

CAREER EDUCATION – WRITTEN Q&A: Josie Beal

1. What is your job role and organisation?

Associate Solicitor, Birketts LLP

2. What do you do in this job?

Birketts is a full-service, top 100 law firm which has been established for more than 150 years. The firm currently has offices in Cambridge, Chelmsford, Ipswich, London and Norwich. Birketts has a number of departments focussing on different areas of law, and a number of sector specialisms.

I work in the Employment Team, and I am based at Birketts' Cambridge office. I provide specialist employment advice to employers and employees in all aspects of employment law. I advise on contentious and non-contentious issues arising out of the employment relationship, including disciplinary issues, grievances, sickness absence, redundancies, employment contracts and documentation and employment tribunal claims.

I work for a wide range of clients and sectors, but I have particular experience within the education sector. I also provide employment law training.

3. Why did you choose this career?

I wanted to work in law since I was at school. Having studied law at A Level and at University, I knew that it interested me. I also undertook a number of work experience placements at different law firms and a county court whilst I was studying. This was very valuable and interesting, and I got to experience different areas of law: criminal, property, family and litigation. Having the practical experience of what it was like to work in a law firm made me sure that I wanted to pursue a career in law.

I decided to be an Employment solicitor because I like problem solving, and helping and working with people. This is a key part of my job and I find it incredibly rewarding. I particularly like that employment law is always evolving and developing as the social and political landscape changes.

4. What background education or training do you have?

I did A Levels in Law, English Literature and Language, Psychology and Business Studies. I chose to study law because I was interesting in working in legal services, and I chose the other subjects based on what I enjoyed and found interesting.

I went on to study Law at University. I later completed my Legal Practice Course in London.

5. What has your career path been?

I went to a secondary school in a small town in rural Essex. At the time, it wasn't a particularly good school; it was in Ofsted special measures for most of the time I was there. I left school in 2007 after I had completed my GCSE's and decided to go to a Sixth Form College in a bigger town nearby to study A Levels.

I went to University in 2009, and graduated in 2012. After graduating, I spent a year working as a paralegal in a niche employment law firm and went on to undertake my Legal Practice Course, which is an extra year of studying seeking to develop the practical skills required to be a solicitor. In 2014, I began a two year training contract with a law firm to qualify as a solicitor. During my training contract, I spent time in different departments within the firm to experience different areas of law. Employment law was by far my favourite area of law, and so I qualified as an employment solicitor in 2016. I joined Birketts upon qualification as a Solicitor. In 2019, I was promoted to Associate.

6. What does a typical day involve?

One of the things I enjoy most about working in the Employment Team is that we have a varied workload and client base, so no two days are the same. My daily and weekly to do list is often flexible; it is not unusual to get a call from a client needing some urgent advice or assistance!

A typical day often starts with a quick team call or meeting to discuss our workloads and plans for the week. I will likely receive several emails or calls throughout the day from clients seeking advice, either in respect of ongoing matters or in respect of new matters. I might spend some time drafting a contract or a policy, or preparing for an Employment Tribunal hearing.

7. What is your work environment like?

I am normally office based, but during the pandemic I have spent more time working from home. Our office is open plan and I sit in a “pod” with my immediate team. I mostly work with my immediate team however, I also work with the Employment Teams based at our other offices and with other teams where a matter requires input on different areas of law. Everybody in the office is friendly and approachable; prior to the pandemic we used to have regular end of month drinks events, and we have other social events throughout the year as well.

In terms of work life balance, whilst there may be the odd occasion where I need to work late or come in early if I am particularly busy, we generally have a good work life balance. A few years ago, I ran the Cambridge half marathon with some of my colleagues, so we had a lunchtime running club for a while!

8. What aspects of your job are most challenging?

It can be challenging balancing the needs of different clients, especially during busy periods. Equally, employment disputes can be very stressful for those involved and it can be difficult to witness the impact on our clients, especially if a matter does not go their way.

9. Can you give an example of a project or piece of work that you have been most proud of?

The most rewarding part of my job is helping my clients to achieve what they want to achieve. I particularly enjoy getting to know the organisations I work with to understand their business, aims and objectives so that I can tailor my legal advice and assistance to suit their particular circumstances.

10. How do you hope your career will progress?

As my career progresses, I hope that I will continue to hone and develop my skills as a solicitor, so that I am the best that I can be at my job. I hope to continue to progress within Birketts and move into positions with increased responsibility.