

So, you want to be a lawyer?

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Without Prejudice

When I registered to study my law qualification, I did so with a significant degree of naivety. I operated on the assumption that after qualifying I would walk straight into a job at one of the biggest banks in the country, wear a fancy suit, drive a luxury car, make a packet of money and live happily ever after. I could not have been more wrong.

While studying, I subsidised my tuition by coaching sport on a part-time basis at my former school. During this period, I forged a number of strong relationships with the staff, the learners and the parent body. In my final year of studies, I was approached by the headmaster of the school and offered a position as a teaching intern, with the view of developing me into a teacher.

Given that my law qualification was a four-year honours degree, I could leverage this and become a teacher within a single year by studying a postgraduate certificate in education. I accepted this role and spent my first year out of law school teaching senior primary English, history and business sciences. It may sound clichéd, but teaching really is one of the most rewarding professions in the world. During my time as a teacher, I learnt many valuable lessons, including the ability to refine complex concepts into easy-to-understand presentations that could be understood by 10-year olds. It is difficult to articulate the sense of pride that one feels after seeing a learner understand a concept that you have taught.

Despite being one of the best periods of my life, I quickly became frustrated with the teaching profession and sought a more demanding intellectual challenge. At this point I learnt the very important lesson that just because you have a law qualification, doesn't mean that you will be able to secure articles at a law firm. After applying to what seemed like every law firm in Sandton, I amassed, what I believe to be, the single largest collection of rejection letters known to man.

Without being disheartened, I began the search for alternative careers that could be pursued by a law graduate. One day I found myself reading the *Sunday Times* when I came across two jobs that appealed to me. The first, a role as cadet reporter at Independent Newspapers and the second, a role as a legal intern at Total South Africa. Being the optimist that I am, I polished up my *curriculum vitae* and sent it to both companies.

Within a week, I found myself at Independent Newspapers' offices in the centre of Johannesburg being grilled on my general knowledge by the editor of *The Star* and writing at 1 500 word article on a topic I received just five minutes before. This situation was made far more intimidating by the fact that at the very same time as I was going through this process, so were about twelve other candidates vying for the same position.

After a week, I received a telephone call from the gentleman responsible for the Independent Newspapers' cadet programme advising me that I had been successful in my application and that the Independent Newspapers were particularly interested in grooming me for a role as a legal journalist.

At the very second that I got off the phone with the Independent Newspapers, I received a call from the human resources manager at Total. I had just been invited to attend an interview with Total's then head of legal. When asked about my availability, and bearing in mind that I was still riding the wave of euphoria from being offered a position at the Independent Newspapers, I responded in the only way that one would expect a young and ambitious law graduate to do – I said, "I'll have to ask my parents"! After the wave of sheer panic had worn off, I took cognisance of the magnitude of this rookie error and contacted Total and told them that I would be happy to attend the interview.

I attended the interview with Total a week later and, two weeks after that, I was offered a position as a legal intern. At this point, I contacted Independent Newspapers, thanked them for their time and declined the opportunity to become a journalist in favour of working within the legal team of one of the biggest oil companies in the world.

During my time at Total, I was exposed to many different areas of their business and numerous areas of law. Under the watchful eyes of Natachia Moorgas and Krinesh Govender, the two most senior personnel in Total's legal team, I was exposed to and advised on competition law, corporate/commercial law, employment law and industry-specific regulatory matters.

My role at Total was set to endure for a single year – however, towards the end of my internship I was asked to stay on for another year as an advisor. My promotion came with a bigger paycheque, but also more responsibility and I found myself having my own portfolio to manage. During my second year at Total, both Natachia and Krinesh impressed upon me the importance of becoming an admitted attorney to further my legal career. At this point, I began to prepare my curriculum vitae and submitted it to a number of law firms within the Sandton area.

My time at Total represents one of the most valuable periods of my professional career and provided me with a solid foundation from which to enter legal practice. I received the most amazing mentorship and training, I was permitted to further my postgraduate studies at the University of the Witwatersrand, and I was afforded paid time off to attend vacation programmes at several law firms in Sandton. From having a countless number of rejection

letters, I now found myself with offers from five of the best law firms in the country. After conducting a significant amount of research and procuring the advice from friends, family and colleagues, I accepted the position as a candidate attorney at Hogan Lovells.

My life at the Washington D.C./London headquartered firm began in commercial litigation and soon progressed to the corporate M&A team where I have remained ever since. During my time at Hogan Lovells, I have been exposed to billion-rand transactions and I have acted for some of the biggest corporates listed in the United States, Europe and South Africa. I have advised on acquisitions, disposals, mergers, restructurings, schemes of arrangement and rights issues.

My time at Hogan Lovells has not been all work and no play. I am a volunteer at the Teddy Bear Clinic, which counsels sexually abused minors at the Protea Glen Magistrates' Court; I sit on the social club committee, which arranges various social activities throughout the year; and I chair the Bike Run Club, which champions employee participation in running and cycling events with an aim of improving employee wellness and breaking down silos that exist between different teams.

More recently, I was the recipient of the Associate Achiever Award, awarded to the best all-round performing associate at Hogan Lovells. As part of receiving the award, I spent some time in the United Kingdom where I worked from our London office and completed a Euromoney English law training course. On my return to South Africa, I received the good news that I had also been nominated, as one of seven nominees from the African continent, for Attorney of the Year (Associate) at the African Legal Awards.

On reflection, the journey on which my law qualification has taken me has been remarkable. I went from being seemingly unemployable, to becoming a teacher, to having the opportunity to become a journalist but instead working as a legal advisor at Total, taking up employment at one of the biggest law firms in the world and thereafter being nominated for one of the most prestigious awards in the profession.

I may be an anomaly, but I am evidence that a law qualification opens many doors in many different industries. As clichéd as it may sound, it is ultimately incumbent on the holder of the qualification to make the most out of the opportunities that it provides.

So, you want to be a lawyer? I say you can be much more than that.

Darryl Jago received the award for Attorney of the Year (Associate) at the African Legal Awards on 7 September. Congratulations – Editor *Without Prejudice*

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