



Winckworth Sherwood

Are you born to be a lawyer?

"That's not fair mum, everyone else in my class has got one!"

"You just don't need the latest iphone darling."

"But mum, do you really want me to be the only one in my class that doesn't have it?"

(Sigh). "The way you argue, you are born to be a lawyer!"

Sound familiar?

To help you decide if you really are born to be a lawyer, I have picked out five critical skills which, in my experience, are needed for the job.

1. Precision

Take the following sentence:

"John will pay Sarah £100 on Monday or Tuesday each week."

And now, take this sentence:

"John will pay Sarah £100 on Monday and Tuesday each week."

What is the difference?

One word - "and" - which changes the whole meaning of the sentence. If this sentence was in a contract then the conjunction is the difference between John promising to pay Sarah £100 or £200 each week so it is essential that the correct one is used.

The best lawyers need to be precise because, in a legal document, the devil is in the detail. Grammatical and linguistic accuracy may seem minor, but it can have major implications for your client.

2. Common Sense

The best legal advice is tailored to the individual circumstances of your client.

For example, in a divorce settlement, your client may want to keep the dog but is this sensible if your client works abroad for six months of the year?

As a lawyer, your job is to find solutions that actually work for your client. To do this, it is important to understand that the purpose is not to 'win' at any cost but to find a pragmatic and common sense solution which is acceptable to all parties. An ability to find these solutions is sometimes referred to as having 'commercial awareness' and is highly prized by clients.

3. Ability to express yourself

Legal documents can be complex and difficult to understand. As a lawyer, as well as understanding these documents, you need to be able to explain what they mean in simple but precise terms (both in writing and in person).

For example, imagine your client wants to know if there are any tax benefits to leaving some of their money to charity when they die.

Whilst it may be quick to email your client all of the relevant tax law, will your client understand this? It is vital to be able to pick out the key pieces of information and translate them into language that is useful to your client for their specific purposes.

4. Ability to work well with others

The best lawyers that I have encountered have excellent people skills.

Much of the job involves working with other people so an ability to get on with people from all walks of life is needed.

If a client asks you to sell their house, there are all sorts of people you may need to talk to make sure this runs smoothly – the landlord, the surveyor, the estate agent, the buyer's solicitor as well as your own colleagues.

Having the confidence and personality to interact with a large variety of people is a key skill for the job.

5. Patience

Patience is perhaps the most underrated skill that is needed.

Things don't always go to plan and you have to be able to keep calm and hold your nerve in sometimes difficult and frustrating circumstances.

Perhaps the urgent deal you are working on is delayed because of an I.T. error? Or perhaps your client has just revealed something in court which they did not reveal to you in advance?

The job of a lawyer is specifically not to be emotional in these circumstances. Having a level headed temperament to deal with crisis situations calmly and resourcefully is a critical part of the job.

Conclusion

Are you considering a career as a lawyer?

The job is not always what people think so it is important that you make a decision with your eyes open. People often tell me that I must be good at arguing because I am a lawyer but, although this skill can be useful, the job requires much more than that.

If you think that your skill set matches what the job entails, you may be on the path to a very rewarding career!

Matt Cowen is a Solicitor at Winckworth Sherwood LLP