



CAREER PLANNING: A COMPLETE GUIDE TO DESIGNING YOUR LEGAL CAREER



WHERE LAW FIRMS COME
TO RECRUIT LEGAL TALENT

Having a clear plan in place for achieving your legal career goals is one of the most important things you can do as a legal employee.

Your career plan is the compass you'll use to guide you toward the best-suited roles for your skills and interests.

Working out how to design your legal career isn't just something you'll do when you're fresh out of college or finished with your education. The best industry leaders frequently refresh and update their strategies based on their changing priorities, deeper evaluations of the marketplace, and a growing understanding of their sector.

Indeed, many people have begun making changes to their career plans in recent years, inspired by the Great Resignation and the introduction of new employment opportunities across a range of practice areas.

Some employees are now actively seeking more flexible work schedules, while others are drawn to evolving job roles that weren't available when they first entered the market.

So, how do you ensure you're designing an effective strategy for your future in the legal sector?

Today, we will explore the benefits of having a solid career plan and how you can build the ultimate map toward success in your industry.

What is a Career Plan?

The legal landscape is brimming with various opportunities for different professionals. How you experience this industry will depend on the skills you develop, your personal values, and your unique interests.

A career plan is how you ensure you're designing your step-by-step journey through the sector according to your needs and your future personal and professional goals.

Career plans provide employees with steps to accomplish what they want while they excel professionally. For instance, if you're planning on becoming a Partner or Associate in a firm, you'll need to design how you will enter the industry, develop both functional and leadership skills, and pursue lateral moves or promotions to achieve what you want.

Used correctly, a career plan can effectively guide you through finding your first job, switching to new careers, and choosing the right employer to work for. These tools can also come in handy when you're working with a [legal recruitment company](#) by giving them an insight into where you want your role to take you in the years ahead.

Why Are Career Plans Critical?

Career plans keep us on track toward the professional outcomes we most want to achieve. According to a recent [article from Indeed](#), people spend around a third of their waking hours at work, yet over a third of people don't feel happy in their careers.

While there are various reasons you may be unsatisfied in your legal role, one of the most common is that you may have chosen a position that isn't pushing you toward your goals.

Failing to plan what you want to accomplish in your career means you move into new jobs with no real direction, focus, or purpose. This could mean you end up "hopping" between jobs more frequently in search of the right experience.

Current studies suggest most people will have anywhere from up to fifteen jobs during their lifetime. Having a career plan helps you identify the fields you most want to pursue in your industry and set long-term objectives so you can constantly progress toward success. The right plan will keep you organised and informed, so you can make intelligent decisions about which classes to take, what internships to consider, and ultimately, which positions to apply for next.

Career plans also boost your chances of effectively applying for and getting the roles you want. Not only do they provide useful guidance to a recruitment consultant, but they can also help you to answer questions in interviews about your goals and expectations.

When Do You Need a Career Plan?

Designing your career is something you'll need to do consistently throughout your professional life. After you've obtained your legal qualifications, you'll need an initial plan to help you determine which roles you want to pursue first and where you want these jobs to take you.

At this early stage, it is useful to have an informal conversation with a legal recruiter, who can guide you on your next steps and offer insight into current market conditions, opportunities, and the hiring landscape.

With a documented career plan, you can determine whether it's best to apply for a promotion, or change jobs completely.

Throughout your life, you'll regularly return to your career plan and refresh your strategy by reconsidering your current priorities, skills, and experiences.

How to Start Planning Your Legal Career Path

Designing your entire legal career can seem like a daunting prospect at first. The important thing to remember is that your current career plan isn't set in stone. You can always make changes in the future if you discover you're moving in the wrong direction.

In fact, [one study in 2018](#) found that around a third of all Americans completely changed fields when moving from one role to the next after college, a similar pattern for many continents across the globe.

When starting your legal career plan, focus on where you stand and what you hope to achieve based on your current situation. Here are some steps to get you started. You can use the same guidance when creating new career plans in the future or updating your existing strategy.

Step 1: List Your Current Skills

Where you start your career path will depend on your legal skills. Employers in the legal sector will look for different credentials, knowledge, and characteristics for each role they want to fill. Start by listing all of your talents that might benefit your career.

During this step, it's important to think about hard and soft skills. Your hard skills are the technical talents related to legal roles. They might include the ability to use certain software or a specific qualification in a related practice area.

Your soft skills are the more versatile, transferable skills that can apply to various roles. For instance, you might be an excellent communicator, brilliant at organising your time, or have experience leading other teams.

Step 2: Consider Your Industry Experience

Experience and skills often go hand-in-hand when planning the next move in your legal career. Whether you are on the path to qualification already, have just finished your training contract, or work in the sector in a non-qualified capacity, no or little previous industry experience means you will likely start with entry-level positions in a firm.

If you're already established as a solicitor or non-qualified professional in the sector and are ready to take the next step, your existing experience will determine what kinds of roles you can apply for. If you already have experience leading a legal team, then you might be able to apply for a manager role or more senior positions.

Looking at the job descriptions posted by law firms will determine what kind of experience and skills you'll need to apply effectively for each role – and as such is a great resource for general research when looking at formalising your career plan and competency framework.

Step 3: Assess Your Personal Values

Once you've got a clear view of your skills and the opportunities they match, you can start to think about the other factors influencing how satisfied you might feel in a role. If you haven't determined a specific "long-term goal" for your career yet, consider looking at the market and asking yourself what kind of roles most appeal to you.

Ask yourself what you like doing, the elements of your role you're most interested in, and which directions offer the most benefits. Outline the key values you will focus on when searching for roles. For instance, [58% of employees](#) say professional development contributes to higher levels of job satisfaction. Other points to consider include:

- Work/life balance: How important is it for you to have a job that contributes to a good work/life balance? Do you need to look into flexible, remote, or hybrid roles?
- Purpose and meaning: Which role will give you a deeper sense of purpose? How will you ensure you feel proud of what you're doing?
- Business culture: Is there any particular culture you want to pursue when looking into new roles? Do you want a firm to show high diversity, ethics, and inclusion?

Step 4: Think Long-Term

While you can always consider changing your career path in the future, it's important to take a long-term approach when deciding which roles you want to pursue. The legal landscape is extremely short on skills at this time, which has prompted a lot of employers to offer higher remuneration and benefits to attract more candidates.

For some legal employees, it might be tempting to jump rapidly from one career to the next in search of more money. However, investing in a short-term cash injection now might not be as beneficial as planning what you can achieve in the long term.

Take the time to plan out what you really want to accomplish, and evaluate how each job opportunity will help you progress towards your end goal. For instance, taking a lower-paid role or a lateral move at the same salary right now with a host of learning opportunities could make it easier to move into a high-end position later in your career.

Designing your Legal Career with SMART Goals

A big part of effectively designing and planning your legal career is setting the right goals. Your goals will help you map your career journey and measure your progress over time. They're also an important tool for maintaining high levels of motivation.

Remember, getting the perfect legal job can take several years with multiple steps. You can't jump straight from a college education to a role as a Partner of your favourite firm. Legal career paths in particular can be multi-dimensional and non-linear with various routes to qualification and (in some cases) relatively easy transitions to move practice areas if one isn't the right fit in the long term.

SMART goals will help you see how each step you take in your journey is closer to the correct outcomes. A SMART goal should be:

- **Specific:** Be detailed about what each step in your career path should look like. For instance, you might want to ensure you're working for a specific law firm with a strong focus on training, education, and innovation.
- **Measurable:** Choosing a goal you can quantify makes it easier to track your progress. For instance, if you want to pursue a position as a manager, you might want to ensure you've proven your leadership skills in 5 scenarios before asking for a promotion.
- **Attainable:** Set goals you can reasonably achieve. For instance, if you're in an entry-level legal position today, it's not reasonable to assume you can apply for a managerial role tomorrow. You'll need to develop your soft and hard skills first and prove your abilities to any potential employer.
- **Relevant:** Think about how each of your goals will benefit you. For example, if your ultimate goal is to have a high-paying job in a specific legal field, you would start with other roles related to the same space.
- **Time-based:** Applying certain deadlines to when you want to accomplish various things in your career path will help to keep you on track. For instance, you might challenge yourself to get your degree within a certain number of years and ask for a promotion so many years after you start your new role.

Start by defining a long-term goal for your career. Picture where you want to be when you reach retirement age and what you'd like to have accomplished. Ask yourself what the "ideal" job would be for you, then consider the steps you'll need to take to move from where you are now to where you'd most like to be.

Write down your goals, followed by specific actions outlining your next moves. For instance, your plan might look like this:

- Finish (non-legal) degree in 3 years
- Apply for and complete CPQ Foundation in 18 months
- Apply for and complete CPQ Advanced in 12 months
- Apply for and complete CPQ Professional in 12 months
- Qualify as CILEx Lawyer and apply for qualified roles in my specialism

One study found [76% of the participants](#) who wrote down their goals, made regular progress reports, and shared their ambitions with a friend achieved their desired outcomes.

Making Progress in your Career Plan: Skill Development

Once you have a map of steps leading toward your desired career goal, it's time to start thinking about how you can accelerate toward the right roles. Typically, this will involve working on your current skill set and gaining experience, as well as general professional development in the sector.

For each new role, you want to pursue, examine the job description and responsibilities of an employee in that position. This will give you a clear view of which technical and soft skills you need to develop and any experience you might need to gain along the way.

For instance, if you want to become a Partner in your firm you will need interpersonal and communication skills, business acumen, commercial awareness, and demonstrable experience in leading a team (and a business) successfully.

Remember, your soft skills will be essential in determining how likely you are to get a new job. As you progress through each position, dedicate time to developing the following skills:

- **Communication:** Strong communication skills are a must-have for any industry and position. You'll need to be able to interpret and relay information clearly and succinctly across various channels, from email to voice and instant message.
 - **Collaboration:** Learning to work effectively with other team members is crucial to success in any career. Not only will the ability to work as part of a team make you more appealing to an employer, but it can also help you make connections that open the door to new opportunities.
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- **Problem-solving:** Every law firm can encounter challenges from time to time. To prove yourself as a valuable employee, learn how to respond to issues with creative problem-solving techniques. Practice looking at issues from different angles and know when and how to take the initiative when handling a problem.
- **Organisation:** Good organisational skills will ensure you can manage your schedule effectively in any role and stay on top of deadlines. This will show employers that you're reliable, trustworthy, and capable of taking on new responsibilities. Learn how to use your time, plan projects, and keep track of your to-do list.
- **Work ethic:** When designing your legal career, it's important to make sure you're constantly committed to demonstrating a good work ethic. Employers will always value determination, dedication, and commitment from their staff. Treat it with passion and respect, even if a job is just a step toward your desired role.
- **Interpersonal skills:** Learning to connect with others effectively is important as you work towards your ideal legal role. It will improve your relationships with employers and team members and also play a crucial role in building your network. The people you connect with throughout your industry will help you discover new opportunities that might help you reach your goals.
- **Business acumen:** The further you progress through your legal career, the more your employers expect you to know about the industry and how it works. Make sure you understand how each firm you work for operates, and align yourself with your employer's values.

The Value of Developing Transferable Skills

The path to your perfect career won't always be straightforward. As you move towards your ideal legal role, you may need to make lateral moves to develop other transferable skills. These abilities will also come in handy if you decide later in your career that you want to make a more significant change to your career – changing practice areas for example.

Transferable skills are hard and soft professional capabilities that can be applied to multiple industries, jobs, and opportunities. [One survey](#) on Jobsite found that "general professional skills" are one of the top things 41% of recruiters look for in a candidate.

If you feel like you're not making enough progress in your current role, consider looking into other positions which will help you to develop the following skills:

- **Project Management:** Project management skills are a must-have in many high-level legal roles. It involves being able to plan, control, and execute work related to a specific project in alignment with various stakeholders. Suppose your current position doesn't allow you to take charge of many projects. In that case, it might be difficult to develop these skills so you can move into a managerial or leadership position. Try looking for ways to take charge in other jobs.
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TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

- **Customer Service skills:** Even if your ideal role is unlikely to bring you face-to-face with customers and clients frequently, it's important to know how to interact with the ideal customer of your chosen business. Gaining customer service experience, even in an entry-level role unrelated to your industry, can make you more appealing to hiring managers in search of a candidate with a strong focus on customer experience.
 - **Leadership:** Often, progressing in a legal career will mean taking on more responsibilities. Higher-paying and more demanding jobs come with a need for exceptional leadership skills. Consider volunteering for projects which allow you to develop your leadership abilities, such as managing a specific team or taking the lead on a task. You could even look into volunteer positions outside your current role to help you build leadership skills.
 - **Research and analysis:** Firms need to make intelligent decisions about evolving and progressing based on the information they gather about their industry. Knowing how to research relevant topics and present them to shareholders in your business makes you a more valuable employee. Research and analysis can also help you better understand your industry, making more intelligent decisions as a leader.
 - **Writing:** Writing might not seem like an important skill at first, but it's likely to apply to virtually every legal job you pursue. Whether you're crafting email correspondence to an end client, creating a report for a Partner, or designing a project plan, you'll need to know how to convey your thoughts.
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How to Take the Next Step in your Career Path

Once you've established your short-term and long-term legal career goals, developed the skills necessary to progress in your industry, and assessed the market, you can consider taking the next step in your career path. However, before you jump into applying for a new job or requesting a promotion, there are a few things you can do to improve your chances of success:

1. Work on Your Personal Brand

Many employers are beginning to take personal branding more seriously when considering which candidates they should add to their teams. [Around 91% of all employers](#) already use social media as part of their hiring process. Many recruiters and potential hiring managers will research you online before deciding whether to offer you an interview.

As you work on your career journey, ensure you're building an eye-catching and impressive brand. This means listing your experiences and accomplishments on LinkedIn, ensuring you have a professional image on all public social platforms, and networking with the right people.

2. Update your CV/Resume and Cover Letter

As you add new skills and experiences to your repertoire, make sure you draw attention to them in your CV/Resume and cover letter. Your CV/Resume should always include the most relevant information about your education and previous roles for the job you will be applying for.

Customise your CV/Resume and cover letter whenever you're looking to move roles to ensure they highlight the most important talents and accomplishments to your potential employer. Use your previous experiences as examples of how you can deliver each business's desired results.

In the cover letter, make sure you specifically discuss what makes you the right candidate for this specific role. Use the job description posted by your intended legal employer to guide you.

3. Work With a Professional Legal Recruitment Team

One of the easiest ways to ensure you can achieve your legal career goals is to work with a recruitment expert. A specialist [legal recruiter](#) can help you to find the right roles for each goal you set for your professional future. They'll help you track down job opportunities you might not be able to find on your own and provide insights on how you can impress each potential employer.

A professional recruitment team will ensure you don't have to "settle" for roles that don't adhere to the career journey you've designed. You can even share your career plan with your legal recruitment consultant and ask for their insights on which next steps you need to take.

If redesigning your legal career is on the horizon for you, we hope that these top ideas would put you on the path to a rewarding and satisfying career.

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We understand that while talent is your greatest asset - it can also be your scarcest resource - which is why you need a recruitment partner with the market expertise, insight and network to deliver the right people at the right time.

Clayton Legal has been partnering with law firms across the country since 1999 and during that time has built up an enviable reputation for trust and reliability.

We provide an experienced and credible voice in the market by being able to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the legal sector's talent agenda. Talent is all about people and just like you, our consultants are true experts in their field with a real drive for excellence which informs everything they do.

From Partners and Associates through to Solicitors, junior fee earning positions and support staff, Clayton Legal is the only name you'll ever need - and what's more - we are nice people to do business with!

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