up early or... ask your colleagues when do they usually switch off or when is the best time to get up so that you make sure you're still with your team and you're aware of what's going on and also carve out time in the evening or in the morning for yourself just so that you can make sure that you're not working almost 24/7, which is what could potentially happen if you don't keep track of your time and your activities during the day. So definitely carve out time for yourself.

00:22:00 Husnara

Thank you. So just before we wrap up, I wanted to ask you a final question about video call etiquette. I've had several horror stories about flatmates wandering around almost naked, thankfully with a duvet wrapped around them. I've had someone stand up in the middle of an interview to plug their phone in because it was about to die, and they had literally a pair of pyjama's shorts on. Any interesting stories or anecdotes you want to share? And indeed, any tips you want to share about video calls, Sajeed?

00:22:44 Sajeed

Yeah, I have (...). One of my colleagues, they have a Zoom account and I think her husband was using the Zoom account before her. So, I think the tip that I would say is always make sure whoever's use your Zoom account, the name is appropriate. So in this instance, my colleague's husband was having a Zoom account with I think the football team that he plays with and he put his name as "Ivor 6 pack" For the rest of the call, obviously, she didn't realise that her name was Ivor 6 pack but the rest of the team were like "who's Ivor 6 pack?". I think that would be my main tip is just before you go on Zoom, just check that no one else has used it and you've got an adequate name, an appropriate name.

00:23:32 Husnara

Yeah, that's a very good tip. What about you, Kyria?

00:23:40 Kyria

Well, (..) I don't have any personal amusing stories to tell necessarily, but I have enjoyed reading some of the most recent news stories on people struggling with Zoom and Teams. And so, I would recommend that when you join a Zoom or Teams call, just to make use of the video preview. Just so that you know what you look like before you join the call and you know, straighten anything out, just make sure that there isn't any distractions in the background to either remove them or change where you're sitting. Another thing I'd say... My first instinct is to always put myself on mute. Just because you don't know if someone might walk in and say something that's inappropriate or your phone might go off. So just those little things that would make a difference. Especially as sometimes clients join calls before the team does, so you want to make sure that the first impression is always really good.

00:24:37 Husnara

But can I just say? I mean, they're all really excellent points, so thank you, but I also think that some of the Zoom mishaps are fantastic ice breakers. I know one thing that happened to me was I was talking to a partner who I hold in very high regard, this was last summer, and my cat decided to come running past me with a live mouse in his mouth and I was obviously mortified, but it was also a great way to just feel a bit more relaxed. I think that in some ways it can be a bit intrusive the way Zoom and Teams have entered our home lives, but equally they can be great ice breakers and a great way to break down barriers that people create that can hold back their ability to build relationships. So, as they say, every story has multiple versions, so on and so forth.

So just as we wrap up, both of you, do you have any final thoughts or observations? Sajeed, one final tip please, if you may?

00:25:44 Sajeed

I'll just say, as a trainee or as a lawyer in this environment that we're currently in, I would say don't be too hard on yourself and take this as an opportunity to be outside of your comfort zone. Because I think we need to get used to the idea that, over the course of our careers, we need to stay current and that means that we need to adapt. And I think the way we were working before the pandemic and the way we'll work after will be different. And I think the legal profession has always moved really slowly, so I think it's a good change in a way. So just learn to adapt and come outside of your comfort zone. And I think yeah, that is my #1 tip.

00:26:42 Husnara

Great, thank you. Kyria, your final tip, before we wrap up?

00:26:50 Kyria

What I would say for future trainees, and even current trainees, is "you are not alone". Try your best to build a network both internally and externally just so that, if you have any questions, you always have someone that you can go to for advice. Whether it is just making sure that your home office is set up correctly or establishing a good routine, just so that you make sure that you have a successful start to your career. And so, this: you're not alone. So, reach out if you can, find people who will be there to support you.

00:27:20 Husnara

My final observation is that the theme of relationship-building has come up again and again and again. And granted, it can be harder to build relationships when you don't get to meet people in person. But for all the reasons we've outlined during this recording, I think with a little bit of resourcefulness and by putting yourself out there, there's no reason why you cannot forge meaningful relationships with other people. And the same applies to both extraverts and introverts. I think that you need to embrace change and just appreciate that the status quo has gone forever. Experiment you may not always get it right, but hopefully all of us will come out of this very, very strange time that we live in stronger.

Thank you very much guys. We're out of time but it's been lovely catching up with you and to hear your stories and stay well!