

PUPILLAGE APPLICATIONS – THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

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1. Why do you want to be a barrister?

This is the first question on most pupillage application forms, as well as the first question often asked at interview. Therefore, before even considering applications, make sure that becoming a barrister is something you want to do and understand why that is. This is why experiences such as mini-pupillages, shadowing and judge marshalling are so important. They expose you to aspects of the profession that you can't read about in a textbook and offer you an opportunity to ask about and observe what life as a barrister is really like. It is only after you have a genuine and considered answer to this question, that you should think about applying for pupillage.

2. Where to apply

There is a lot of different advice about how many applications to make and where to make them. I knew that I wanted to build my practise in Manchester. I was also in my GDL year so feeling a little less pressure than my contemporaries on the BPTC. I therefore applied to just three chambers based on their location, their reputation, the type of pupillage they were offering and my own experience during mini-pupillages. Choosing where to apply and how many applications to send is a very personal decision and should be dictated by your own circumstances and priorities. What many people forget is that recruitment is a two-way process; you have to impress chambers, but the opportunities and pupillage experience they offer has to impress you as well.

3. The application forms

Filling in application forms takes time and is a process that begins long before the forms are released. Almost every candidate will have a strong academic record and will have completed some form of legal work experience. You need to demonstrate that you have experiences and interests that go beyond this and make you stand out as the better candidate. My own approach was to compile a list of the skills that I felt would be required of a pupil and then list the experiences I had, both legal and otherwise, that demonstrated those skills or my capacity to learn them. Doing this not only helped me to answer the questions within the application form, it also meant I had a range of examples and anecdotes ready to use during interviews.

4. Rejection

Perhaps the hardest thing to prepare yourself for during the recruitment process is rejection. The truth is that when it comes to pupillage there is no golden formula – each chambers is looking for something different and this can change on an annual basis. Whilst I was offered pupillage at two of the chambers I applied for, the third did not even offer me a first round interview. Many individuals who turn out to be incredibly successful barristers are not offered pupillage on their first attempt, this clearly does not mean they were not good enough. The experience gained every time you complete an unsuccessful application or interview only means you are more prepared for the next time.

5. The interview

I can honestly say that I enjoyed all of the interviews that I had during the recruitment process and I believe there are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, I knew my application back to front and had scrutinised every section that I thought I might be questioned on. Secondly, I had done my research. This did not mean that I could quote the Jackson Reforms or had a speech prepared about my favourite judge. Rather, I made sure that I had a general understanding of what was happening within the legal profession and then focused more closely on the areas of law I had expressed an interest in. I also spent time exploring how chambers' own work related to those areas. This meant that whilst there were questions I certainly hadn't prepared for, I was still able to offer educated and informed responses with confidence. Finally, and I think most importantly, was that I went into each interview with a strong sense of who I was and what I wanted from pupillage and the interview experience. Whilst the recruitment process is about trying to impress a committee and ultimately get a pupillage, it is also about finding the place where you will flourish as a pupil and will provide you with the best environment in which to begin your career.

9. Be “commercially aware”

This phrase is oft-used but means so much more than just reading business news, and is something which is applicable to nearly all areas of legal practice. It is exceptionally rare for any piece of work at the bar to require purely legal considerations. Especially in civil work, all clients have different priorities and interests. For example a client may have a fantastically strong case for breach of contract, but the defendant is bankrupt and the client may never be able to recover their money and the money they spend pursuing the case would be entirely wasted.

If you are given a problem scenario or situation to consider in an interview or application, always look at the bigger picture, try to assess the client’s likely priorities and give these weight or consideration in any answer you give.

10. Have belief and keep going

There is no getting round the fact that the bar is competitive and the majority of applicants are initially unsuccessful. Rejections are always hard to take, but use each and every one as an opportunity to reflect and improve.

The bar is a career where barristers hugely benefit from having a broad range of professional and personal experience. Although facing another application cycle can be dejecting use the time wisely and as an opportunity to shore up your weaknesses and gain another year’s experience and knowledge. If the bar is right for you, you will get there eventually. And when you do, you may well be glad of those extra years spent preparing.

Good luck.

Nick Taylor



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